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Study finds bond between military veterans and their service dogs unusually strong

Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine, Merrick Pet Care, Newman's Own Foundation, release study examining the outcomes of service dogs paired with military veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

(Ponte Vedra, FL) – K9s For Warriors, the nation's largest provider of Service Dogs to disabled American veterans, announced the publication of a new study in the journal *Frontiers in Veterinary Service*. The study conducted by the Purdue University College of Veterinary Science validated the commonly held belief that veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) enjoy an unusually strong bond with their Service Dogs. The study also found that Service Dogs - or in the case of K9s For Warriors, rescue dogs trained to be Service Dogs - enjoy working and show no signs that being a "working dog" dampens their enthusiasm for life.

The researchers used general linear models to analyze an online survey of 111 veterans (M = 40.1 ± 8.3 years, 80 percent male) regarding frequency of training methods, PTSD symptom severity, service dog behavior, and the human-animal bondⁱ. The findings demonstrate positive outcomes and a stronger human-animal bond with the use of positive training methods at home.

"These latest results reinforce the evidence that our Service Dogs are exceptional at helping veterans heal from and overcome PTSD," said Rory Diamond, K9s For Warriors CEO. "The intense bond shared between our warrior-canine pairs is something every dog lover can understand, but what we've just found is that the bond far exceeds that of a pet relationship. This underlines what we've said all along, that the dog and veteran rescue each other."

Purdue University researchers conducted the study, sourcing participants from K9s For Warriors veterans, who attended a 3-week placement class involving a set of standardized training and dog handling instructionⁱ. Participating veterans responded to survey questions regarding the use of at-home training methods, PTSD symptom severity, service dog behavior, and the human-animal bond.

The findings affirm that the average human-animal bond between veteran and service dog was observed to be 5.8 (on the Inclusion of Other in the Self-Scale, a 7-point scale) while dog owners typically score less than 4 on the same scale with their pet dogs^{i,ii,iii}. This conclusion sheds light on the important role service dogs play in veterans' lives.

"This study brings attention to the importance of everyday interactions that occur between military veterans and their service dogs," said Megan LaFollette, M.S., Ph.D. Candidate in Animal Science, at Purdue University. "Particularly, the finding that veterans using higher levels of positive reinforcement felt closer to their dogs reiterates the value of connections that form as veterans are involved in training

their service dogs.”

Participants reported using all training methods at least once a month, including reward-, correction-, dominance-, and bond-based trainingⁱ. The results show that higher use of reward-based or bond-based training methods were associated with reporting more positive outcomes while higher reported use of correction-based training methods was associated with reporting more negative outcomes.

PTSD severity was not associated with the veteran-dog bond or any behavioral outcomes in service dogsⁱ. This addresses a common concern as to whether the bonding process is more difficult in severe PTSD cases, and whether dogs are only able to aid a certain level of the disorder. The study confirms that regardless of the PTSD experienced, the potential for a strong veteran-dog bond and desired behavior outcomes is there.

“This important study brings us one step closer to scientifically proving that service dogs are an effective therapeutic intervention for veterans diagnosed with PTSD,” said Tim Simonds, chief executive officer of Merrick Pet Care. “Through our partnership with K9s For Warriors, we’ve witnessed the healing power of pairing rescued service dogs with veterans struggling with PTSD and are passionate about supporting this research to help increase political and financial support for this type of treatment.”

The survey also inquired about how long veterans had been with their service dog and whether the dogs’ behavior and character had changed, either negatively or positively, over timeⁱ. The length of time the participating veterans have been living with their service dog (one month to seven years) was not associated with character or behavior changes in service dogs. Factors such as veteran age and gender also affected service dog behaviors.

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About K9s For Warriors

K9s For Warriors is the nation’s largest provider of service dogs to military veterans suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and/or Military Sexual Trauma (MST) as a result of military service post-9/11. The service dog program is unique and offers an innovative approach to recovering from the invisible wounds of war. Two lives are transformed with each pairing: the veteran reduces his/her risk of suicide while the rescue dog receives a newfound purpose.

Find more information at www.k9sforwarriors.org | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

About Merrick Pet Care, Inc.

Founded in Hereford, Texas, in 1988, Merrick Pet Care, Inc. – a leader in natural and organic pet food – is dedicated to crafting the most wholesome and nutritious food that pets deserve. Merrick partners with organizations like K9s For Warriors that share the company’s commitment to making a difference in the lives of pets and pet parents. Since 2015, Merrick has provided each K9s For Warriors rescue dog with all their meals and treats as they train for service to their veteran struggling with PTSD.

Additionally, Merrick pledged \$500,000 to complete clinical research showing the effective role service dogs play in the treatment of PTSD among veterans. For more information, visit

www.MerrickGivesBack.com.

ⁱ LaFollette M., Rodriguez K., Ogata N., O’Haire Marguerite. Military Veterans and their PTSD Service Dogs: Associations Between Training Methods, PTSD Severity, Dog Behavior, and the Human-Animal Bond. *Frontiers in Veterinary Service*. 2019;doi:10.3398/fvets.2019.00063

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- ⁱⁱ McConnell AR, Brown CM, Shoda TM, Stayton LE, Martin CE. Friends with Benefits: on the positive consequences of pet ownership. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* (2011) 101:1239. doi: 10.1037/a0024506
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cavanaugh LA, Leonard HA, Scammon DL. A tail of two personalities: how canine companions shape relationships and well-being. *J Business Res.* (2008) 61:469–79. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.07.024