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Afghan vets reunited in NY with 8 battlefield dogs

Associated Press

PORT JEFFERSON STATION, N.Y. — Army reunions have been held as long as soldiers have been going off to war, yet a reunion this week was perhaps like no other in history.

National Guard soldiers from New York who befriended a stray dog while on patrol in Afghanistan were reunited with the 65-pound mixed breed and her seven rambunctious puppies after the animals arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport on Wednesday.

The reunion was made possible by the efforts of a Long Island pet rescue organization whose motto is: "Paws of War — No Buddy Left Behind."

"They really became part of the family to us," 1st Lt. Joseph LaPenta of Staten Island said. The soldiers befriended the dog they called Sheba after arriving in Afghanistan in January. She sometimes joined them on patrol, chasing away other stray dogs that may have threatened the soldiers, they said.

In March, Sheba had a litter of seven puppies. Because Sheba was weakened from the births, they nursed her and the puppies back to health, feeding her their allotment of beef jerky and MREs — Army issued "meals ready to eat." Later, relatives sent bags of dog food from home.

Soon, however, the soldiers learned their base would be closed as part of the U.S. draw down in Afghanistan.

"It really broke our hearts that we might have to leave them there" LaPenta said.

That's when Staff Sgt. Edwin Caba of Long Beach sprang into action and contacted an old high school teacher. She put him in touch with a Long Island group called Guardians of Rescue, which has for several years collected donations to bring dogs back from combat zones. They had rescued about 20 when the request came in for help getting Sheba and her pups.

"We won't turn our back on the servicemen and we won't turn our back on the dogs," said Guardians of Rescue president Robert Misseri. Working with a private Kabul-based organization called Nowzad, the groups arranged to have the dogs sent to the United States so they could be adopted by the soldiers.

Misseri estimates it costs about \$4,000 for every dog rescued from a war zone. He said an online

crowd sourcing fundraiser is still collecting money to pay for Sheba and her pups. The money is needed to pay for transportation and other logistics, including health care for the dogs — they are quarantined for 30 days and given all their vaccinations before being sent.

The effort appeared to pay off Wednesday night when the dogs and the soldiers arrived at the Save-a-Pet animal shelter on Long Island to celebrate the reunion.

"For this to happen now, leashes in their hands, they're kissing their faces," Misseri said with amazement. "This is what we do."

The puppies, already six months old and about two feet tall, are named Cadence, Rocky, Sarah, Jack, Buckeye, Breezy and Harris. Two soldiers are taking two dogs each, and three others are going home with one dog apiece. Most will stay in New York; two are headed for the Cincinnati area.

Sheba's future is still being assessed, said Dori Scofield, vice president of Guardians of Rescue, who is caring for the dog at her Port Jefferson Station animal shelter. There is hope Sheba may someday be trained as a service dog to work with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, although Scofield said it is too soon to know if Sheba would qualify for such training.

Caba, whose home was destroyed in Superstorm Sandy, said the dogs helped divert his attention from his troubles at home; he has just completed his third tour of duty in Afghanistan.

"It's nice to have something to pass the time, get rid of the stress," he said. "We just built a bond you can't even describe."

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