

# Phony Service Dogs Hurt Veterans

By Jason Haag

**W**e've all seen the news stories. United Airlines blocks a New York woman from a flight out of Newark Liberty when she tries to board with her peacock. An Ohio man smuggles a marmoset past the gate at Columbus's John Glenn International, only to be discovered midflight. These and other passengers claim to need "emotional support animals."

For veterans like me, this isn't a laughing matter. We rely on highly skilled service animals to make it through our days. Every time someone tries to fly with a miniature horse, it makes airlines suspicious of our dogs. That's about to change. The Transportation Department released a rule last week that will keep untrained pets off planes and help airline officials identify trained service animals.

I served 13 years in the Marines, including two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. I sustained a machine-gun

wound and multiple traumatic brain injuries. I suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, characterized by debilitating episodes of anxiety.

I was constantly terrified—until I was paired with a service dog, Axel. My postbattle buddy was trained to help me with flashbacks and calm my anxiety. He saved my life.

## A new federal rule will keep untrained 'emotional support animals' off planes.

I'm not the only one. As many as 1 in 5 Iraq combat veterans have PTSD. More than 80% of PTSD patients said service dogs reduced their symptoms, and more than 40% of them with PTSD cut back on medication as a result.

I cofounded Leashes of Valor, a nonprofit that pairs post-9/11 veterans with highly trained service dogs at no cost.

It takes a lot of work to prepare. The dogs receive up to two years of rigorous training before meeting their owners, who must complete a 16-day, 120-hour instructional program with the animals.

Some service dogs are trained to sense panic attacks or flashbacks and respond by nudging or lying on their owners to calm them down. Others know to interrupt their owners during a night terror. Many are trained to retrieve medication. Service dogs also learn how to tune out distractions and behave in public. They know not to growl, bite or lunge at people on planes or anywhere else.

These dogs are consummate professionals. Imagine how I felt when an airline questioned Axel's credentials and barred us from our flight. I was frustrated, but not surprised. "Many people fake an ESA out of their pet by putting a vest on it," says Rebecca Johnson, director of the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction.

Airlines have every reason to

keep fraudulent service animals off flights. Last year, a passenger filed a lawsuit after an untrained dog mauled and permanently scarred him. Dogs have barked, urinated and defecated on planes. Delta Airlines reported an 84% spike in incident reports involving untrained animals between 2016 and 2017.

Until today, there were no clear federal rules to help airlines determine which animals they let on their flights. That often led them to turn veterans like me away. The new DOT rule creates a single, national definition of "service animals" that aligns with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Airlines will be able to distinguish professionally trained service dogs from pets wearing vests.

The DOT's policy will protect passengers from untrained animals while ensuring that veterans receive the support they need. I'm grateful for this change—and so is Axel.

*Mr. Haag, a veteran of the U.S. Marines, is founder and CEO of Leashes of Valor.*

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