Puppies Behind Bars

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THE LOVE OF SGT. ZOE

It’s not hard to guess how a young American serving in Afghanistan feels when he or she sets eyes on a small black Lab. But when Puppies Behind Bars talks to Army chaplain Karen Hallett about “Sergeant Zoe”—who was raised by inmates in the P.B.B. program at Bedford Hills prison, officially commissioned by the military, and deployed to Bagram Air Base with Hallett last spring—the impact of a dog in a far-off war comes vividly and powerfully home.

For “the chaplain with the dog,” as Hallett became known, every walk down the main (and only) street at Bagram was a chance to engage more deeply with the soldiers she was there to help. Describing a typical response to Zoe, Hallett recalls their first encounter with one officer: “He spotted Zoe. I knew he was going to ask if he could pet her—he had that “Oh boy, a dog!” look on his face. I told him he could. In one motion, he dropped to his knees, grabbed her, and did a pet-hug-wrestle move with her. She responded by nipping his chin, which prompted more pet-hug-wrestling. When he was finished, he stood up, shook my hand, and said, “Thanks, chaplain, that was f---ing AWESOME!!!” We ran into him every week or so. He’d see Zoe coming, and he’d run over to get his share of love.”

First and foremost, Hallett explains, an Army chaplain’s job is to protect and provide for the soldiers’ First Amendment right to the free exercise of religion, conducting services for the chaplain’s faith group and coordinating services for other faiths. Much like civilian ministers, they have three areas of focus: nurturing the living, caring for the wounded, and honoring the dead. All of which, it turns out, are helped by having a dog. And not just any dog. As Hallett notes, Zoe was specifically trained by P.B.B. to attend to her handler and others during times of stress, including grief and anxiety.

Continued on page 2
CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

Chaplain Karen Hallett remembers one of Zoe’s most precious gifts:

“I received an email late on Christmas Eve from another chaplain. His commander had heard that a chaplain on Bagram had a dog, and he asked if I could come over to see him. So I arranged to come over early on Christmas morning. The commander wanted to take a picture with Zoe in front of the unit’s Christmas tree. Apparently, his family had to put their 10-year-old black Lab to sleep in November, just after he deployed.

“His six-year-old daughter had written a letter to Santa Claus, asking him to bring a stuffed black dog to her daddy who was helping with the war, so he wouldn’t be lonely on Christmas. The commander emailed his wife the picture of him and Zoe. She printed it and hung it on the tree. When their daughter woke up on Christmas morning in the States, she saw the picture on the tree with a note from her daddy: ‘Santa asked God to bring me a black dog like you asked, and God sent Zoe to visit me.’ Cool, huh?”

With Zoe at her side, the chaplain found herself giving out as many as ten of her business cards a week, as soldiers stopped to pet the dog. “Zoe opened the door for me to have many informal conversations with service members,” she says, recalling a husband and wife, both first lieutenants, who called her for marital counseling because “as dog-owners themselves,” they thought they would be comfortable talking to her.

Then there was the sergeant, returning to Afghanistan after emergency leave for his mother’s death, who ran into Hallett and Zoe in the PAX terminal. He got comfort from the dog, and was moved to pray with the chaplain. Another soldier, who had lost a good friend to suicide, was finally able to grieve when Zoe was sitting on his lap. From the hospital nurse who just lost a patient to the platoon leader mourning a fallen comrade at one of the all-too-frequent memorial services, Hallett watched soldier after soldier find solace and release in the steadfast black Lab.

That Piece of Home

“Zoe gave a sense of God’s unconditional love to soldiers facing prolonged deployment and combat. She was especially important to the soldiers of Joint Task Force Empire, who provided route-clearance operations throughout Afghanistan,” the chaplain says. About half of U.S. military families own pets, according to one Army medical survey, and the vast majority consider their pets a part of the family. “Zoe brought that piece of home to soldiers,” Hallett adds.

Hallett describes a typical day for Zoe as “a mirror image of my day. If we were staying on Bagram, the day began around six with a run (until it got really cold—screw that!). By eight a.m., we were at the headquarters for meetings and general office work. Zoe was allowed to roam freely through our two-story headquarters. She helped herself to everyone’s offices. She would check on me every hour or so, sticking her head in my door to make sure I hadn’t left her.

“Every now and then I would see her romp past my door as she chased her ball down the hallway. She attended church services and Bible studies with me. Our days ended between nine and ten most nights, and were broken up by walks and trips to the hospital to visit the wounded and staff.”

Chaplain and dog also criss-crossed Afghanistan over their nine-month tour: “If we were traveling, our day would begin around three a.m. We’d get to the PAX terminal by four, and wait for our flight, which could take anywhere from two to ten hours. Some travel was very easy, but most locations required more than a day to reach, and several modes of transport. But the flight crews and people who worked in the terminals were always very glad to see Zoe. I carried her food in my backpack and always had her roll-up bed with me. We spent many nights
sharing that bed on the floor of a terminal.”

Hallett had been in Afghanistan on her first deployment just six months earlier, and so she knew she would be able to care for a dog there. She also knew that the right dog would really help her ministry: “There were two therapy dogs for some 80,000 soldiers—definitely not enough.” The last piece of the puzzle, after P.B.B. had trained and paired her with Zoe, was to make sure that the dog would be able to deal with what lay ahead.

Her Awesome Dog Thing

Before the 411th Engineer Brigade left the U.S., Zoe trained alongside the soldiers, which gave her exposure to harsh conditions, weapons fire, and military vehicles, and Hallett took her on a cross-country commercial airline trip to see how she coped with long flights. “She rolled with it all. She was a perfectly trained dog from the moment I received her,” the chaplain says. In Afghanistan, Zoe continued to shine.

“Nothing phased our girl,” Hallett reports. “In the summer, down south, the temperature would reach 125. This made the gravel very hot, so we took precautions with boots or Musher’s Secret [paw wax]. I put a swamp-cooler vest on her—which she hated because she thought it made her look fat. The vest, soaked in water, kept her cool, and reflected the sun away from that black coat. She was a trooper. It didn’t matter if it was hot or cold, or raining, or windy, she just did her awesome dog thing.”

The chaplain is full of praise for P.B.B.’s inmate puppy-raisers, for their devotion and attention to detail: “Zoe’s ability to focus, to stay on task, and to quickly adapt to her surroundings is because of the work that they do. I pray that each of them shares in the sense of pride that I have in her. I cannot thank P.B.B. enough for allowing me to have Zoe. Our soldiers loved her, and she made a huge difference.”

Hallett believes that the military has barely scratched the surface in using dogs with and among troops that are actively serving. “There is a great need for dogs in the Wounded Warrior Transition Units, and many other units,” she says.

Next stop for Zoe is Fort Bliss, where Hallett will be the mobilization chaplain, training the chaplain teams heading into the Afghanistan theater: “Everyone is already excited about having Zoe in Texas—oh, and having the chaplain,” she jokes. No question that both she and the dog will welcome a less grueling post.

Tasked to Honor the Dead

“The year was tough for Zoe,” Hallett says. “She got plenty of exercise, but not much play. We had a combat stress dog, Butch, who lived near us on Bagram, and a fenced area where they could safely chase each other when we could arrange the time. Since both teams traveled, it was tough to sync playtime. I went through a couple of RC monster trucks—Zoe loved to chase these down. The only problem was that she was a little rough on them when she caught them. She thought that running away from me with the truck in her mouth was part of playtime.”

Though most of Hallett’s stories concern the soldiers in her care, and the wonderful dog helping her serve them, she obviously gave more than 100 percent during her second Afghanistan tour. Asked about the Bronze Star she just received, an honor rarely awarded a chaplain, Hallett first nods to her “incredibly supportive” command and commander. “I have always been allowed to do ministry ‘my way’—that is, as God has wired me to do it. This year it included an out-of-the-box solution like bringing Zoe with me.”

Hallett set new standards, as she and Zoe traveled more than 20,000 miles around Afghanistan, visiting subordinate chaplain teams every 45 days and seeing 75 percent of their 5,300 soldiers over the year. Chaplains are now systematically involved in moving soldiers home, providing comfort at layovers during emergency compassionate leave, and tracking the care of the wounded as they continued on back page
FREEMAN POWER
The Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust has made an extremely generous Dog Tags challenge grant, to help Puppies Behind Bars continue its work with Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. Your donations in support of P.B.B.’s Dog Tags program will be matched dollar for dollar, up to $55,000, through September 2013.

THE FISCHER FACTOR
New York Department of Corrections Commissioner Brian Fischer, who served with three governors, announced his retirement. It has been P.B.B.’s rare good fortune also to have Fischer on the board of directors for the past five years, and—more luck—he will remain a board member. This winter, after another “class” of wounded Iraq and Afghan vets graduated with their service dogs from P.B.B.’s Dog Tags training program, Fischer summed up the power of the ceremony, which was held at the Fishkill prison. “It provided a unique opportunity for inmates to connect on a very personal way with the soldiers to whom they are giving their dogs,” he wrote. “They do so out of love for the dogs and respect for the soldiers and marines. For too many, love and respect was not often felt before this.”

THE THREE PERCENT
For the sixth year in a row, Charity Navigator has given P.B.B. a four-star rating—the highest certification of an organization’s good governance and fiscal responsibility. As Charity Navigator C.E.O. Ken Berger wrote in March, “Only 3% of the charities we rate have received at least 6 consecutive 4-star evaluations, indicating that Puppies Behind Bars outperforms most other charities in America.”

TALENT ON BOARD
The P.B.B. board welcomed back Katherine Bang, Vanity Fair’s photo research editor, for another stint as a director, and voted in two new members—Christine Rogers and Joaquin Martinez, both longtime supporters. Rogers, a former partner at Arnold & Porter, set up P.B.B. as a non-profit and oversaw the law firm’s pro bono work on its behalf. Martinez, the owner of five Mexican restaurants on the Upper West Side, including Café Frida, has catered most of P.B.B.’s cocktail benefits, thrown a free dinner for its staff each year, and hosted the five veterans in last summer’s Dog Tags training at a Café Frida feast.

EVENING STARS
At its annual benefit gala on December 3, the Animal Medical Center honored Gloria Gilbert Stoga with its prestigious Brooke Astor Award for her work with P.B.B. “The admiration went both ways: “The A.M.C. has been our partner,” Gilbert Stoga told the audience. “We bring our dogs to them not just because of the love with which they treat all their patients, nor just their cutting-edge technology and procedures, but because a diagnosis from the A.M.C. is definitive.” Two P.B.B. graduates, Oprah and Amos, and the veterans they have been paired with, Will Pagan and Rick Yarosh, received special awards and a standing ovation from the deeply appreciative crowd.

COOPER & ANDERSON
Tune in to Anderson Live, on May 3, to see host Anderson Cooper meet his namesake, a yellow Lab, on national TV. The canine Anderson—now in P.B.B. training at Fishkill prison—was sponsored in honor of Cooper, and in gratitude for the award-winning journalist’s support of the Dog Tags program.