

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/ORN/VA; 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](http://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 firefist 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 nonprofit 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.





Louisa Kastner, 48, have reunited nearly 300 working dogs like Max with their former handlers, transporting them thousands of miles, and often rehabbing them at their four-acre facility in Houston. “This is a labor of love for us,” says Maurer, 54, adding that many of these dogs suffer from various physical and psychological issues, including PTSD, after years of service in combat zones. “But they deserve it,” she says. “These dogs go to the front lines to protect us, and they do it for just a little love and attention from their handlers.” Adds Salazar, who was reunited with Max in July 2017: “They brought Max home to me, and for that I’ll always be grateful.”



### Helping Four-legged Heroes

Kastner (left) and Maurer in Houston in March with Mako, a recently retired bomb-detection dog.



## Remembering the Fallen



Navy veteran Keith Sherman has lost more friends in combat and to suicide than he can bear. “I can’t count the number of funerals that I have been to—and part of me doesn’t really want to know,” says Sherman, 46, who retired as a senior chief petty officer in 2018 after serving 26 years, including combat tours in Bosnia and Iraq. Talking through his own PTSD led Sherman to a new life mission—and in August 2018 he launched Gold Star Dirt, a nonprofit that honors Gold Star families by letting them tell the stories of the loved ones they’ve lost. “Talking about my trauma has been better for me,” he says. “So I thought maybe talking about their heroes might be healing for them.” On Nov. 1 Sherman’s story collection will be added to the National Archives. “Keith was the first person I opened up to about my son,” says Rebecca Nelson from Atmore, Ala., who lost her 19-year-old son Travis in Afghanistan in 2011. “You don’t want anyone to forget. It’s remarkable what he’s done.”



### A Hero’s Journey

Sherman (above, with Gold Star sister Nikki Winn, and, inset, in the Navy in 2006) has traveled to all 50 states to interview Gold Star families.



**‘They’ve given everything, and their sacrifice should never be forgotten.’**

—KEITH SHERMAN

## Support for Female Veterans



When veteran Mea Williams left the Navy in 2006, her family helped her adjust to civilian life. “But I wondered about other women veterans who didn’t have strong support at home,” says Williams, 37. So in 2012 she joined Grace After Fire ([graceafterfire.org](http://graceafterfire.org)) to give female vets financial assistance and peer-to-peer support, including job counseling. “Women veterans often miss out on the help male vets get,” says Williams. “We want them to succeed.”



**Women First**  
“We meet the veteran wherever she is in her journey,” says Williams.





# Healing the Scars of War with Horses



Andy McCann owes his life to a horse—and Patrick Benson. Three years ago McCann was grappling with PTSD, depression and anxiety following a 16-month deployment to Iraq between 2007 and '08. “I was hanging on by a thread,” recalls McCann, 39. But the former Army sergeant says his life was transformed after he spent four days at the 12-acre farm in Stillwell, Kans., where Benson’s War Horses for Veterans uses horsemanship—the basics of riding, handling and training horses—to help vets heal from the traumas of war. “You can’t lie to a dang horse,” says Benson, 40, who himself used equine therapy to recover after his six years in the Army infantry, before cofounding the organization in 2014. “A horse will tear down the massive shell these guys have put around themselves and allow them to start feeling again, making them more receptive to the world around them.”



## Finding a Way Back

“A horse can teach you all sorts of wonderful things,” says Benson (in Iraq in 2003).

‘A horse can literally help these guys start feeling again’

—PATRICK BENSON



## Lifesaving Bonds

Benson (above, right) with Vietnam vet Charlie Ochoa at the War Horse farm. Left: Volunteer Jason Klepac tends to a horse in the group’s stable.

## Vet-Owned Businesses Give Back



“We’re the *Cheers* for vets!” says Marine vet Brad Nadeau, 38, of his Stars & Stripes Brewing Company in Freeport, Maine. But Nadeau, who served in Kuwait and Iraq, “wanted to make it more meaningful than just a brewery.” In addition to the bar’s military theme—beers include *Semper Fi.Pa* and *Stout & Give Me 20*—Nadeau donates a percentage of profits to a suicide-prevention program for veterans. “We have two missions—support veterans and make excellent beer.”



### Black Rifle Coffee Company

Founded and staffed by vets, the Salt Lake City business aims to put veterans into the workforce. ([blackriflecoffee.com](http://blackriflecoffee.com))



### American Freedom Distillery

The company contributes a percentage of profits to veteran causes, from PTSD to family support. ([americanfreedomdistillery.com](http://americanfreedomdistillery.com))



### Sword & Plough

They turn military-surplus materials into totes and backpacks—and donate 10 percent of their profits to veteran causes. ([swordandplough.com](http://swordandplough.com))



Brewed with Honor Nadeau, with wife Nancy. Inset: Nadeau at Camp Pendleton in 2002.

