

No Pet Left Behind

By Dennis McCafferty

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The puppy was only a few days old when Army medic Matt McDonough discovered him trapped within twisted razor wire, near his base in the Diyala River valley in Iraq in 2007. The tiny, malnourished dog was badly cut all over. So McDonough took him in, treated his wounds and fed him scraps from the mess hall. Within days, his little friend started to heal.

Because keeping a pet is against Army regulations, McDonough and his platoon kept it hidden from top brass. When they returned to their barracks one day, they found the puppy snuggling in a Kevlar helmet. That's when he got his name: K-Pot.

"We were with him for about six months," says McDonough, 35, who finished his tour of duty in 2008 and now is a chef in Charleston, S.C. "Everybody formed an attachment to him. Being a medic, I'm always taking care of everyone. But others in the platoon now looked at K-Pot as a pet that they could care for. He was someone to feed and bond with when you had a bad day."

Still, rules are rules. Eventually, the platoon was caught and superiors ordered the dog be put down, McDonough says. But the soldiers made other plans – they got K-Pot to safety by arranging for local residents and other civilians to take him in. Then they found out about a program called Operation Baghdad Pups.

Run by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals International, Baghdad Pups serves to get dogs like K-Pot – and other pets – to suitable homes in the United States. Seizing on the opportunity, McDonough and others on the base put K-Pot in a Stryker and drove him to Balad, where a private contractor from Australia was happy to transport him to Baghdad. From there, Baghdad Pups representatives got K-Pot to the United States, where he now lives in Gloucester County, N.J., with McDonough's sister, Danielle.

"When we were hiding him, we did anything we could to keep him," McDonough says. "If that meant keeping him in an interpreter's trunk for a night, that's what we did."

In places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the safety of the soldier and innocent civilians understandably comes first. But there really is no official line of support for animals caught in the crossfire. And soldiers frequently grow attached to stray pets they find along the way. Fortunately for animals of all kinds affected by war, Baghdad Pups and other organizations go to great lengths to ensure they're protected and placed in caring homes.

Breaking the Rules. The first dog's name was Charlie. A platoon found him while patrolling the outskirts of Baghdad in early 2007. He was no bigger than a potato, and the soldiers scooped him up and hid him in a tattered blanket. Then two dogs called Sally Bujo and Little Beast lost their "dad," a sergeant who was killed in April 2008. Then there was One Eye, a kitten befriended by a group of Marines.

Since Charlie, Operation Baghdad Pups has rescued 265 pets – an effort entailing immense logistical planning, given that the Department of Defense cannot act as an official liaison when it comes to saving such animals. Doing so requires a flurry of e-mails to and from bases in Iraq between servicemembers and SPCA staff, followed by arrangements with local transporters in Iraq and international flights. Then a suitable home with the soldiers or their families in the United States must be found.

“It’s clearly against military regulations for active-duty personnel to befriend an animal,” says Terri Crisp, program manager for Operation Baghdad Pups. “Everyone who has chosen to do this is technically breaking the rules. But we’ve had some people in high authority doing it as well – as high as a lieutenant colonel. Even superiors realize these animals present a great, therapeutic value for their soldiers. And no soldier who has worked with us has ever gotten in any kind of real trouble because of this.”

A recent Baghdad Pups success story involved a mother dog named Queen. She had three pups, and Crisp and fellow SPCA International rescue experts were able to get her from Baghdad to Kurdistan just before Baghdad officials called for a sweep of stray dogs in the city. More than 54,000 animals were shot or poisoned during the sweep, according to SPCA.

“We got Queen and her pups out with just a week to spare,” Crisp says. “It would have only been a matter of time before they got to them.”

Foster Homes for Pets. Rescue operations aren’t limited to animals and pets living in war zones. Here at home, soldiers preparing to head overseas are often without a place for their pets to stay until they return from deployment in a year or so. For these troops, too, help is available.

In 2006, Army Maj. Randall Baucom – never a “pet guy,” he says – found seven abandoned puppies at a construction site in Bridge Creek, Okla., where he lived. As best as Baucom could tell, they were a lab/border collie mix. He was able to find homes for five of the dogs. But he couldn’t find places for an alpha male named Buster with big feet and ears, or for a runt female named Little Girl. So his home became their home.

A divorce, the death of Baucom’s mother, and a deployment to Iraq followed. He had no one to take care of the dogs until he learned about Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet (GASP), a grassroots military-support organization.

“Before I found their website, I really had no other options,” Baucom says. “I wanted to keep the dogs together. They had not been apart for more than 24 hours since they were born. They were very excitable too, able to leap over a 5-foot chain-link fence to escape. But this group was able to take them in.”

Baucom left the dogs in October 2006 and picked them up after he returned in March 2008.

“I worried that they wouldn’t recognize me or that they’d be afraid of me,” he says. “But they immediately knew who I was. They jumped all over me like I was a lost member of the pack. I figured because they were together, they never thought they were away from home.”

Baucom is currently serving in Camp Zama in Japan, and the dogs are safe and well with his father back home.

Since 2005, GASP has provided foster homes for more than 300 pets. Linda Spurlin-Dominik and Carol Olmedo, the organization's founders, were first inspired by a posting on a military-support message board about a dog named Scooby Doo from Toledo, Ohio. They immediately saw a need to help find foster homes for animals in similar circumstances, because the only other option a soldier may have is turning the pet over to a shelter where it could eventually be euthanized while its owner is serving overseas.

"We realized there were many, many stories like these," Spurlin-Dominik says.

The first animal officially fostered through GASP was a Chihuahua named Johnny Cash from Fort Hood, Texas.

Today, Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pet oversees a national network of about 2,300 potential foster homes willing to care for the pets of active-duty troops, Guardsmen and reservists during deployment. This year, Spurlin-Dominik and Olmedo plan to open a 13-acre sanctuary in Gatesville, Texas, to serve as a temporary home for animals until GASP can place them into approved foster homes.

"These pets belong mainly to couples who are being deployed at once and single owners who are in the military," Spurlin-Dominik says. "Of course parents or other relatives will take in their children. But pets are often another story. This is a way to find these pets a good home until they can be reunited with their owners."

Dennis McCafferty is a frequent contributor to The American Legion Magazine.