

Owners of retired "war dogs" must pay for vet care

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Cody Crangle, 23, plays with his retired Marine service dog, Flo, 8, on his porch in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Crangle adopted Flo after both served in Afghanistan. One day in a park, Flo started limping, and a veterinarian said Flo had torn her ACL. Photo: Katie Klann/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel/TNS

MILWAUKEE, Wis. — Flo is a highly trained war dog. She knows how to find buried explosives and can sniff out more than 50 types of chemicals. When she finds something dangerous, she alerts others right away.

Flo spent seven intense months in Afghanistan. When she and her handler, a Marine named Cody Crangle, returned to the United States, Crangle asked the military to let him keep Flo. He asked several times until he was finally allowed to adopt Flo and bring her to Milwaukee with him.

Crangle, 23, was playing with Flo in a park near their home when she began to limp. He suspected that Flo had pulled a muscle in her back left leg, but Flo's veterinarian said it was more serious than that.

Flo had torn a ligament in her knee and would need surgery that could cost around \$4,000. Crangle scheduled the operation even though he does not have the money for it yet.

Crangle is a college student. He does not make much money in the bar where he works, but he says he will figure out some way to pay for Flo's surgery. In the meantime, Flo hops around on just her three good legs.

No Medical Support For Former War Dogs

While Flo was serving in the military, some of the nation's top veterinarians took care of her. Now she does not get any assistance from the military. War dogs do not receive continued medical support like other retired service members do.

Army dog handler Jerry Witt thinks the government should do more to help military dogs. "They have served, and served with honor, and they deserve to be taken care of just like any other veteran," he said.

Witt says the two dogs he worked with in the Vietnam War saved 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 of the dogs were given to the South Vietnamese army, while the others were put to sleep.

Military dog handlers from the Vietnam War challenged Congress to change the rules. They wanted military dogs to be brought home once their service was complete.

In 1992, President Bill Clinton signed a law that made sure that all military dogs would be treated like true veterans. Still, the dogs are not given health care once they are retired.

He Kept Flo Close

When Crangle joined the Marines, he learned that he would become the dog handler in his group. At the training camp, one of the dog trainers came up to him and said, "Oh, you have a really special dog." Crangle said he felt a connection with Flo as soon as he met her.

While Flo and Crangle were in Afghanistan, they always walked at the front of foot patrols. It was their job to find hidden explosives on the path ahead of everyone.

Crangle kept Flo close to protect her. The two of them had a special skill that made them an important target for their enemies.

During her training, Flo was exposed to recordings of explosions, gunfire and screams, but real fighting in Afghanistan was different. Eventually, it began to affect her personality. At first, Flo was OK as long as she was right by Crangle, but one day when their camp came under indirect fire, Flo changed.

"She was terrified, shaking nonstop for like 24 hours," Crangle said. From that point on, he says Flo became timid and jumpy.

An Emotional Reunion

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 that 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.

When Flo returned to the United States, she went back to the war dog training camp for a medical and mental health checkup. Crangle called the camp frequently to see if Flo would be going back to Afghanistan.

Months later, Crangle learned that Flo was being retired. He adopted Flo and drove to Chicago to pick her up at the airport. It was a very emotional reunion.

Since then, Crangle has had lots of help with Flo. She stayed with Crangle's parents while he went back overseas with the Marines in 2014. War Dogs, a volunteer group that honors military dogs, also helped with Flo's earlier veterinary costs.

Crangle is no longer in the Marines. He is not asking for help paying for Flo's surgery, but he does want to spread the word about the challenges of caring for retired military dogs.