



Captain Cecilia Najera of the U.S. Army's Combat Operational Stress Control unit runs with her coworker, Boe.

Operation Stress Control

Dogs bring solace to soldiers | By Melanie D.G. Kaplan

FORTY-EIGHT TO 72 HOURS after a critical event occurs in a war zone—a soldier is killed in an explosion, for example—the U.S. Army's Combat Operational Stress Control (COSC) unit offers what it calls traumatic event management to help the affected unit cope with the loss. “We debrief and talk about what they experienced,” says Capt. Cecilia Najera, an occupational therapist. “We reinforce [the fact] that the symptoms and feelings they are having are normal reactions to something that is abnormal.”

During one such gathering, in Tikrit, Iraq, the soldiers sat in a circle around Boe, a black Labrador and one of the first army dogs to be deployed specifically to provide troops with emotional support. Some of the men and

women wanted to talk about the incident. Others, trying to get a handle on their feelings, just wanted to listen. A few found it easier to talk when they were petting the dog.

“It was somber,” Najera remembers. But then, in the middle of the circle, Boe broke the gloomy atmosphere with an abrupt movement. “She tried to catch a fly,” Najera says, “and everyone laughed. She definitely offered a bit of a distraction and helped lighten the mood.”

Sgt. 1st Class Boe was arguably one of the hardest-working and most popular soldiers at the base during her deployment. In a place where both the emotional and the physical climates are harsh, Boe became de facto family for many of the soldiers. She got them talking when they were inclined to shut down, and

frolicking when they needed to relax. She allowed them to express themselves emotionally and demonstrate affection (which she reciprocated) in an environment where warmth and tenderness were in exceedingly short supply.

The program was launched in 2007, and Boe and another black Lab, Budge, became the army's first COSC dogs, helping service members deal with combat anxieties, homefront issues and sleep disorders. They were donated to the army by America's VetDogs, a sister organization of the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind. The foundation has a history of working with the military, back to post-World War II days, when they provided guide dogs for vision-impaired veterans.

There is nothing new about dogs

working with soldiers—they are well established and valuable in areas of detection and security. But it wasn't until folks from the army's COSC unit approached VetDogs about sending therapy dogs to Iraq that the nonprofit organization began training its canines for a very different purpose.

"These dogs have to have impeccable behavior," says Wells Jones, CEO of VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind. "We're giving them that behavior, plus preparation for all kinds of people and circumstances." He acknowledges that, seeking a similar emotional connection, military units have been known to adopt local dogs. But those dogs, few of whom have been inoculated, can bring disease onto a base. Most importantly, the army has a rule against it. General Order 1-A says that soldiers are forbidden to adopt, care for or even feed any domestic or wild animals in the war zone.

Trainers choose COSC dogs, whose jobs fall under the umbrella of animal-assisted therapy, based on temperament. It's critical that they do not react negatively to loud noises, and that they follow their handler's commands despite distractions ranging from mortar rounds to a soldier bearing a tempting treat. Training includes exposure to ground-rumbling noises (rifle ranges) and exotic transportation (helicopters).

With security in mind, VetDogs chose Boe and Budge in part for their color—black. "We were thinking that they'd be less visible at night," Jones says. "But since then, our preference has changed and we'd prefer them on the lighter side because of the strong sunlight and the fur's ability to reflect."

Before a dog is sent overseas, army handlers spend time training at the VetDogs campus on Long Island, N.Y., and at army bases. Although one person becomes the dog's primary handler, three others are also trained to ensure that 11th-hour staffing changes won't affect the dog's care. On top of that, 40 to 50 people in each unit receive one day of basic instruction in dog care—for instance, do not feed the dog MREs



(the army's infamous Meals Ready-to-Eat, which may, in some cases, be less palatable than kibble). When the dog is fully trained, he or she travels on official army orders to the war zone.

Opening Doors to Mental Health

"I didn't know what to expect with Boe," Najera says. "It was my first deployment, and I had no clue how I'd use the dog." As part of COSC's prevention team, Najera facilitated outreach and classes in areas such as coping skills and suicide prevention. Boe, constantly at Najera's side, made her purpose clear in no time.

"There's still a mental-health stigma," Najera says. "When you say, 'Hi, I'm from Stress Control,' people tend to run the other way. But I found that having a dog opened up doors. Instead of having to [make the] approach, people approached me." She says it also gave soldiers something neutral to talk about, especially if they had pets at home. Before they knew it, they would be talking about personal aspects of their lives and even—on occasion—their feelings.

Najera found that she and Boe were always working. Not only were they available to men and women dealing with combat trauma or news of tragedy back home, but soldiers would also approach the pair at the dining facility

or while they were running on the track (part of the old Iraqi Air Force base where they were staying). Najera created a program for a couple of overweight soldiers to run with Boe, and the dog even participated in a 5K on the base. The four-legged competitor still managed to boost morale, even after beating a few human racers. On Boe's fourth birthday, the Army Dixie band played, and the dining facility staff made a cake and a piñata. "It was a party for her, but it was really for our community," Najera says. "It just showed how much people really enjoyed having a dog."

Boe wasn't immune to the high-stress environment. After all, she was charged with comforting many of the 16,000 people living on a base that was active 24 hours a day. "I think the dogs experience compassion fatigue too," Najera says. "When soldiers tell us what they're going through, it becomes stressful for us, because we're absorbing the stresses. I think it was the same for the dogs." Eventually, a forced nap was scheduled into Boe's day.

In Mosul, at Forward Operating Base Marez, Budge lived at a smaller facility but still had his work cut out for him: consoling troops at a trailer-based clinic and going for walkabouts to visit units. The base was mortared multiple times



From left: Boe with his first handler, on duty in Iraq; Army handler training Boe in New York Harbor on FDNY's Marine One; earmuffs at the firing range are among the protective gear provided to the COSC dogs.

a day, and though Budge raised his ears at the sound, he didn't panic. He even had a chance to save a life, donating blood to a military police dog who was injured along with his handler in a shooting.

Like Boe, Budge was a superstar and champion icebreaker, garnering invitations (to unit social gatherings, for instance) that a mental-health provider might never get otherwise. "We couldn't go anywhere without someone calling his name," recalls his handler, Staff Sgt. Syreeta Reid, an occupational therapy assistant. "They didn't remember my name, but they always knew I was the one with Budge." Sometimes Reid set up play dates between Budge and the soldiers: Frisbee or fetch on a field where an Iraqi soccer team once played.

In both countries, the weather is unforgiving and the physical conditions are challenging, and the dogs—just like other soldiers—are deployed with proper gear. They have booties to protect their paws from the hot ground and Doggles to protect their eyes from blowing sand. They have cooling jackets for daytime and, in Afghanistan, warm vests for night. Reid says she inspected Budge's paws daily to make sure they weren't cracked, and used cream to keep them hydrated. The mercury rose

to 135 degrees some days, and those were indoor days for Budge.

On days with multiple soldier visits, Budge would inevitably receive too many treats. Reid says one of the hardest things was dispelling the myth that food equals love. The fact was, Budge was getting a little, well, pudgy. Reid pled with his fans to limit the treats, but eventually resorted to serving him smaller meals to control his weight.

Homecoming

Boe and Budge were deployed for 18 months, returning to the U.S. in April 2009. Jones says that people remember working dogs not returning from Vietnam, but "these dogs travel on orders," he says, "so they all come home." Upon their return, they go to VetDogs for evaluation and retraining for their next army assignment. Most of the former COSC dogs have been redeployed to occupational or physical therapy clinics at U.S. bases.

Studies are currently underway at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence, next to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, to help understand exactly how the dogs are helping soldiers. Anecdotal evidence shows that the presence of an animal helps soldiers sleep and lowers their anxiety.

But just like any other area of military medicine, it's critical to have research to show the effectiveness of the therapy dog program, which—with training, transportation, gear and care—isn't cheap. In the meantime, the deployments continue, even though the dogs haven't yet been formally added to the COSC unit's personnel roster.

Today, three dogs are serving in Afghanistan (Apollo, Timmy and Zeke). Two dogs (Butch and Zack) returned from Iraq in December and are temporarily back at VetDogs before they are redeployed to Afghanistan. After retraining, Boe and Budge were sent to Ft. Gordon's Eisenhower Army Medical Center in Georgia. Budge died in 2010 from lymphoma, and Boe is now working at Georgia's Ft. Benning, lending a paw to the healing of wounded soldiers.

It's hard to know if Boe is happy to be back in her home country because she takes such pleasure in working and helping people, regardless of who owns the turf. Being deployed might not be such a bad life for a dog. "These dogs are doing something they love to do," Jones says. "They love to be with people. So it's not the same circumstance as soldiers, who are away from their families. The dogs are with their family." **B**