

JULY 15, 2025

Family

familymedia.com

The Magazine For Military Families

Buddy System

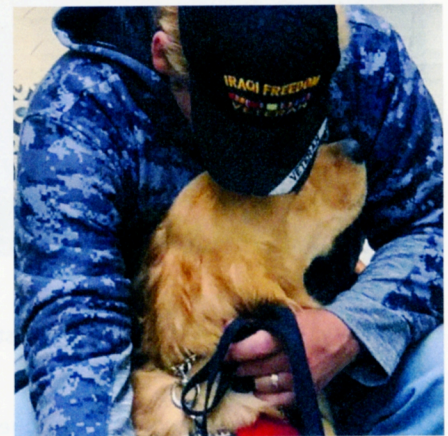
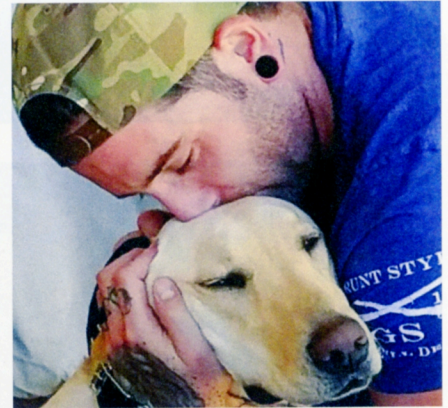
Non-profit Northwest
Battle Buddies Provides
Special Canine Companions
to Assist Suffering Veterans

PAGE 16



Buddy System

Non-profit Northwest Battle Buddies Provides Special Canine Companions to Assist Suffering Veterans



"Quality of life" often feels like an impossible dream for the countless veterans who suffer from the debilitating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD.) One non-profit organization—Northwest Battle Buddies—is helping these veterans reclaim their purpose and independence one furry friend at a time.

The organization was born out of a heart-wrenching reality: "According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, an estimated 20 veterans commit suicide each day; our goal at Northwest Battle Buddies is to eradicate veteran suicide and promote mental well-being," explains Shannon Walker, who founded the

organization in 2012. "The alarming statistics surrounding veteran suicide rates underscore the urgency of addressing mental health challenges within the veteran community. Our efforts are to raise awareness, bring attention to this pressing issue and advocate for necessary resources and support systems. By shedding light on the struggles faced by veterans, we as an organization encourage open dialogue and promote destigmatization."

Service dogs play a crucial role in helping veterans regain their independence, confidence and overall well-being; to date, Northwest Battle Buddies (NWBB) has paired more than 270 working teams

of service dogs and veterans. "My commitment to supporting veterans stems from a deeply personal connection," Walker states. "My father Glenn Walker United States Air Force, Airman 2nd Class, taught me to love America and the men and women who served, fought and died protecting this great nation, and protecting the freedom that every American enjoys today. He inspired my passion for serving those who have served our nation, and his experiences became the catalyst for my dedication to make a difference.

"NWBB was founded from a heartfelt desire to address the unique challenges

that veterans face after serving in the armed forces," she continues. "My extensive experience as a dog trainer, combined with my deep understanding of canine behavior, led me to discover how dogs are specially equipped to help humans in their times of need. Many veterans struggle with issues such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression, which can profoundly impact their quality of life. I knew that matching veterans with service dogs that are specially trained to provide support and comfort, would promote a renewed sense of purpose and belonging.

"NWBB focuses on leveraging the exceptional bond between humans and canines to address PTSD in veterans," she adds. "Our expertly-trained service dogs offer unconditional love, support, and restorative benefits, helping veterans achieve solace, companionship, and enhanced freedom and independence, ultimately aiding in their recovery and overall well-being."

In addition to pairing veterans with service dogs, the organization offers essential resources such as health checks and ongoing support for both the dogs and their veteran partners. Every service dog placed by NWBB is spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and receives any necessary medical care to ensure their health and well-being. "Service dogs are trained to perform specific tasks that mitigate the effects of mental health conditions," Walker details. "They can sense signs of distress and provide grounding, offer physical support during anxiety-inducing situations, and even intervene during moments of crisis. The constant support of having a service dog in even a veteran's darkest hours provides a profound source of mental health support, which can be crucial in the healing process."

Battle Buddy dogs are not just average canines: each dog receives five months of intensive training and each veteran/dog team receives an additional 160 hours of training together. Many of the dogs are rescued from shelters, and are trained to assist their veteran handlers in specific ways, including:

- Wake their veteran from nightmares
- Interrupt anxiety attacks
- Redirect flashbacks
- Alert on adrenaline
- Provide a social barrier in public
- Perform pressure therapy
- Provide a constant feeling of safety

"Our service dogs empower veterans by boosting their confidence and independence, making life more accessible and comfortable," Walker comments. "They enable veterans to reengage in activities and experiences previously considered out of reach. Whether it's everyday tasks, attending events, celebrating special occasions, or engaging with loved ones, these service dogs instill the confidence needed to participate fully and without hesitation, ultimately restoring a sense of joy and fulfillment in life."



Walker notes that many veterans are reluctant to admit they need assistance. "Stigma and shame associated with seeking help are significant barriers to addressing veteran mental health," she says. "It is vital that we break down these barriers through education, outreach programs, and destigmatizing conversations. By creating safe spaces and fostering a supportive environment, veterans are encouraged to seek the assistance they need without fear of judgment. This is when we hope they reach out and ask for a service dog.

"Many American heroes return home to find their greatest battle still awaits as they battle PTSD and the debilitating effects that often lead to thoughts of suicide," she explains. "Service dogs make a difference! There is no cure for PTSD; however, with a canine Battle Buddy by their side, veterans with PTSD can reduce their symptoms with life-changing

results. These professionally trained dogs perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a chronic disability who cannot perform the work or task independently from him- or herself. Service dogs have emerged as invaluable support tools for veterans battling mental health challenges. These specially trained animals offer not only practical assistance but also solace and healing. For veterans, a service dog is an amazing tool to mitigate the symptoms of PTSD so they can live their lives post-service.

NWBB is supported entirely through donations, and any veteran who was deployed, honorably discharged from the U.S. armed forces, and has been diagnosed with PTSD is eligible for evaluation by the group. "We encourage community involvement," Walker enthuses. "Whether through donations, volunteer opportunities, or fostering service dogs, there are numerous ways to support our mission, including:

- **Join Operation Never Quit and pledge \$22+ monthly to provide a professionally trained service dog to a veteran.** Whether you make a one-time donation or become a part of our monthly giving community, Operation Never Quit, you are helping us make a difference in the lives of our American Heroes.
- **Puppy Foster Program:** NWBB's Service Dog Puppy Fosters play a pivotal role in providing essential support, ensuring that every service dog begins its journey in a loving home. Our puppies are raised in



approved, safe, and loving environments for up to 12 months, contributing to the well-being and companionship of our heroes, making a profound impact on their lives. Every year, we look at matching puppies with a foster family.

- **Become a Sponsor:** Partnering with Northwest Battle Buddies you can help provide resources and support that will enable the group to carry out our mission and make a difference in the lives of our American heroes.
- **Host a Fundraiser:** Support Northwest Battle Buddies by creating a custom fundraising page, with a private link for a specific fundraising event, memorial or registry.
- **Request a Speaker:** By sharing compelling stories of resilience, courage and the unwavering bond between veterans and service dogs, NWBB educates and inspires audiences to understand and support veterans battling PTSD.
- **Annual Freedom Gala:** A night featuring veteran teams, guest speakers, a puppy brigade, and more. Gift a ticket to a veteran, allowing them the opportunity to be celebrated for their service to our country.
- **Wish List:** The NWBB Amazon Wish List is a great way to help support the group; supporters can purchase items including food, beds, leashes, toys, grooming tools and crates as a gift and it will be delivered directly to the organization.

"There is so much preparation, dedication and hard work as the dogs are either adopted or bred," Walker points out. "The pups are raised in carefully selected foster homes for 8-12 months and then the dogs enter their five months of professional training. The final step is selecting the veterans that will be paired with the dogs to then enter their five weeks of training. This is where the 'magic' happens. The instant the veterans meet their dogs, the walls start to come down, the tears start to flow, and they begin to truly hope again and start to believe that a future of freedom and independence is within their grasp.

"Some of the greatest challenges military families face is understanding the best path forward for their loved one who may be battling PTSD," she adds. "And the most rewarding part of NWBB is seeing every life changed for the good that we have had the honor of gifting a service dog to: the fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters that are living their lives with greater freedom and independence, engaged in the relationships of their beloved families; bringing value to the lives they love and their communities.

"My plea to veterans is this: 'Never quit, never give up,'" Walker declares. "It is my hope that the day before a veteran meets their service dog is their last worst day...and the day they meet their service dog it is their best first day." 🇺🇸

For more information about Northwest Battle Buddies, please visit our website at northwestbattlebuddies.org

In Their Own Words

Veterans assert that companion service dogs from Northwest Battle Buddies have saved many lives. The inspiration behind Northwest Battle Buddies Operation Never Quit Project is Michael, an American hero who found hope and healing with a service dog.

"Exactly one year prior to getting River, to the date, I attempted to take my own life. The pressure became too much. The vertigo and headaches from my TBI were excruciating. I felt like a failure, worthless.... Why was I spared over the husbands, fathers and friends I served with that didn't come home? The guilt was too much to handle. I tried all the meds...they did nothing. Drinking became my numbing agent; that only made things so much worse...three years, no booze now.

The hardest part is 10 years later; I still get calls telling me another Army brother has taken his own life. These were some of the toughest men, fathers and sons I've ever had the pleasure to meet. The pressure was too much. My hypervigilance made me feel like every rooftop had a sniper and every trash bag on the road was an IED. My innocence was stolen from me at 18 when I had to kill or be killed for the first time.

During my attempt I had everything. I bought my first house, just got married to the love of my life a couple months before all this, makes no sense, I know...I should've been on cloud nine. But my PTSD took over that day. I was having a bad day to start because I had just lost another friend.

I drank down a 24-pack of beer, pulled my hidden Remington 870 out of the attic...put down a tarp...grabbed a chair...put the barrel in my mouth, tears were rushing down my face as I was thinking about my wife and family and what I was about to do to them. Now I move my finger to the trigger. As I do this, Lindsay comes in to check on me. Her jaw dropped, and without skipping a beat she used unreal strength to get the rifle from me. She saved my life!

After this she put me into a PTSD program that I went to twice and she found Northwest Battle Buddies. Now she can relax somewhat. I have River, who is now saving me daily...."

Other veterans feel a powerful bond with their companions.

"Service dogs can be the difference between life and death. I've listened to stories from other veterans, and I hear the pain in their voices and see it in their eyes. As an empathetic person, I feel their pain almost like it's my own. And having the presence of a service dog to help buffer those feelings of pain—it's powerful."

— **Combat Veteran DL, whose companion is Northwest Battle Buddies service dog Atlas**

"I was able to go to Walmart, the grocery store and to a doctor appointment in Vancouver alone. I have not been able to do that for about 10 years. Hope is there for me to lean on for the support of my anxiety."

— **Veteran Dani, whose companion is NWBB service dog Hope**