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PAWS FOR A CAUSE

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PAGE 13

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“Happiness starts with a wet nose and ends with a tail.” This popular adage can be found on everything from shirts to socks, mugs to memo pads, and the best thing about it, is – in addition to being trendy – the saying is also true!

One international non-profit charity is taking the sentiment to heart: Paws of War has been operating worldwide since 2014, helping the military save the animals they rescue while deployed overseas. The group also serves veterans and provides assistance with numerous issues, including suicide prevention, service and support dogs, companion cats and dogs, food insecurity, veterinary care and more.

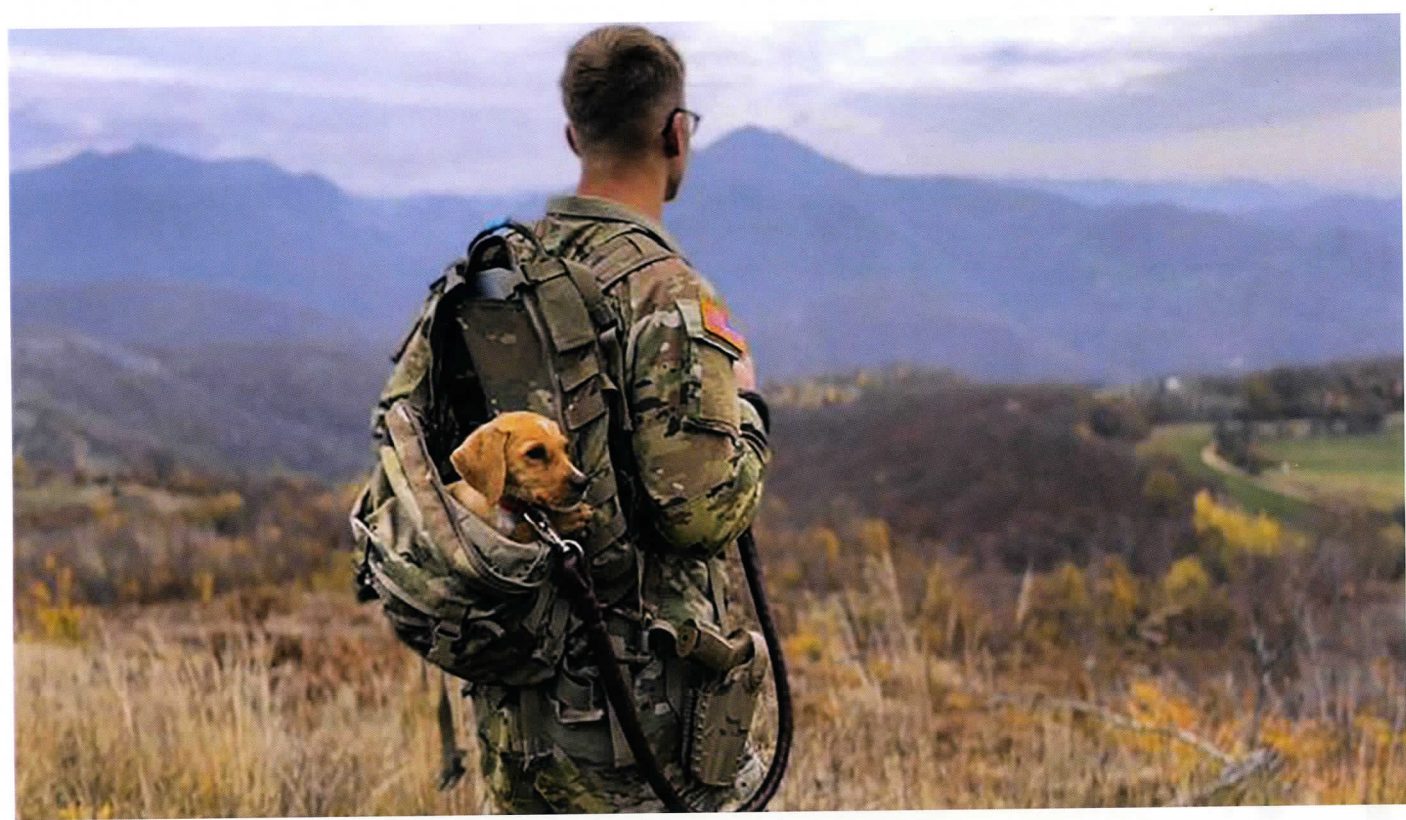
“Paws of War started out as a very small program of an animal rescue organization,” explains Robert Misseri, co-founder of the Nesconset, NY-based group. “A soldier reached out asking if we could save his dog. Once we did one, the calls started coming in and we knew how important, and difficult these rescues were, so to give it the resources it needed, it was spun off into a standalone organization in 2014.

“Paws of War has a slogan, ‘Helping both ends of the leash,’ and that really epitomizes what the organization’s core goal is, to let the healing bond between people and animals work its magic and save both lives,” Misseri adds, noting that since 2014, the group



has brought over 300 dogs and cats rescued by troops serving overseas to safety in the U.S. The organization also has provided hundreds of veterans with service and support dogs rescued from kill shelters.

The approach is backed by science: Numerous, verifiable medical studies have found that pets have a positive impact on people’s health and well being. “Pet owners are less likely to die,” stated Harvard Medical



School clinical assistant professor Beth Frates, citing the American Heart Association's finding that owning a furry (or scaly, or hairy) companion reduces a person's mortality rate by 24%. According to an article published in *Harvard Magazine*, (<https://www.harvard-magazine.com>) Frates and Megan Mueller, associate professor of human-animal interaction at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, have found that pets make people healthier in numerous ways, including lowering blood pressure; helping people exercise more, thereby lowering cholesterol and triglycerides; reducing loneliness, anxiety, and stress; creating social connections; and even assisting in clinical mental health settings.

Paws of War's mission is multi-faceted: **The War Torn Pups & Cats program** reunites military personnel with the animals they rescued and bonded with while serving overseas at no cost to the troops. The group also trains and places shelter and support dogs to serve and provide independence to U.S. military veterans that suffer from the emotional and physical effects of war, giving veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and other debilitating conditions the chance to experience the therapeutic and unconditional love only a companion animal can bring.

"Military families are really hurting, many families have been torn apart by multiple and extended deployments," points out Misseri. "Coming home unfortunately is very hard for a lot of troops, dealing with the things they experienced as well as the guilt of being away hit some very hard. The '22 a day' (referring to the number of U.S. veterans that take their own lives each day) is a sad and sobering number."

Paws of War relies solely on donations and volunteers in its mission to help deployed troops and veterans, and since 2014, more than 988 volunteers have worked more than 68,000 hours. There is

never any cost to troops or veterans, and the group provides service dogs and training to veterans and first responders who have served in any branch of the uniformed services in any era; have received an honorable or a general (under honorable conditions) discharge; have a service-connected disabling medical condition; and have been released from all service and reserve obligations. Paws of War has two top charity ratings: Charity Navigator's Four Star Rating and the Candid (Formerly Guide Star) Platinum Seal of Transparency.

The group is constantly seeking new volunteers and resources to assist with its compassionate cause. "We are a grassroots organization funded by individual donors," Misseri explains. "We would love to be able to reach out to a wider audience and also attract corporate sponsors. Getting the word out about the services we provide is not nearly as difficult as getting the word out about the need for funding and volunteers. Lots of people want to come in and play with the dogs a few times, but we really need people who are good with social media, dog trainers, flight buddies, transport partners, fosters, people to work events, the list just goes on. For the most part anyone over 18 with a passion to help is welcome."


The last few years of the global pandemic have been extremely challenging, according to Misseri. "Paws of War, like most, was severely impacted by COVID. Veterans already suffering from PTSD and other types of trauma felt particularly vulnerable and shut in, cut off from some of the few lifelines they had. At the same time, first responders and nurses were faced with a daily siege of death and despair causing many of them to experience mental hardships. So many people were reaching out to us for help, for a service dog, for a companion dog or cat. We had to work through the lockdowns and expand our programs to try and meet the need. Today we have about 200 service dog teams in training, and last year rescued over 200 dogs and cats for deployed military."



Paws of War recently expanded its program to include training and placing service dogs with military children who have autism. "The presence of a service dog in the home brings peace of mind to military members who have to leave for deployment – knowing the dog is a comfort to their child and the family," Misseri comments. "Service dogs provide friendship, confidence, and calming ability to children who find social interaction and many daily situations overstimulating, and the dogs offer calm reassurance. They can reach children on a level that other people often can't."

The group also operates a no-cost mobile veterinary clinic, provides housing assistance to veterans with pets, offers lifetime care for retired military working dogs, provides emergency foster care for the pets of hospitalized veterans, runs a therapy dog program for veterans and seniors, and recently started a Ukraine animal rescue operation.

Misseri urges individuals to be aware and attentive to other's needs on a personal level. "If you know someone is struggling, don't just hope they get better, be a friend, be an advocate, be a lifeline," he advises. "So many people just need a hand up, just need to know someone cares. Get involved in any way you can, the troops, veterans and first responders we serve are certainly heroes that deserve our support."

The kindness and generosity of Paws of War volunteers make a virtually limitless difference in the lives of the deployed troops, military families, and veterans the organization serves. "Every day we hear the stories and meet the people whose lives have been changed or saved," Misseri relates. "We see so many dogs and cats rescued from certain suffering and most likely death, lounging on a couch and being loved and spoiled. That is such a great outcome." 

For more information or to donate, visit the group's website at: <http://pawsofwar.org>.



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— Robert Misseri, co-founder