

## A unique service

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U.S. Army Cpt. Mary Deighton plays with her dog, Major Aspen, in this photo provided by Deighton. Deighton served as the handler for the dog during a tour of duty in Iraq, where Major Aspen worked with a behavioral health team, taking weekly helicopter rides with either Deighton or the behavioral health specialist to forward bases to interact with soldiers.

### La Grande doctor builds unwavering bond with therapy dog while serving tour of duty in Iraq

Mary Deighton was in medical school when the twin towers fell. She decided to join the army and serve her country.

Little did she know that in a few years she would be deployed to Iraq overseeing six physicians, seven physician assistants, 243 medics and one dog.

After finishing medical school at the University of New England in 2006, Deighton spent three years in North Carolina at Fort Bragg completing her internship, her residency and becoming board certified in family medicine.

Deighton, now a field surgeon with the National Guard assigned to La Grande, began work in August as a family physician at the Regional Medical Clinic.

In the Army, doctors are given a choice: to work for a big Army hospital or serve within a unit. Deighton took the road less traveled — she chose to align herself with a unit.

In 2009, she was assigned to the 3rd Brigade Combat team, 4th Infantry Division known as the Iron Brigade.

Preparations were under way for the Iron Brigade to deploy to Iraq with 4,300 soldiers. Since Deighton was the Iron Brigade's lead physician, when other medical personnel were assigned to assist the unit during deployment she was put in charge.

Deighton was concerned.

Fifty percent of evacuations from the theater of war — soldiers sent home during deployment — are because of mental health reasons such as post traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. Yet her unit of 4,300 soldiers had one behavioral health officer.

Col. James E. Rainey commanded the Iron Brigade at Fort Carson and would lead the unit in Iraq. Deighton approached Rainey about a therapy dog joining the unit.

Occupation health workers in Iraq had discovered that soldiers who interact with a dog were healing faster.

Rainey agreed to consider a dog but stipulated that as a working dog enlisted in the United States Army it had to be a registered purebred and well trained but not cost any money.

It was six weeks before deployment. Trained therapy dogs sold for about \$16,000.

Deighton found a 1-year-old dog that looked like a Queensland Healer at the Humane Society in Colorado Springs. A trainer who trains dogs for the United States Air Force Academy agreed to work with the mutt. A vet produced registration papers. Deighton had a few tricks up her sleeve — she taught the mutt to salute, about face and low crawl.

On the day of the big interview with Rainey, Deighton had the dog sit in front of the colonel, salute and about face.

"Then she low-crawled right up to his boots," Deighton said. "It melted the Iron Brigade commander's heart."

The dog was named Iron Maiden and given the rank of sergeant.

In the Army, a dog has to outrank her handler so in the event of mistreatment, the handler could face charges of disrespecting a superior.

Iron Maiden's handler, a senior medic, suffered a broken ankle right before deployment. The dog was reassigned to Deighton, who was a captain. So Sgt. Iron Maiden was promoted to major.

In reality, she was too sweet a dog to be called Iron Maiden, so everyone — except Rainey — called her Major Aspen.

Major Aspen and Deighton became a team. They landed in Kuwait and spent 10 days with other canine teams. Since Deighton was in charge of all medical personnel for the Iron Brigade, she needed to rejoin their unit. But at Camp Beuhring all

300 female personnel from the unit were housed in one tent. Major Aspen and Deighton were almost forced to separate at this point because the army said the living conditions were not fit for a dog.

On Easter Sunday 2010, the Iron Brigade arrived in Iraq. The 4,300 soldiers were split among 20 forward bases in Southern Iraq.

Major Aspen worked with the behavioral health team. She took weekly helicopter rides with either Deighton or the behavioral health specialist to the forward bases.

It was typical for Deighton and Aspen to find 30 soldiers on a forward operating base along the Iranian border. It was a stressful setting with a lot of danger. Soldiers hardened themselves to deal with the harsh environment and the relentless strain of a war zone.

Aspen would jump out of the helicopter wagging her tail, licking everyone and engage the soldiers in play. She brought a sense of normalcy to their stark world. With a dog, they could let their guard down.

"She was a really good ice breaker for people to transition into opening up," Deighton said.

The Iron Brigade lost its first personnel to suicide when a physician's assistant committed suicide before deployment. Within the first month of being deployed in Iraq, they lost another person to suicide.

"When your whole world is out of your control, a dog can help normalize behaviors," Deighton said.

In the field, Aspen would run up and jump on a person. Pretty soon the soldier and dog would be rolling around, all legs in the air.

The team sometimes visited the command center where the daily tension was palpable. When Aspen walked in, the mood would change. Everyone was smiling, laughing and playing with the dog.

"The difference was just phenomenal," Deighton said.

From a mental health standpoint, Deighton believes that in a war zone it is critical to have something that is OK to love.

During deployment, singles cannot have a relationship. Those who are married or attached are far away from spouses or significant others. But it is OK to love a dog.

"She brought a lot of happiness," Deighton said.

Deighton's work with Aspen reinforced the importance of companionship. They worked 14- to 18-hour days often only separated for the 20 minutes it took Deighton to eat at the dining hall.

In January 2011, a rocket attack hit the base where they were stationed. Deighton was in the dining hall. Aspen was in Deighton's assigned housing — a shipping container divided into three rooms. As the base was mortared, a rocket landed between the dining facility and Deighton's quarters.

"We were hit really hard," Deighton said.

Deighton could not get to Aspen for about 12 hours. The explosions, fire and chaos were too much. Aspen developed symptoms similar to PTSD. She became jittery, fearful of loud noises and did not want to load into the helicopter anymore. She developed separation anxiety and began to bark frequently.

Finally, Deighton told Rainey that Major Iron Maiden was done. Aspen was retired from duty after serving one year in Iraq.

Although it is unusual for a handler to be allowed to keep an Army canine, Rainey allowed Deighton to adopt Aspen.

Deighton is working to recover from injuries sustained in Iraq. She and her fiancé, Alex Porter, bought a 21-acre parcel near La Grande. She enjoys working the land and playing with their dogs.

"It is peaceful and healing," Deighton said.

