

# SUPPORT OUR 4 LEGGED SOLDIERS

By Frank A. Yevchak Jr.



During my early police career, I had, briefly, been involved in helping with K9's and wanted to be a K9's officer myself. After I retired from the Upper Saddle River, N.J. Police Department in 2005, I took on a position with the West Milford BOE, as a Security Resource Officer. In 2007, I got involved with Operation Thank you, a program run by Macopin Middle School teacher Rich Dygos, that sends holiday packages to our soldiers. I started surfing the net for different ideas on how to help and found a few sites about Military Working Dogs (MWD's) and one of them called MWD's "The Forgotten Soldiers". I wanted to understand why they were called Forgotten Soldiers, so I did some more research and, eventually, communicated with Ron Aiello of uwardogs.org. in Dec 2008.



Ron gave me a team in Afghanistan to send supplies to, but a letter I sent came back marked 'undeliverable' with no forwarding address. So, I asked Ron to get me a permanent kennel to assist. I knew it would be expensive and I couldn't afford it alone, so I requested help from Mrs. Blom and the high school DECA group, Mrs. Reinhold,

my Principal, the Macopin Student Council and their advisor, Artie Joecks, and the entire Macopin Middle School staff. They helped me generate funds and are still involved to this day, especially the West Milford High School DECA, with the assistance of Kala Ward and Kelsey Vanderbeek, two extremely bright, energetic and patriotic young ladies.

On Memorial Day of 2009, I geared up my German Shepherd, Niki, as a MWD to show support for her 4-legged soldiers and brought her to the parade in West Milford. I was hoping she would be a good visual and would bring awareness of the importance of the MWD's. I never imagined the impact she would have on the crowd and one soldier.

It was a very hot day, but during the speeches, and the rifle salute, Niki never flinched. She seemed to realize her role and how important it was. She stood erect and proud. After the salute, the soldier I just mentioned approached me and said he had overheard me telling everyone that Niki was there to support her 4-legged soldiers, her heroes. He thanked me, and stated just how important they were in Iraq and that he had firsthand knowledge of how many lives they had saved. At that moment, I got the impression his may have been one of those lives that were saved. Before I could get his name, and properly thank him, he disappeared into the crowd. It was then that I knew I had to do whatever it took to help in a larger way. That's when Support Our 4 Legged Soldiers was, officially, born!



In June of 2009, Ron gave me an e-mail of a S.SGT. recently deployed to a new kennel at JBB Iraq. I started sending kennel supplies and care packages for the dogs, and handlers, almost every week until I had lost contact with them in June 2011. Over that two-year period, I had helped supply their kennel with, almost, everything you could imagine to help maintain their kennel. I helped supply the dogs with new konges, treats, doggles, hygiene items, leashes, insulated water bottles and bowls, along with anything the handlers, or kennel master, requested. I even supplied them with a weed

whacker to help trim the weeds by the kennel fences to protect the dogs from the fleas, ticks and spiders. This was so the handlers didn't have to use the knives I sent them to cut the weeds.

The kennel masters, rarely, ask for anything for themselves, or the handlers, but I tried, vigorously, to get a wish list from them. It became a constant challenge to figure out, exactly, what to send. I'm happy to say it only took me a few weeks to get it right, and I feel confident that I made some of their lives just a bit easier. As one kennel master put it, 'the baked cakes were a real treat!'



One of the saddest days of my involvement with the 332 ESFG/K9 at JBB was when I received an e-mail from the KM that one of their MWD's, IKKA, was put to rest on Mon. Nov.19, 2009, due to an irreversible illness. I had been fortunate to have seen IKKA at play, and in training, with her handler in photos. The entire camp was upset with the loss of IKKA. Even though not KIA, she was still part of their unit and a dedicated soldier and, as the KM said, she was known as a "Love Bug". You see, their dogs are not just equipment to them; they are partners, family and, truly, loved by them. IKKA, like every MWD, was given a soldier's memorial upon death and S.SGT. C. has retained IKKA's ashes and brought them home with him so she would, forever, have a place of honor.

Shortly after I had lost contact with the 332 ESFG/K9, I was invited to an American Red Cross Heroes Breakfast where I met Alan Krutchkoff of Adopt a Soldier Platoon. Rich and I had been there to accept their Heroes Award for assisting our soldiers. Neither of us considered ourselves heroes and it was humbling to be called 'heroes' for helping our soldiers. While there, Alan offered me one of the biggest challenges I ever thought I would face in assisting the MWD Teams. He gave me the info for a Veterinarian Technician stationed at Marine Base Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan that needed assistance in obtaining items for the dogs she was caring for.

In mid-June of 2011, I made contact with the Vet Tech and found out that her camp was responsible for caring for, in excess, of 100 dogs at any given time. She gave me her KM's e-mail and they e-mailed me with a list of needed supplies. The change from supplying 15 dogs to trying to help over 100 was mind-blowing to me. I needed to step up the fund-raising, immediately. The DECA girls, immediately, started planning fund-raisers for the cause. The Vet Tech needed items like salves and boots for the dog's paws, due to the scorching sand and rubble the dogs have to navigate over. Toys and dog beds were sent for the dogs in the clinic, as they were healing. The KM needed garbage bags, dog waste bags and water hoses, since the rats ate through the one's he had. He was building a cooling pool for the dogs and asked for tarps, so the water wouldn't, constantly, run out. At the







time, the temperature was well over 100 degrees in the shade. I was lucky enough to get a custom liner made, and donated, by Ordini Pool Supply in Paterson, N.J.

For those who may not be avid dog lovers, the bond between a dog and handler is a very close, and emotional, one. The trust, and connection, that is made between them is astounding. They feed off of the other's emotions. When a handler's morale is down, the dog will sense it and will react accordingly. The same is true of the handler. If their dog's morale is down, the handler will try and bring it back up for the dog to

perform proficiently. Thus, the reason for us all to try and do the very best we all can for our soldiers, 2 and 4 legged, whether it be with a card, a letter, a baked cake or a new kong ball.

The Tech and KM remained my contacts in Afghanistan, until they were redeployed in August and September of 2011, respectively. In September 2011, I made contact with a new KM at Camp Leatherneck, and a number of additional Vet Techs scattered throughout Afghanistan. Although it appears that Camp Leatherneck's needs have diminished, for now, the requests from Vet Tech's scattered around Afghanistan have become substantial. So, I knew I had to try and get as many donations, as possible. I made some more online contacts, but there was still a need for additional assistance. Previously, I had approached the owner and manager of Mike's Feed Farm in Riverdale, N.J. and asked if I could be given a substantial discount for the MWD Teams. They, immediately, agreed. A month later, when I told them about all of the new locations I needed help with, the response by Mike, and his manager Kelli, was unbelievable.

Not only has Mike's Feed Farm given me the needed discounts, but Kelli has made contacts with vendors and received donations for the MWD Teams. Mike's has set up a MWD display, and offers a discount to anyone that purchases items for the MWD teams and holds fund-raisers at their store. The first, in which Capt. Ken Fackina and K9 Zula from Wanaque, N.J. PD assisted SO4LS by doing a narcotic scent work detection display, was a huge success. Especially since both Zula and Niki were there. They were the center of attraction, especially for the children present.

All three of the current Vet Techs, and the KM's, I am trying to assist are responsible for the care of over 500 MWD's, IDD's and CWD's, collectively. Some of their combined needs are dog blankets, blanket coats, dog boots, leashes, military harnesses, stainless steel food and water bowls, collapsible travel water bowls, 60 lb. food storage containers, 30 lb. soft travel food storage containers, kongs and retriever kongs. Also needed are jolly balls, dog boots, nylon collars, martingale collars, long and short leashes, scent training equipment, a bite suit, Jute tugs, caged and leather muzzles, furminators, deshedding shampoos, and, eventually they will need water-activated cooling vests.

I realize that the requests are extensive, but their needs pale in comparison to the dedication and sacrifices that they, as well as all of our soldiers and their families, are making for us. As a police officer, I know it is impossible to tell what didn't happen, because we do our jobs well. That also goes for the work of the MWD Teams. It has been said that tens of thousands of 2-legged soldiers' lives have been saved. Who knows how many more have been kept from severe injury because of the courage and dedication of our MWD's, even as many of the K9's have made the ultimate sacrifice to protect their handlers and fellow soldiers?

I'm also proud that Congressman Garrett gave a speech in front of Congress about the value of the MWD's and how SO4LS is assisting. I was able to have March 13th, the birth of the Military K9 Corps in 1942, designated as K9 Veterans Day in West Milford Township in 2010 and, with the

assistance of Senator Pennacchio, I succeeded in having it also designated at a statewide level in 2011. I'll leave you with a portion of a quote from one of the Vet Techs. If anyone has any doubt about how our Vet Techs and handlers feel about their dogs this will certainly put that doubt to rest.



"Frank, I wanted to explain to you, a little bit, why we do not have a lot of supplies here. We do not have a MWD kennel on Camp Phoenix. We rely on support from the contract dog companies, but they seem to be in the same position. Most of our dogs are patrol, but are not able to train/practice because they do not have a bite suit/top or sleeve, and the training they do with explosives are carried in whatever is available (ammo cans and Tupperware). We can always make do with what we have, but would like not to "create or tactfully acquire" supplies. One of my handlers told me something that I try to stand by. "I chose to put on this uniform and come out here to fight and die for my country, he did not. He's just along for the ride!"

We had been discussing what we should do in case of emergency; that we are told to save the handlers. And as many as I asked, they have all told me that I would more likely get shot myself if I didn't save their dogs first. These men and women, truly, look at these dogs like their partners and best friends."

In closing, I just feel this should also be a fitting place to, again, thank my 4-Legged partner, "Niki", who sparked the founding of Support Our 4 Legged Soldiers that day. Niki passed over the Rainbow Bridge, without warning, on January 28, 2012, as I held her head in my hands. We looked into each others' eyes and said our farewells, for now. She took a large part of me with her that day. But she will, forever, be a part of me, the success of SO4LS and of West Milford's history!

As one of many organizations that is doing whatever it can to assist our MWD Teams, and the rest of the military, I thank you for any assistance you can give us.

**Frank A. Yevchak, Jr., Founder**  
**Support Our 4 Legged Soldiers**  
**GOD BLESS AMERICA AND ALL OUR TROOPS**  
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"See a Soldier, Thank a Soldier. See a Soldiers Family, Thank them for their Sacrifice!"  
 "Where Angels Fear to Fly, K9 Leads the Way!"  
 "Author Unknown"

