



Military Working Dogs

Robby's Law—An Well-Intentioned Law, Ignored at the Cost of Veterans

Dogs have been used by the United States Military, in varying forms, for decades. While there is difference of opinion of whether these dogs should be used in such capacity, there is certainly no division of thought in regards to the kind of life the dogs deserve after their service. This sentiment was solidified with the passage of “Robby’s Law” in 2000. This law, named for a military working dog who was euthanized after his service, despite his handler’s efforts to adopt him, was passed with a central aim to facilitate adoption of Military Working Dogs (MWD) and prevent further unnecessary euthanization of dogs.¹

Prior to the passage of Robby’s Law, MWDs were euthanized without question and regardless of the dog’s health. In some instances, it was simply too costly to transport a dog back from its tour, and therefore euthanizing the dog created a more cost-efficient method.² Robby’s Law dictates that every possible step should be taken to ensure that MWDs are adopted out to law enforcement officials, previous handlers, or persons capable of handling such dogs. Because many of these dogs have medical conditions, such as PTSD, or other behavioral concerns, it is particularly necessary that they only go to individual who are equipped to handle these types of dogs. As such, civilians that wish to adopt MWD must be vetted before the adoption process is permitted to move forward.

¹ “Robby’s Law” H.R.5314,

² Michael J. Kranzler, *Don’t Let Slip the Dogs of War: An Argument for Reclassifying Military Working Dogs as “Canine Members of the Armed Forces,”* U. Miami Nat’l Security & Armed Conflict L. Rev. 268 (2014), accessible at <http://repository.law.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=umnsac>.

Under Robby's Law, preference must first be given to the handlers. If a handler is deceased or unable to provide care to the dog due to injury, the dog may still go to the handler's family, provided that the family undergo a screening process. Second in line, are law enforcement officers. If a dog does not go to its handler, law enforcement agencies are given the opportunity to adopt these well-trained dogs for the agency's own use.³ Last in line, are civilians. While handlers are not required to pay anything for the adoption of the dog they trained and work with, civilians who are cleared for possible adoption must undergo a rigorous application process and may pay as much as \$2,000 dollars.⁴ Specifically, in the instance of dogs suffering from PTSD, medical expenses can be very high and it is necessary to ensure that the adoptive family is in a positioned to cover these costs and equipped to create an environment amendable to the dog's condition.

Another important aspect of Robby's Law, is that it requires the Secretary of Defense to submit annual reports to Congress reporting on the status of MWDs, specifically how many were adopted out, how many are waiting to be adopted, and how many were euthanized. The report must provide detail as to why a dog was euthanized instead of adopted out.⁵

On paper, Robby's Law represents a monumental movement forward for MWDs. Ideally, the law provides a safe future for dogs, after their service in completed. The law is particularly well-drafted to recognize the nature of dogs who have served as MWD and the importance of placing them with an individual who can provide those dogs with the best life, post-service. Yet, despite such strong aims, the law has seemingly been under-enforced. In the past five years, multiple instances have occurred where handlers were denied adoption of the dogs they trained and served with during combat.

³ See note 1.

⁴ Id.

⁵ See note 1.

Further, in many of the instance, the dogs seemed to disappear entirely, with no accountability or explanation provided.⁶

Specialist Brent Grommet was deployed to Afghanistan with Matty, the MWD in which he had specially trained. The two not only trained together, but also deployed together, and served together. The bond that developed between the two was inevitably strong, shaped by their shared experiences. In 2014, an IED exploded, injuring the two and both were flown back to the United States; Grommet sleeping on top of Matty's crate.⁷ Like many others, Grommet was aware of Robby's Law and believed he would be afforded the opportunity to adopt Matty. This knowledge eased the difficulty of parting with Matty upon return to the states. Yet, Grommet was not immediately reunited with Matty. Rather, Grommet spend the next two years searching for Matty, incurring threats to be sent to Leavenworth prison for even discussing his difficulty in locating Matty.⁸ Luckily, with the help of a non-profit, the two were finally reunited.⁹

Ryan Henderson has not been as lucky. Henderson and his dog Satan formed an inseparable bond during service. Henderson, who tears up when discussing Satan, described his first encounter with the all-black German Shephard as anything but forgettable. While at the initial meeting where handlers are assigned to dogs, Henderson represented himself as a tough-guy who was not afraid of anything¹⁰. It was this portrayal that led those assigning the dogs to scribble "Satan" next to Henderson's name. At their first meeting, Satan tore the leash from Henderson's hand, causing Henderson to fall and tear is ACL. Clearly, Henderson had met his match. Similar to Grommet,

⁶ Maureen Callahan, *Troops Betrayed as Army Dumps Hundreds of Heroic War Dogs*, New York Post, (February 14, 2016) accessible at <http://nypost.com/2016/02/14/troops-betrayed-as-army-dumps-hundreds-of-heroic-war-dogs/>.

⁷Maureen Callahan, *Soldier's Hero Dog 'Stolen' by Military*, New York Post, (November 9, 2014) accessible at <http://nypost.com/2014/11/09/soldiers-hero-dog-stolen-by-military/>.

⁸ Id.

⁹ *Four Military Working Dogs Receive K-9 Medal of Courage Awards*, USMC Life, (July 13, 2016) accessible at <http://usmclife.com/2016/07/4-military-working-dogs-receive-k-9-medal-courage-awards/>.

¹⁰ Ryan Henderson, *Military Working Dogs: Treated as Property*, Animal Law Conference (2016).

Henderson and Satan developed a strong relationship through the hardship of war, training and working together in a foreign land. Similar to Gromett's story, Henderson was separated from his dog Satan after suffering a grand mal seizure and being flown to a nearby hospital in Germany. Henderson has tirelessly worked to be reunited with Satan since his injury in 2014 but has been unable to do so.

What happened to Matty, Satan, and countless other MWDs and why were they not reunited with their handlers? An event that took place in North Carolina, in February of 2014 may hold some answers¹¹. During that month, an adoption event was held by a North Carolina-based company, K2 Solutions.¹² Many, if not all, of the dogs which were at this adoption event had PTSD. Information has been uncovered which shows that those individuals who adopted the dogs at this event were not vetted in accordance with the strict guidelines set forth by Robby's Law. Rather, this event was described as a "dumping" of former MWDs.¹³

Unfortunately, this was not the only event of its kind. More than a 100 MWDs were adopted out to agencies and civilians that year, through public and private events.¹⁴ In one instance, a dozen MWDs were dropped at the door of a kennel in Mt. Hope, Virginia. These dogs were brought to the kennel under the auspice that they were only to stay for six-eight weeks while a contract company who purchased the dogs from the Department of Defense attempted to place the dogs elsewhere. This company had, allegedly, secured a contract with the Panamanian government which would allow the company to sell the dogs for a decent price. But, when the contract fell through, the kennel was told to

¹¹ Callahan, *Troops Betrayed as Army Dumps Hundreds of Heroic War Dogs*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Cristin Severance, *Soldiers: The Army Gave Away Our Military Dogs Behind Our Backs*, CBSDFW (May 11, 2016) accessible at http://aldf.org/wp-content/uploads/ALC/2016/Soldiers_the_Army_gave_away_our_military_dogs_behind_our_backs.pdf

“destroy” the dogs.¹⁵ Luckily for those 12 dogs, the kennel owner decided not to. Instead, he’s undertaken about \$150,000 of debt caring for these dogs and attempting to locate their handlers.¹⁶

Despite numerous attempts on the part of handlers such as Grommet and Henderson, to contact the government, K2 solutions, and anyone else that may be of service in tracking down their dogs, many were unsuccessful. Further, while K2 solutions has alleged that they made every attempt to contact previous handlers, many handlers say they received no such notification.¹⁷ Many handlers have yet to be reunited with their dogs, forcing them to undergo painful recovery without their loyal, wartime companions. The burden has seemingly fallen on numerous non-profits that have taken up this cause, working tirelessly to help reunite these companions through a multitude of efforts including making Freedom of Information requests, conducting diligent search efforts to locate the dogs, or even simply providing veterinary care during the process.

Robby’s Law was created with the intent to provide for MWD’s, many of which suffer injury and face long recovery periods after their service, much like their handler counterparts. Yet, the law has clearly been circumvented, leaving many veterans, such as Henderson, to persistently pursue any, and all, avenues in hopes to someday be reunited with their military companion.

Credit to Stephanie Cook



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¹⁵ Liz Donovan, *Caring for War Dogs Caught in Scandal Puts Man in Financial Distress*, AKC (March 1, 2016) accessible at <http://www.akc.org/news/caring-for-war-dogs-scandal/>.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Cristin Severance, *Soldiers: The Army Gave Away Our Military Dogs Behind Our Backs*.