

Everyday Dog Heroes

Meet 3 brave dogs who make a difference.

Cherie Langlois

Just like the superheroes in comic books, real-life heroes have many guises. Usually they come in human form, donning firefighting gear, soldiers' uniforms, and other garb. But the canine world has its share of courageous heroes, too, of all sizes, shapes, and breeds. We're privileged to introduce you to three brave hearts.

Rex: Keeping the peace

Like many dogs, Rex enjoys having that special spot above his tail scratched. Dashing from his kennel, the 7-year-old sable German Shepherd Dog gambols around like a giant puppy. It's difficult to imagine this happy dog launching a swift attack against a human foe at a word from his handler of four years, Sgt. Daniel Jones. Yet he can and does.

Rex, who has received a Joint Service Achievement medal and two combat badges, is a patrol explosive detector dog currently stationed with Jones at Fort Lewis Army Base in Washington state. As a young dog, Rex completed a military training program where he learned to sniff out explosives, bring down a fleeing person, and attack an assailant. After he and Jones teamed up, the pair deployed to Iraq in May 2005, their primary mission one of base defense. "We made sure vehicles entering the base were secure and checked around for explosives," says Jones, a certified canine handler who wants to be a dog trainer when he retires from the military.

They also volunteered for dangerous off-base missions. Thanks to Rex's ultra-sensitive canine nose, they located about 17 weapons caches — weapons that, if left undiscovered, could have been used against U.S. soldiers or Iraqi civilians.

On one successful cache-finding mission, the two jumped 20 feet from their helicopter into a hot zone. Rex, a hefty 100 pounds at the time, landed atop Jones. After that painful start, Jones waded and Rex dog-paddled through a marsh in 95-degree heat to reach their destination. At night, Jones had such trust in his canine partner's guidance that he skipped the night-vision goggles. "Rex is my eyes in the dark," he says.

Back home, along with traveling around the United States on Secret Service missions and publicity trips, the pair tackles law enforcement as a Fort Lewis Police K9 Unit. During traffic stops, Jones says Rex serves as an excellent psychological deterrent. "When I go up to a vehicle and identify us as a K9 unit, it keeps things from escalating," he explains. "The guy thinks, 'I won't even try to outrun this dog.'"

Red: Searching for the lost

Losing your home is a terrible thing, but it pales in comparison to losing a loved one. After Hurricane Katrina battered and flooded the North Central Gulf Coast in August 2005, the city of Bay St. Louis, Miss., lay in ruins with homes smashed to kindling and roads obliterated. While many residents had evacuated, others had stayed.

"It was chaos," recalls Heather Roche of Bay Area Recovery Canines in Annapolis, Md., who traveled to the hard-hit area soon afterward with her search-and-rescue dog Red, a 712-year-old female Labrador Retriever. "They didn't truly know how many people were missing."

Red and Roche searched for the missing in the stifling southern summer heat for more than a week. Working with the Bay St. Louis Fire Department and other SAR teams, the pair traversed a hazardous, surreal landscape of unstable rubble, fetid pools, and collapsed homes. Stoic and tireless, Red delved deep into holes, sniffed through empty houses, and skillfully climbed shifting mountains of debris. At one point, she tumbled into a cesspool hidden beneath a floating door. Each area they cleared without finding human remains gave hope to the community, for it meant the people had reached safety.

"Red loved to work," Roche says with pride. "Day after day, as hot and miserable as she was, she would go search."

Today, Red — along with Roche and fellow SAR dogs Alley and Raven — remains on call 24/7 for search-and-rescue missions. As a Type 1 Advanced Certified FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) canine, Red performs to specific standards without the direct guidance of her handler and successfully searches more difficult rescue simulation courses. As one of only 184 of these dogs in the United States, Red has searched through debris from the Pentagon after 9/11, located murder and drowning victims, and made archeological finds. Not bad for a dog who flunked puppy testing and earned the nickname "Puppy From Hell" for her destructiveness and stubborn streak.

"To get her to like the idea of finding people, we had to give her steak," Roche says. "I didn't think she was going to make it, but she turned out to be a fantastic dog. She'll do anything I ask her to do ... she does it flawlessly. And by helping law enforcement find evidence and missing people, she's helping the families who have lost their loved ones."

Margaret: Saving her loved ones

It happened too fast, as it always does with toddlers. On September 11, 2006, Julie Whittaker of Oklahoma and her 2-year-old niece Kyleigh had just fed the ducks at Overholser Lake. As they headed back across a concrete boat ramp, the fearless toddler dashed down to the water's edge. To Whittaker's horror, Kyleigh slipped and fell in.

Running to her niece's rescue, Whittaker, too, lost her footing on the slick, algae-coated ramp, and slid into the lake. She managed to snatch up Kyleigh — who wrapped her arms and legs around her aunt — before falling onto her hands and knees.

"Bless her heart, Kyleigh was so brave, she didn't struggle," recalls Whittaker, who couldn't swim at the time. "But the more I tried to move up the ramp, the more I kept sliding backward. I ground my knees through the algae into the concrete and dug in with my fingernails. My neck was stretched so far back that I was afraid Kyleigh's head would go under and she'd drown."

Between her niece's weight and the slippery algae, Whittaker couldn't move. Even worse, the park appeared deserted — except for her 5-year-old Pembroke Welsh Corgi and constant companion, Margaret.

According to Whittaker, Margaret likes to make up new games, ride in the golf cart, and show off her ball-throwing skills for daycare kids and nursing home residents. Although the energetic Corgi lacks the specialized training of heroes Red and Rex, she's extremely intelligent and obedient. What's more, she and Whittaker share a powerful bond of love.

And now she stood at the water's edge, her panicked eyes as big and round as golf balls. "Margaret!" Whittaker screamed. "Help us! Please help us!"

In a heartbeat, the sturdy little dog charged into the lake and latched onto her owner's shirt. With Whittaker shouting encouragement, Margaret pulled and thrashed and yanked the two toward safety. "It took about 20 minutes — we were that far down into the water. Her strength was amazing," Whittaker remembers, her voice breaking with emotion. "She never gave up or let go" until the trio reached a concrete barrier at the edge and were completely out of the water.

While Kyleigh emerged from their ordeal unscathed, Whittaker required a doctor's attention to have embedded stones removed from her knees.

A sore and limping Margaret visited her veterinarian, Ron Mollet, DVM, of Council Veterinary Hospital, who promptly nominated her for the Oklahoma Veterinary Medical Association's 2007 Hero Animal of the Year Award, which she won.

"Sometimes Margaret and I go to the lake, and I'll sit there on that barrier and thank God," Whittaker says. "If it wasn't for Margaret, I don't know what would have happened. It still just amazes me, the way she responded. It was nothing less than a miracle."

Cherie Langlois is a freelance writer who lives in Washington state with her husband and daughter, along with Coonhound Pippin, six chickens, five sheep, four cats, three ducks, two horses, two goats, one rabbit, and one cockatiel.