

People
SALUTES
AMERICA'S
VETERANS

Heroes on the Home Front

THEIR SERVICE DIDN'T END ON THE FRONT LINES. MEET FORMER SERVICEMEN AND -WOMEN NOW TAKING ON NEW CHALLENGES BACK IN THE U.S.—AND SOME OF THE PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT THEM *By* JOHNNY DODD

From *Black Hawk Down* to the War on Drugs

★ For much of his life, former elite Delta Force member Norman Hooten never imagined that he'd have anything in common with someone addicted to opioids or heroin. But all that changed when Hooten—who survived the bloody 1993 Battle of Mogadishu and was made famous in the 2001 film *Black Hawk Down*—learned that two of his comrades from that conflict had died of substance abuse. “When you lose someone in combat, it's tragic, but you can expect it as within the limits,” says the 59-year-old retired Army master sergeant. “But when they come home and die of an opioid overdose, I couldn't wrap my head around it.”

So Hooten decided to do something about it. He went back to school and earned a doctorate in pharmacy—a career he was pursuing after leaving the Army in August 2001 but put on hold when he was recalled following the 9/11 attacks. And today he works at the Orlando VA Medical Center, helping veterans battle opioid addiction, along with chronic pain and PTSD. “It all began with those two guys,” says Hooten. But it wasn't until I got to the VA as an intern in 2017 that I saw just how



↑ **Warrior Pharmacist** “Helping other vets is important,” says Hooten (above in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993, and, right, with a patient at the Orlando VA Medical Center in 2018).



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: JOANNE DEITZ/ORNVA; COURTESY, NORMAN HOOTEN; JADDIE MCGARVEY/GO FUND HERO; COURTESY, FABIAN SALAZAR

many people are affected by [addictions].”

The exact number of U.S. soldiers and veterans currently abusing opioids and heroin isn't known, but between 2010 and 2015 the VA reported a 55 percent increase in opioid-use disorders among soldiers who had seen combat. “It's a fairly common progression,” explains Hooten, who says he's lost almost as many friends to overdose deaths and suicides—where substance-abuse disorders were a contributing factor—as he has in combat. “They're prescribed painkillers for an injury, then progress to street drugs because it's cheaper.”

Hooten considers his latest mission helping vets battle the enemy of opioid addiction as “a new opportunity to serve.” And he acknowledges that the battle is far from over. “This is something that's going to take a long time,” he says. “It's going to be a long fight—and we haven't seen the worst of it, but it's one I think we can win.”

‘I decided I had to do something about the opioid epidemic.’
—NORMAN HOOTEN



Moving In Hyatt with veteran Steven Holmes, and hard at work (right).

A ‘Welcome Home’ for Vets

★★★

As the daughter and sister of veterans, Charlie Hyatt has always had a soft spot for those who served. So when she learned that while vets could get housing through government programs they often had nothing to fill those homes, she took action. Since 2011 her Help For Heroes (gofundme.com/f/HelpForHeroes) charity has provided everything from furniture to cookware to nearly 500 once-homeless veterans in Ohio. “My joy,” says Hyatt, 58, “comes when I open the back of my truck in front of the home of a vet who has nothing and tell him, ‘This is all yours.’”

Reuniting Vets & the Dogs They Served With

★ That hot July afternoon seven years ago in Afghanistan is forever seared into Fabian Salazar's memory. The U.S. sailor, on special deployment with an Army infantry unit, was on a routine patrol with his bomb-detection dog Max and seven other soldiers when a firefight broke out. During the shooting, the Belgian Malinois breed noticed an enemy fighter on a nearby wall preparing to open fire on the group—and started tugging on his leash, alerting Salazar, 36, to the danger. “If it wasn't for Max, I probably wouldn't be here,” he says. “And neither would a few other guys who were there that day.”

So when Salazar learned that Max was being retired by the military in 2017, he knew he wanted to adopt the dog who'd saved his life—and turned to Kristen Maurer, cofounder of the non-profit Mission K9 Rescue, for help. Since 2013 she and Army vet

A Bond Forged in War Salazar with Max in San Antonio in 2019 and (below) in Afghanistan in 2012.

