

"War dogs" don't qualify for retiree medical benefits

By Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.09.15

MILWAUKEE, Wis. — Flo is a highly trained war dog who knows how to find buried explosives and can detect the smells of more than 50 types of chemicals. When she finds something dangerous, she knows how to alert others. Flo spent seven intense months in Afghanistan working with her handler, a Marine named Cody Crangle. When they returned to the United States, Crangle pestered the military until he was finally able to adopt Flo and bring her to Milwaukee.

Crangle, 23, was playing with Flo in a park near their home on Milwaukee's east side when she began to limp. He suspected that Flo had pulled a muscle in her rear left leg, but a veterinarian told him she had torn a ligament in her knee. Now she hops around on just her three good legs. Crangle scheduled Flo for surgery that could cost around \$4,000. He is currently a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student and does not make much money in the bar where he works, but he says he will figure out some way to pay for it.

No Ongoing Medical Support

While Flo was serving in the military, some of the nation's top veterinarians looked after her health. Now she does not receive any assistance from the military. Unlike other retired service members, war dogs do not have ongoing medical support.

"If they need veterinarian services, I think the government should do that," said Jerry Witt, an Army dog handler. "They have served, and served with honor, and they deserve to be taken care of just like any other veteran," he said.

Witt credits the two dogs he worked with in the Vietnam War for saving his life. At that time, U.S. military dogs were considered equipment rather than soldiers. None of them returned home at the end of the war — half were given to the South Vietnamese army, while the others were put to sleep.

Military dog handlers from the Vietnam War lobbied Congress to change the rules and bring dogs home once their service was complete. In 1992, President Bill Clinton signed legislation that ensures all military dogs are treated like true veterans. Still, they are not eligible for health care once they are retired. War Dogs, a volunteer group that honors military dogs, helped with Flo's earlier veterinary costs.

"A Really Special Dog"

Crangle is not seeking financial help for Flo's surgery, but he does want people to know about the challenges of caring for retired military dogs. American Humane Society President Robin Ganzert says most people are surprised that "veterans with four legs and a tail don't get services when they retire."

Crangle was assigned dog handling responsibilities after signing on with the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Division. When he arrived at the training camp to meet Flo, one of the trainers came up to him and said, "Oh, you have a really special dog." Crangle said he felt a connection with Flo right away.

While Flo and Crangle were stationed in Helmand province, they always walked at the front of foot patrols.

War Was Difficult For Flo

Protective of Flo, Crangle usually kept her close as they discovered trip wires and buried explosives on their path. He knew bomb detection dogs and their handlers were high- value targets for terrorists.

Flo was exposed to recordings of explosions, gunfire and screams during training, but eventually, real fighting in Afghanistan began to affect her personality. Initially she was OK as long as she was at Crangle’s side, but one day when his camp came under indirect fire, Flo changed.

“She was terrified, shaking nonstop for like 24 hours. I’m not a veterinarian or a doctor, I can’t tell if she has PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), but I think in that environment she became more skittish,” Crangle said. According to Crangle, being really good at her job was a big part of what made war so difficult for Flo. “She’s so sensitive there were some days she was so stressed she wouldn’t go out, she just shut down. I could tell she just wanted to go home,” he said.

A Tattoo On His Arm

Upon returning from Afghanistan, Flo went back to the war dog facility for a medical and mental health checkup before meeting her next handler for another tour. Crangle called the facility frequently to see if Flo was going back to Afghanistan and with which unit. Months later he learned she was being retired and placed up for adoption.

Crangle adopted Flo and drove to Chicago to pick her up at the airport. Their reunion, which took place during the 2012 Christmas holiday, caused quite an emotional scene. Flo stayed with Crangle’s parents when he deployed to Asia with the Marines in 2014. Now they live together as Crangle, who left the Marines after his last tour, studies for a business degree and works.

Like many Marines, both Crangle and Flo sport tattoos. Flo’s left ear is tattooed with her ID — R670. Crangle has many, including one on his right biceps that proudly displays his pup’s dog tag, R670.