



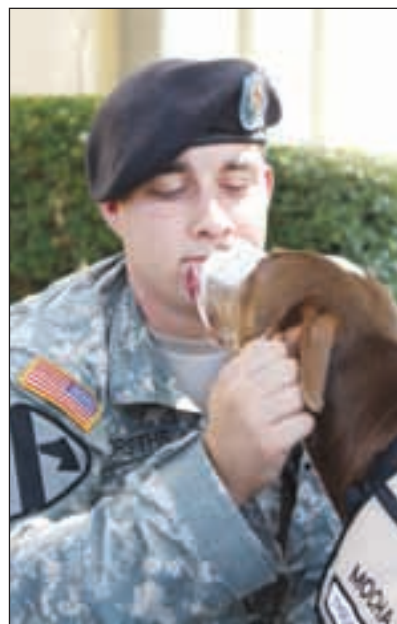
Photos by Joy Pariente, Sentinel Staff

Mocha enjoys some attention during pet therapy Clinic. The pet therapy sessions give Soldiers opportunity to relax and address their feelings the pet therapy organization Divine Canines June 23 at the WTB's Occupational Therapy dealing with PTSD, TBI and depression the in a stress-free environment. The dogs are from from Austin.

Pups helps Soldiers relieve stress

BY JOY PARIANTE
Sentinel Staff

Sitting on the lawn under a shady tree and getting attention and affection from groups of Soldiers probably isn't the kind of future Mocha saw for herself a few years ago when she was sitting in a shelter, abandoned after her breeding days were over.



Specialist Steven Forsythe, Co. C, 1st Bn., WTB, gets kisses from Mocha during pet therapy. The purpose of pet therapy is to give Soldiers a stress-free way to relax and explore their feelings.

Mocha is a pit bull and her veterinarians said from the looks of her that she had been bred repeatedly in her younger years. Due to the overwhelmingly negative perspective on the breed, Mocha might have not had a chance for a home and a family if it hadn't been for Lydia Zaidman, who gave her a chance.

After bringing Mocha home and getting to know her, Zaidman knew the dog had a bright future as a therapy pet, but it would take some training. Today, Mocha visits schools, hospitals and other locations interested in pet

therapy through the Divine Canine program, based in Austin, which emphasizes the natural healing power of dogs. "We want to support the community and be helpful to other human beings," Zaidman said of her and Mocha's mission.

A group of these Divine Canines visited Fort Hood June 23 as the final piece of a six-week stress management program offered through the Warrior Transition Brigade's Occupational Therapy Clinic. The clinic brings in the dogs because of their intrinsic ability to calm and connect with humans around them, Janice Johnson-Simcox, Occupational Therapy Department liaison to the Warrior Transition Brigade, said.

"It's a good way to be able to give them a little something extra. The dogs don't have to do anything, they just have to be there," she said.

Specialist Ryan Walton, Company A, 2nd Battalion, WTB, developed post traumatic stress disorder from his time in Iraq and his role as a first responder during the Nov. 5 shootings.

"Occupational therapy really helped me deal with issues not only from that day, but from Iraq," he said, while petting therapy dog Ruby, a rescued Rottweiler mix. "Just hanging with these guys a little bit really helps."

Many of the dogs in the program are rescues from shelters and they visit more than just Soldiers. The Divine Canine members also work with school reading programs to help children become more comfortable with reading aloud by reading to the furry listeners. They also visit with special needs students at Austin area schools, at homes for the mentally handicapped and in retirement homes.

Since many of the Soldiers in the stress management group are dealing with emotional issues resulting from severe depression, PTSD and traumatic brain injuries, the role of the dogs in their healing is significant.

"For these Soldiers, I think the



Specialist Robbie Gaupp, Co. C, 1st Bn., WTB, shakes with Lakota, a therapy dog with Divine Canines out of Austin during a dog therapy session June 23.

only way out is through. The dogs don't help them necessarily escape their problems, but they help them



While Mocha does her duties as a therapy dog, she's also working toward changing public perception of pit bulls.

work and talk through them in an environment without stress," said Heidi Armstrong, a member of the board of directors for Divine Canines and a volunteer with the organization. During past visits, Armstrong said many Soldiers told their stories in depth while bonding with the therapy dogs. For most of the Soldiers, it was the first time they had talked openly about their experiences.

"Dogs don't see any type of mental illness or what humans perceive as special needs as unique or different. They approach everyone with openness," Armstrong explained. "It's a soul to soul connection rather than an external, outward facing approach."



Specialist Ryan Walton, Co. A, 2nd Bn., WTB, gives belly rubs to Ruby, a therapy dog from Divine Canines, during a pet therapy session June 23.