

When military members are deployed, this nonprofit ensures their pet has a home

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Pets

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After being apart for over a year, P.O. 2nd Class Myesha Harris, who was deployed on the Truman, and her 2.5 year-old male French Bulldog Nipse are reunited in Deb Coon's backyard Friday, October 14, 2022. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

VIRGINIA BEACH — Thirteen months ago, Petty Officer 2nd Class Myesha Harris said goodbye to her little French bulldog as she prepared to deploy on the USS Harry S. Truman.

When she returned to pick him up last Saturday from a foster home, the stocky pup with blond-colored fur ran to Harris, stood on his back legs and snuggled against her neck as she bent down to greet him.

“Nipse, I missed you so much,” said Harris, 29. “Look at you; you’re so big.”



For over a year, Nipsey, a French Bulldog, has waited for her owner Petty Officer 2nd Class Myesha Harris to return home from deployment. As seen Friday, Oct. 14. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

The 2-1/2-year-old pup gained a few pounds since she last saw him in person, but he was in good hands while she was away. Harris found the foster home for Nipsey through a nonprofit organization named Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pets that connects active-duty service members, wounded warriors and veterans with temporary homes for their pets.

Harris, a California native, doesn't have family in Hampton Roads to rely on, so she inquired about options for boarding her dog while deployed through the Navy's Fleet and Family Support Center.

Guardian Angels, based in Texas, encourages service members and veterans not to give their animals away when deployed by providing an affordable long-term care option, said Marge Janiak, spokeswoman for the foster program.

"It's a blessing for people like me that love their pets but also want someone to take care of them like they would," said Harris, who works in the carrier's helicopter squadron.

The foster organization has about 10 to 15 pets being cared for across the country at any given time. Another dog is currently in a foster home in Williamsburg, Janiak said.



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A team of coordinators screen pet owners and potential fosters before matching them up. Harris brought Nipsey to meet Deb Coon, a Virginia Beach resident and one of the organization's approved pet foster parents, before deciding to leave him with her last September.

"She liked him, so I liked her, too," Harris said.

The pet owner is usually responsible for all pet care-related expenses including food and vet visits. The foster contract is for the length of deployment, which can fluctuate.

The Truman deployed in December and was scheduled to return in May. Its time at sea was extended due to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Harris and around 5,000 other sailors finally returned to Norfolk on Sept. 12 after nine months.

Nipsey stayed with Coon, a former dog handler in the Navy, while Harris prepared for the ship's departure, during her deployment and until she was settled back into her apartment in Chesapeake, a month after returning.



Deb Coon, who fostered Nipsey while Petty Officer 2nd Class Myesha Harris was on her fourth deployment, helps pack up the dog's belongings Friday, October 14, 2022. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

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