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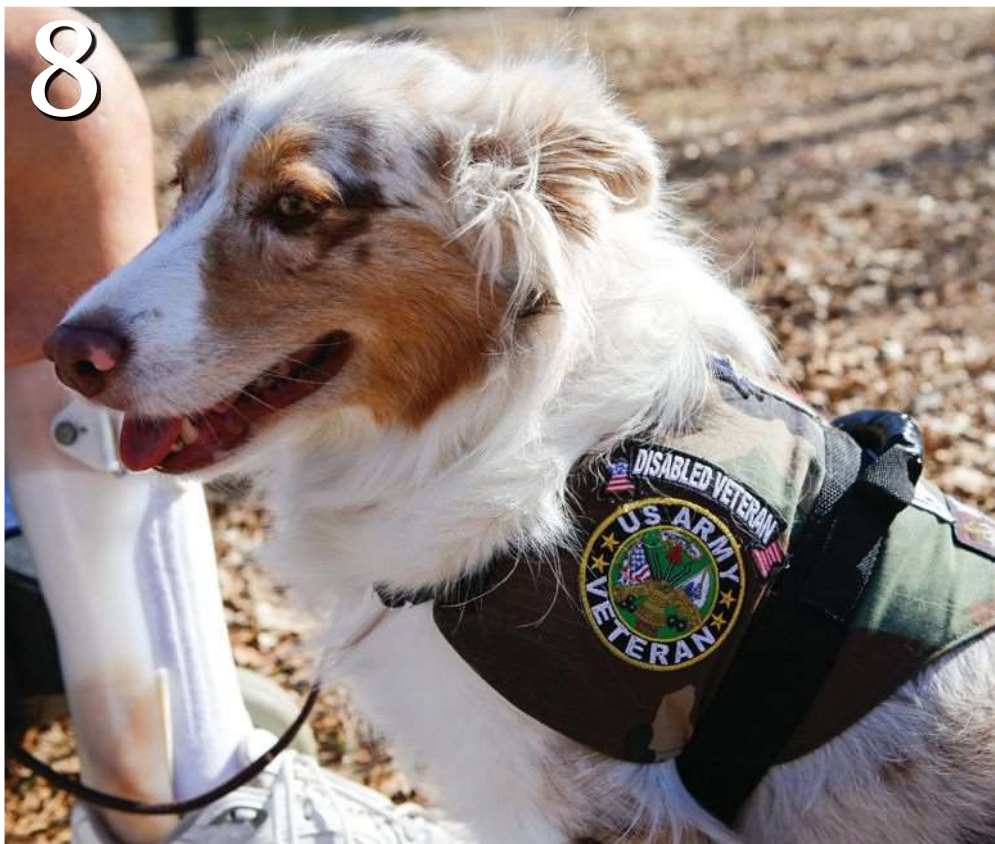


With his emotional support dog, Missy, by his side, Lee Poland lives more comfortably.

Photo by Sarah McVean.

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“She’s just sensitive to all kinds of things, which makes her the great dog that she needs to be. She can tell when he’s getting upset or agitated, and she tries to comfort him in some way.”



Constant Companions



— By Amber D. Browne



Later this month, Texas and other states will recognize Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day. The day has been set aside to honor the men and women who served and sacrificed for their country. Tens of thousands of Vietnam

vets never made it home. And, for those who did, the memories remain. Looking back, Lee Poland doesn't care to remember the bad times he encountered while serving in the Vietnam War. He prefers to only speak about the good times.

Lee joined the Army in 1961 — just because he wanted to serve his country. Lee first went to Vietnam in 1966 for a one-year tour. He was a squad leader with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. “On my first tour, I was a door gunner on a helicopter for assault and destroy missions,” he shared. “I got a Purple Heart. I got shot in the butt,” he said, grinning, remembering the injury he suffered while hanging out the door of a helicopter.

He went back to Vietnam with the 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One) for his second tour in 1969. Lee appreciates the camaraderie he had with many of the men in his division. “You really did get to know the guys,” he explained. “You go in with someone you know really well, and they get killed. It takes a toll on you,” he recalled. “You try to remember the good times,

but frequently, they're overshadowed by the bad times.” Lee remembers an incident when he was greeted by a heckler at the airport while on leave. “He called us baby killers,” he said. “That was one bad time.” Other times, he was greeted with respect, especially in his hometown in Iowa.

While serving in Vietnam, Lee also flew on medical evacuation missions. “Assault and destroy wasn't so bad. The worst one was flying on medevac,” he said. “It gets to you after a while. You just never get over it.” He considers his tours in Vietnam all part of the job.


That job in Vietnam and his time serving in the National Guard left Lee with many ailments, which he deals with daily. “He had a lot of joint problems and bone deterioration,” Lee's wife, Lonna, explained. “Because of all of this, he's had both knees replaced, both hips replaced, rods in his spine and plates in his neck.”

Due to his health issues, Lee was awarded a service dog. He was leery about the idea at first, because he had just made the difficult decision to have his 16-year-old Border Collie, Trixie, euthanized in January 2013. She was losing her quality of life, and although she wasn't a service dog, Trixie had been his constant companion. “That was the hardest thing I had to do,”

Lee admitted. Shortly after Trixie's passing, Lonna asked him if



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he wanted another dog. His answer was, "Yes, but only if the dog was 'something special.'"

Lonna got to work and began searching the Internet and area shelters and breeders. "We didn't want a puppy. We just wanted a dog that was already mature and maybe partially trained," she shared. Lonna spoke with a representative at Parker Paws, which led her to H4 - Hounds Helping Heroes Heal. The organization awards shelter dogs trained by the Lone Star "Dog Whisperer" Susan Herbert, to veterans



as emotional support animals. Missy was discovered at a Corsicana shelter, and right away, H4 representatives knew she was the perfect fit for Lee.

Mark German with H4 awarded Missy to Lee on a Sunday in March 2013. The following day, Lee's wife was admitted into the hospital with internal bleeding and was in an induced coma for three weeks. She remained hospitalized for two months. "But, he had Missy. He just clung to her, because



I was gone,” Lonna said. “I am forever grateful to H4 for providing her. It was like a lifeline for him.” Missy has been his constant companion ever since. “She always senses if he’s getting upset or agitated, and she will go right to him and try to get his attention,” Lonna explained.

Donning her service dog vest, Missy accompanies Lee everywhere he goes. She’s a constant fixture at his side while he shops at area stores or takes leisurely strolls through his Willow Park neighborhood. “She gets upset if I go out without her,” he said. “I’ll be out in the yard in the summertime. It’s hot,” he said. “She’ll be right there. She’s smarter than I am. She’ll find a shade tree,” he joked. Missy enjoys frolicking in the backyard. She will wait for Lee’s signal and then take off, running as fast as she can.

Always by his side, the Miniature Australian Shepherd provides emotional support to Lee. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “She’s just sensitive to all kinds of things, which makes her the great dog that she needs to be. She can tell when he’s

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getting upset or agitated, and she tries to comfort him in some way,” Lonna said. The Polands want to move forward with additional training for Missy, so she can provide more physical support to him, such as bringing Lee his walking cane. He recently suffered a fall, and although Missy was quickly by his side, she couldn’t help him. “She knows she’s supposed to be with him. She knows that’s her job,” Lonna explained.

Although Missy knows it’s her job to watch over Lee, she has become a part of their family. When she’s not wearing her Veteran Assistance Service Dog vest, Missy is off-duty. She gets comfy on the floor next to Lee’s chair or hops up on the couch and watches for his approval to know if she can stay. Missy may lie on the bed for a few minutes at night, but she sneaks out to roam the house, searching for her perfect sleeping spot. Whether that ends up being in the closet or the bathroom, Missy always returns to the bed before Lee and Lonna wake up. “She’s got a good home, and she knows it, too,” Lee said.

Missy has been with Lee for a year now, and he feels lucky to have her. She is there to provide support as he works through emotional and physical problems caused by the war and his time in the National Guard. “She’s a blessing to me,” he admitted. Missy probably feels the same way. Rescued from a shelter and now putting her training to use, she is part of the family. Lee and his wife of 50 years often hit the road in their RV, and Missy is always ready to jump onboard and sit by his side. Both Lee and Missy are living life a little easier now as constant companions. **NOW**