

# ARTICLE #1

## Military Working Dogs: What Happens After They Serve?

BY Larisa Epatko *May 28, 2012 at 10:45 AM EDT*



A staple to most militaries around the world, dogs hold important roles including sniffing out drugs and bombs, finding victims of natural disasters, and lifting the morale of injured troops.

But what happens after they've served their time in the military?

To find out, we spoke to Collen McGee, public affairs officer at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, where all dogs used in the U.S. military are trained.

Prior to 2000 — and the enactment of “Robby’s law”, which started the adoption program at Lackland — the dogs were euthanized, she said.

Lackland breeds its own puppies for service, but half the dogs don't pass the aptitude tests, said McGee. So now, the dogs who have served and those who don't make it past the aptitude tests are put up for adoption. The dog's personal handler gets the first priority for adoption, but it then opens up to other military or civilian adopters, she said.

“The list of applicants is 18 months to two years’ long, because that many people want one of our dogs. It’s wonderful,” said McGee. Last year, about 430 dogs found new homes.

Because the dogs are older and are large breeds, they might come with health issues such as arthritis, she added. So adopters, who pay no fee for their new pet, are given a month’s worth of any necessary medications to get them started.

Daphna Nachminovitch, vice president of cruelty investigations at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said the working dogs have invested themselves and do grueling work, not by choice but because of their loyalty and bond with their handlers.

“I think it’s important for us as Americans and for the military to recognize that these dogs are forced to perform duties that most people wouldn’t choose to perform,” she said. “The only people who truly, truly know what they give us are their handlers and the soldiers who work with them.”

The dogs are put in dangerous situations, McGee acknowledged, but they are the only ones who can perform certain tasks, such as smelling a substance in an explosive to find it before it detonates.

“The dogs are saving lives, period,” she said. “They are the most efficient at doing that. I’ve watched these dogs at work and they’re happy doing it.”

The work is hard on the dogs, and their adoptive families are aware of it. McGee said one handler she spoke with adopted a dog with symptoms of nervousness connected with post-traumatic stress disorder, and his 11-month-old daughter is able to give the dog commands. “It’s pretty cool,” she added.

Nachminovitch said she’s heartened to know there’s more recognition that dogs can develop PTSD. “The reality of what these dogs are used for obviously affects them very deeply. These dogs get post-traumatic stress disorder, just like people do.

“I think we owe them at least through retirement a happy loving home so that they get to be a dog,” she said.