

# DOGS OF WAR

*Nonprofit provides veterans with service dogs to help with PTSD, at-home needs*

By **GABBY URENDA**  
*Pamplin Media Group*

**B**ack in 2012, Alex Hussey was in a comatose state for six and a half months.

Hussey served with the 82nd Airborne Division in the Kandahar Province in Afghanistan. Two weeks before his tour was over, he went on foot patrol and stepped on an improvised explosive device.

The explosive took from him both of his legs and his left hand, and inflicted a traumatic brain injury. His family didn't know if he would survive.

"He had to re-learn everything," said Alex's wife, Kim Hussey. "He had to learn how to talk again, how to eat again, how to do everything again. It was pretty much (that) his brain got reset because of this injury."

Seven years later, Hussey still has trouble speaking and uses a motorized wheelchair to get around. But his recovery process may soon speed up with the help of a four-legged friend.

A Hillsboro nonprofit organization, Paws Assisting Veterans, or PAVE, is training an 8-month-old poodle named Trooper to be Hussey's service dog. Trooper is training day in and day out to retrieve items, turn lights on and off, and realize when someone — such as Hussey — could be in distress.

"So, once the veteran applies for the program and they're accepted, what we

do is get a sample from their saliva when they've had a panic attack or a nightmare," said PAVE program manager and dog trainer Vanesa Vizuela.

**"It takes a long time and a lot of hours to train a dog. It's very expensive. ... It's about \$26,000."**

— *Vanesa Vizuela, dog trainer*

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◀ **Veteran Alex Hussey sits with his soon-to-be service dog named Trooper. Hussey lost both of his legs and his left hand and suffered serious brain trauma while serving in Afghanistan.**

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# Dogs

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etc. "And we train our dogs to detect that scent and tell them, 'Hey brother, you are starting to have a panic attack. Let's do something about that.'"

The nonprofit trains three types of dogs to help veterans in need. Once their training is complete, they help veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder, are physically disabled or need animal-assisted therapy.

"It takes a long time and a lot of hours to train a dog," Vizquete said. "It's very expensive. ... It's about \$26,000."

Luckily, the nonprofit takes care of the big-figure cost for the veteran.

But there's more to the service dog than simply being able to perform the tasks, said Vizquete. She added that the dog must have a connection to the veteran outside of the training.

When Hussey met Trooper, Vizquete remembers it being love at first sight.

"The moment that Trooper came in, (Alex had) the biggest smile," Vizquete said. "And Trooper just being a puppy ... (he) was just like moving like a deer and just jumping on him, and then they (were) cuddling on the sofa."

Trooper currently lives with Vizquete and visits Hussey, who lives in Washougal, Washington, about once every month. It will take about another year until the service dog can live with him full-time.

When asked if the long wait would bother him, Hussey shook his head. His wife added that Trooper is helping him already, even if their time is limited.

"He does a lot of commands with him, like sit and lie down," she said. "Alex is working on moving his hands so that Trooper sees his hands. ... Alex is still learning, Trooper still learning."

Trooper will have room to roam in the Hussey's farmhouse-style home in Washougal. The couple celebrated six years of marriage this month, and both said they try to find the positive in everything—even in Alex's injury.

"A lot happened to him, but I want him to still have a life that's worth living," said Kim Hussey. "And every day, I always want to make sure that he's doing something that fills him with joy."

She added that her husband's goofy personality is back to what it was before the accident. Hussey proved this when describing the bomb blast, he has no memory of, as "explosive" with a laugh and a smirk.

Hussey said he doesn't want others to feel bad about his injuries.

"Cause I feel like veterans—we just do our duty," he said, seriously.

But it wasn't long until Hussey's smile lit the room once more.

"I said 'duties,'" Hussey said with a chuckle.

The couple hopes to have a family one day, but for now, they're ready to welcome Trooper with open arms—and lots of treats.



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◀ Veteran Alex Hussey Trooper. Hussey lost his legs and a hand in a serious brain trauma

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