

## New leash on life: Dog helps vet deal with PTSD

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It's not surprising that Jon Morris has nightmares.

An Army Ranger in Central America in the 1980s, he rejoined the military after an 18-year break because he felt compelled to serve in Iraq.

And that's where he ended up, in a town called Anah in the Anbar province.

What happened there is the source of his nightmares.

The police chief of the town had been beheaded by the Islamic Army of Iraq, his head mounted on a stick as a warning from the extremist faction that was controlling the town with strict Taliban rule. Women could not be outside without the veil, and men could be arrested for simply smoking outside.

Jon, who was a staff sergeant and squad leader, says he "came in with an iron fist" in order to restore order and clean up the town — which did not sit well with the extremists.

He was so successful at his mission that a bounty was put on his head by the Islamic Army of Iran, suggesting he would meet the same fate the police chief had suffered.

On March 3, 2007, Jon and some of his men had set up an observation post. After about three hours, they decided there was nothing going on, so they went back into the street.

They were met immediately with heavy machine gun fire. Jon, the only Ranger there, was out in front. "Rangers lead the way," he says.

Jon was hit three times, but his armor prevented the bullets from wounding him. The impact, however, knocked him to the ground and caused serious injury to his back. He later discovered he'd broken four vertebrae and blown out two discs, he says.

But it wasn't over yet.

A rocket-propelled grenade landed behind him, and the resulting explosion knocked him unconscious, causing a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Although he remained for a few months in a less active role, Jon ultimately returned home, severely disabled.

His experience changed him.

Of course there are the physical challenges he's left with, including having to walk with crutches, visual impairment because of an aneurism and issues with memory and cognitive function because of the TBI.

The challenges are emotional as well.

Jon may have left Iraq, but Iraq hasn't left him. He can't forget the ambush that changed his life or the price he can't help but believe still remains on his head. It's difficult for him to relax, especially when away from his home. The sense of personal security that most of us take for granted has been stripped from him.

He was prone to nightmares, and being in crowds was excruciating for him. Such feelings are common among those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Even a trip to Wal-Mart or Food Lion was an occasion for anxiety.

"Security is a big issue for me," he says.

"I don't like being in a big crowd of people. It reminds me there could be someone with a suicide vest."

Now, however, Jon has a new ally in his fight to regain a normal life.

Through a program called Puppies Behind Bars, Jon has been given Muggs, a black labrador retriever specially trained to help him deal with his post-traumatic stress disorder and his traumatic brain injury.

A VA psychiatrist treating Jon for PTSD recommended that Jon apply for a dog through the program.

A year and a half later, in April of this year, Jon and his wife, Leondra, went to Denver to pick up Muggs and go through two weeks of training and bonding with him. Muggs is the first Puppies Behind Bars dog to be placed in North Carolina, Jon says.

Founded in 1997 by Gloria Gilbert Stoga, Puppies Behind Bars began with the help of inmates at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. The program has grown, and now six different facilities participate.

Inmates help train dogs to become explosive detection dogs or service dogs for wounded veterans.

Jon's dog comes from the program's Dog Tags initiative, which was launched in 2006.

Like the other Puppies Behind Bars dogs, Muggs was raised in a prison, socialized by an inmate and trained to perform about 100 service dog commands, including protective measures like "watch my back."

Jon jokes that while Muggs knows 100 tricks, he only knows 35.

Although Jon has had Muggs for just a month or so, the dog has already made a big difference in his life.

"It's given me a ton more security, just knowing he's there," Jon says. "He sleeps beside my bed."

If Jon has a nightmare, Muggs will wake him up.

If someone is at the door, Muggs alerts Jon. He will go into a house before Jon does to turn on the lights and make sure the house is clear. If someone is there, he'll bark to alert Jon.

Jon can deal with crowds much better with Muggs there to ease his fears. If there are too many people around, or if someone approaching is making him nervous, Muggs will block for Jon, unobtrusively inserting his body between Jon and whatever is making him nervous.

"He'll watch my back," Jon says, "and nudge me if somebody comes up."

Leondra notes that Muggs helps her husband deal with a condition called "hypervigilance." Because Jon is confident that Muggs is on duty, Jon can let his guard down, knowing that his service dog is being vigilant on his behalf.

"He's not cured," says Leondra, referring to her husband's PTSD — but navigating the world isn't as tough for Jon as it used to be.

If there is an emergency, Muggs knows how to call 911 on a special phone by knocking the receiver off the hook and pushing a large button with his nose, Jon says. He can also retrieve Jon's cane crutches if they fall.

When Muggs is on duty, he wears a vest that identifies him as a service dog. That helps Jon when he's out in public, but the vest is also a signal to Muggs that he's on duty. When the vest comes off, Muggs turns into a regular dog, approaching visitors to the home for affection and begging to play outside. Those recreational times, when Jon and Muggs can simply have fun together, are also therapeutic.

"He gives me a reason to go outside," Jon says.

But when the vest is on, Jon says, Muggs is "all business."

Muggs accompanies Jon and Leondra to Woodleaf Baptist Church, which has been incredibly supportive of him, John says.

Not only has the congregation built a ramp at Jon's home, they've also welcomed Muggs into the sanctuary for services.

Although they were born and raised in Rowan County, Jon and Leondra had been living in Minnesota since 1997. They moved back to Rowan County about five months ago.

They live in a rural part of the county, on a site set well off the road — an intentional choice given Jon's PTSD.

In spite of all he's been through, Jon misses being in the military and says if it were possible, he'd be in Afghanistan working as a private contractor.

For now, though, he's happy to be back among family and old friends — and a furry new one who's always got his back.

For more information about the Puppies Behind Bars program, go to [www.puppiesbehindbars.org](http://www.puppiesbehindbars.org).