In June 2018, America’s VetDogs placed yellow Labrador Retriever Sully with George H.W. Bush, 41st president of the United States and a World War II Navy veteran. America’s VetDogs had been recommended to the Bush family through our relationship with Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and we worked closely with the former president’s team to determine the service dog skills that would be most beneficial to him.

Mr. Bush passed away in November 2018, and although Sully and the president were together for only a short time, they developed a strong bond. A photo of Sully lying beside Mr. Bush’s flag-draped coffin – continuing to do his job and remain close to his partner – went viral and garnered national and international attention. Sully also paid his respects to the late president as he lay in state at the U.S. Capitol.

Among Mr. Bush’s last wishes were that Sully go on to help other veterans. The dog returned to our campus for a temporary stay through the holidays for some R&R and retraining.

In a ceremony at the USO Warrior and Family Center at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on February 27, 2019, Sully was officially inducted as a member of the facility dog program at Walter Reed Bethesda as Hospital Corpsman Second Class Sully H.W. Bush. The entire ceremony was streamed live on Facebook.

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In March, I celebrated one year as the president and chief executive officer of America’s VetDogs and the Guide Dog Foundation, and marked the start of a new chapter in my life. What a year it’s been!

I spent my first anniversary in Washington, DC, on behalf of America’s VetDogs, reaching out to members of Congress to discuss funding for our service dog programs through their support of the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program. Accompanying me were VetDogs graduate and veterans liaison Joseph Worley and VetDogs graduate Tyler McGibbon and their service dogs, Galaxie and Trooper, respectively.

We had about 20 meetings over two days, which was grueling, but I was pleased at the positive reception we received.

This past year, I’ve learned much about guide and service dogs and how they change lives: a person pairs with their new guide dog and walks safely from point A to point B without having to worry about bumping into obstacles or encountering dangerous situations; veterans arrive as strangers for service dog class and leave with a new partner and the support of a whole new unit of brothers and sisters.

One of the most important things I value is the commitment of our donors, volunteers, and staff to helping people with disabilities live without boundaries.

We’ve already had a notable start to 2019: service dog Sully, the late President Bush’s service dog, began his new career as a member of the facility dog team at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

We received formal notification that America’s VetDogs has once again been reaccredited by the International Guide Dog Federation and Assistance Dogs International. This accreditation is good for five years and indicates we meet the highest standards for our programs, policies, and procedures.

Donors can continue to feel confident when they support America’s VetDogs and disabled veterans and first responders. We have again met all 20 of the Better Business Bureau standards for its Wise Giving Alliance, and we renewed our platinum status with GuideStar for 2019.

In this issue of The VetDogs Sentinel, you’ll read the continuation of Chad Althiser’s journey with his service dog, Mikey, and you’ll meet the Ollises, the family who named Mikey in memory of their son, Staff Sgt. Michael Ollis, who was killed in action in Afghanistan.

I welcome your support as we train and provide the guide and service dogs that change the lives of those who have sacrificed so much for our country and our communities.

Thank you.

John Miller
President & Chief Executive Officer
Marine Major Chad Althiser served in the United States Marine Corps for more than 20 years, including three deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Those deployments left him a changed man. Althiser has been very open about sharing his journey through post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2017, he was partnered with service dog Mikey, who has become a vital part of his recovery.

Chad Althiser
A Brighter Future

While Chad Althiser was preparing to deploy once again to Iraq, he found out his company was to be sent to Afghanistan instead.

“I was pretty excited to go,” he says. He was convinced that Afghanistan would be the chance to “redeem” himself after his Iraq deployments.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work out that way.

“It was a really challenging deployment for many reasons,” he recalls, “some of which include the continuation of experience of my first and second deployments. I didn’t realize it at the time.”

After his return from Afghanistan, Althiser says, “I lost my sense of self. I didn’t know why or how.” He thought about leaving the Marines, but his battalion commander encouraged him to stay in. He found another assignment for Althiser as a company commander at The Basic School (TBS) in Quantico, Virginia. (All newly commissioned or appointed officers of the Marine Corps attend TBS, where they are taught how to fulfill their duties as leaders.) During Althiser’s three years at Quantico, he was promoted to major.

“People at work probably thought I was all over my game. I was performing very, very well,” he says, but instead, “I felt awful. I had such anxiety.”

Ninety-five times out of a hundred, he says, he was good at suppressing his emotions. “When I didn’t, I had a disproportionate response to something, but not necessarily directed at a person or situation.”

Moral injury

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay developed the concept of “moral injury” in the 1980s, when he began working with Vietnam veterans. Moral injury occurs when “(a) there has been a betrayal of what is morally right; (b) by someone who holds legitimate authority; and (c) in a high-stakes situation.”*

“It was fascinating, because everything I had done or thought about in the Marine Corps was directly in line with my morals,” Althiser says. “But in combat, there are things that are subordinate to the greater mission that require hard decisions – by myself, people that I work for, by Marines to my left and right.”

As he was struggling with this awareness, Althiser was also doing a fair amount of self-study to try and “get better.” He started therapy and was diagnosed with anxiety and, potentially, PTSD. He recalls saying, “Eh, I don’t think so,” and stopped going. A year later, he went back again: “I started to get help again, said, ‘I’m not ready for this,’ and again I stopped.”

The following year – the last year of his assignment at TBS – Althiser got good advice from a mentor who understood what he was going through.

This time, Althiser recognized that his “dabbling around” was not healthy. He decided, “I need to get help and I need to stay committed to it.”

He started therapy again and was referred to the traumatic brain injury clinic at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. “I was diagnosed with ‘self-reported mild TBI,’” he says, based on his proximity to the blast during his second Iraq deployment and the number of blast exposures.

Most of his other issues were related to post-traumatic stress (PTSD). He spent a year in intense therapy, including a 10-week residential program.

Althiser first discussed service dogs with his occupational therapist because he was “feeling disconnected

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Honoring “Mikey”

Michael Ollis always wanted to be in the Army. Both his grandfathers served during World War II, and his father, Bob Ollis, had served during Vietnam in the 1960s. “I would like to say it was because of me,” Bob says, “but I don’t know.”

When Bob turned 18, he had gone to his local draft board and asked to be drafted, rather than wait to be called up. He was inducted into the Army in February 1967 and served two years active duty and four years inactive reserves.

Bob served his country with distinction during the 12 months he spent in Vietnam: he was awarded two Bronze Stars for Valor, two Air Medals for air assault, the Combat Infantry Badge, and the Purple Heart.

A lifelong dream

As a child, Michael would pin on all his dad’s ribbons and medals and play army in the backyard with his toy soldiers. One of his favorite trips was to West Point. “One of Bob’s relatives was in the Civil War, and his name was on a monument,” says Linda Ollis, Michael’s mother. “He was very excited about seeing that.”

Michael attended Michael J. Petrides High School in Staten Island, New York, which had an Air Force Junior ROTC program at the time. Bob says the commander of the program would have loved for Michael to have joined the Air Force, but Michael chose the Army’s Airborne Infantry instead, enlisting after his high school graduation in 2006.

As a member of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light), Michael was stationed at Fort Drum, New York. He also served with the 1st Armor Division and the 101st Airborne Division, and was deployed three times: Iraq, from 2008 to 2009; Afghanistan, from 2010 to 2011, and was again deployed to Afghanistan in January 2013.

On August 28, 2013, during an insurgent attack on their forward operating base in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, Michael gave his life shielding Polish officer Lt. Karol Cierpica from a suicide bomber’s blast. He was 24 years old.

Michael was posthumously awarded the Silver Star, the U.S. Army’s third-highest military decoration for valor, which has been upgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross. The Republic of Poland awarded him the Polish Armed Forces Gold Star Medal and the Afghanistan Star.

In 2015, Cierpica named his newborn son in Michael’s memory.

Honoring Mikey

In 2015, the Gateway Rotary Club in Staten Island organized a dog walk in honor of Michael Ollis and to raise funds for America’s VetDogs. The event brought in more than $6,000, so the club was given the opportunity to name a puppy in recognition of their efforts.

Members of the club reached out to Bob and Linda, and they chose “Mikey” (Michael’s childhood nickname) as the puppy’s name. In 2017, Mikey was teamed with Chad Althiser (see story page 3).

The Ollises created the SSG Michael Ollis Freedom Foundation to support veterans’ causes. Since 2017, the

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One of the most joyous times at America’s VetDogs is “Dog Day,” the day when veterans get to meet their new service dogs for the very first time. Over the next two weeks, this bond will strengthen into an exciting new partnership, until the team is ready to head back home and tackle the world on their own terms.

One of the tasks our dogs can be trained to do is turn on light switches. When the handler says “Light,” it tells the dog to put its front paws on the wall and push the light switch with its nose to turn the light on or off.

At the National Sporting Library and Museum event “For the Love of Dogs,” which celebrated the relationship between dogs and humans, VetDogs graduate retired Army Command Sgt. Maj. Gretchen Evans shared the special bond she has with her hearing dog, Aura. Gretchen autographed copies of her book, Leading From the Front. One hundred percent of the proceeds from the sale of the book go to support America’s VetDogs.
from people, even my family,” he says. It was during group therapy that he met a VetDogs graduate, and “I saw how well behaved his dog was.”

He recalls thinking, “If I’m going to go for a service dog, I’m going to go through America’s VetDogs.”

Althiser also liked VetDogs’s involvement with a PTSD study through Western Kentucky University. The study was set up to document and provide empirical evidence of the effects of service dogs on veterans who have combat-related PTSD. It will also help us adjust our curriculum and tasks to ensure we are providing service dogs that meet the needs of veterans with PTSD. “When I learned about the AVD service dog PTSD research study, I knew it was the right path for me.”

It was another step on his journey to recovery.

The right path

In 2015, Althiser retired from the Marine Corps after 20 years and 9 months of service, and applied for a service dog shortly thereafter. He was on the waiting list for about 18 months before being invited to join the February 2017 service dog class.

He admits to a fair amount of trepidation when he arrived on campus and while he was waiting to meet his new service dog. “It made me very anxious,” he says.

And when he met Mikey for the first time, “he came flying over, bouncing up and down.” The other dogs were much more sedate, and Althiser thought, “I have anxiety; the last thing I need is a hyper dog.”

But first impressions can be deceiving. Within 24 hours, Althiser says, “I could tell he was warming up to me,” and by the second week, he was saying, “I’m in love with this dog. Already I can tell it’s going to be a great relationship.”

Training was “more rigorous than I expected,” he recalls. It wasn’t just “show up and throw a service dog vest on the dog. It’s a process.”

While some of that process was physical – “I’d been out of the Marine Corps for 18 months; I wasn’t as physically fit [as I used to be]” – it was primarily mental. “It was nonstop. At the end of a 7-hour day, I was mentally and physically tired.”

Mikey has been trained to wake Althiser if he is having a nightmare by nudging him, bring his medications, turn light switches, and open doors.

The dog was sponsored by the Gateway Rotary Club and Robert and Linda Ollis of Staten Island, and named in memory of their son Michael. (See story on page 4.)

A bright future

One of Althiser’s challenges after retiring from the Marines was the lack of structure. “I thrive in an institution,” he says. Mikey is helping him recreate that constancy in his life. “Each day is a little more structured and predictable.”

In the year Althiser and Mikey have been together, “I have been more present and calm. This allows me to be engaged with my family and others, but also helps me to get the best out of Mikey in a service capacity.”

One of the biggest steps forward Althiser has taken has been to recognize that “the issues I’m dealing with aren’t shallow or superficial. These are deep things, so we have a long road to travel.”

He adds: “The connection I have with Mikey is unconditional. I don’t need to perform a certain way, and I don’t have anxiety about what he’ll think of me. To Mikey, I’m enough. It’s going to be a bright future.”

When the Guide Dog Foundation created America’s VetDogs in 2003 to expand our outreach to disabled veterans by training both guide and service dogs, our goal was to become the premier assistance dog organization serving disabled veterans and to be recognized internationally for our work with guide and service dogs.

There are two international bodies that certify guide and service dog schools on a voluntary basis: the International Guide Dog Federation and Assistance Dogs International.

The IGDF is a coalition of more than 84 guide dog schools located around the world that supports its members in their mission to provide guide dogs for people who are blind or visually impaired. ADI was created in 2007 with a merger of ADI in the United States and Assistance Dogs Europe; its membership comprises schools with guide, hearing, and service dog programs.

America’s VetDogs was first assessed by IGDF and ADI in 2008, and we have been accredited by both organizations every subsequent five years.

In late 2018, we underwent our latest assessments by IGDF and ADI, and received notification in January 2019 that we had once again been accredited by both organizations.

This accreditation lets our donors and consumers know that our guide and service dog programs consistently follow the highest standards for the humane and ethical treatment of the dogs in our programs, maintain educational benchmarks for trainers and apprentices, and have procedures in place for consumers during the application and acceptance process.

America’s VetDogs Recertified by IGDF and ADI

As the newest facility dog, Sully will be working alongside fellow facility dogs Sgt. Dillon and Sgt. Truman, who also came from America’s VetDogs. These dogs interact with injured service members and their families during the rehabilitation process. The dogs’ handlers are active-duty corpsmen and medics who have been trained prior to becoming handlers.

According to statistics gathered by Walter Reed Bethesda, the dogs in the facility dog program average 2,500 contacts and more than 200 working hours per month, and 12 patients and their families have a positive experience for every hour a dog and handler work.

In 1990, George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act. The purpose of this groundbreaking civil rights legislation was to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy the same opportunities as those without disabilities, and it prohibits discrimination based on those disabilities.

Sully (continued from cover)

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Michael Ollis (continued from page 4)

foundation has sponsored three puppies: Mikey; Ranger, who was just placed with his own veteran; and Ollie, currently in our prison puppy program. In February, Linda and Bob dedicated a kennel run named in their son’s memory.

Michael’s heroism on the battlefield and his reputation as a soldier and leader have been recognized in other venues.

A statue of Michael was erected at the Michael J. Petrides School, which also named the athletic field in his honor. At Linda’s insistence, the plaza where the statue stands also includes the names and images of eight other service members from Staten Island who died in service to their country.

The Oakwood Heights VFW Post 9587 in Staten Island changed its name to the SSG Michael Ollis VFW Post in 2014, and in 2015, a rifle marksmanship range at Fort Drum was renamed from Range 2 to the Staff Sgt. Michael H. Ollis Weapon Training Center.

A new ferry in the Staten Island Ferry fleet will be christened the Staff Sgt. Michael Ollis. It is currently under construction in Panama City, Florida. “Ollis” will also represent a new class of ferry boat; two others are planned. Unfortunately, construction on the new vessel has been delayed because of damage from Hurricane Michael, which struck the Florida panhandle in October 2018.

Bob and Linda had a chance to meet Chad Althiser after he and Mikey were teamed together. “I was very happy for Chad and Mikey because they seemed like they were such a good fit to me,” Linda says.

Bob adds: “I wish that Chad and his family have the joy Linda and I and our daughters had with Michael, the love of Michael.” ★