

# Bear Hugs for the Troops

POZNAN, Poland—It was 6am when U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Gabriel Rivera woke up to the sound of his alarm going off. Even though he slept for some good 7 hours, he still felt tired. So after clumsily reaching for his phone in the dark, as he looked at the screen, he saw a notification from a CNN article that made him sick to his stomach.

The headline read: “Russia invades Ukraine.”

Rivera, a public affairs sergeant with the 113th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment (MPAD), Puerto Rico Army National Guard, was deployed in Poland as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

For the last few weeks, he had been diligently following the news about the escalating situation with Russia. So receiving that notification was no surprise, but he still felt a little anxious.

“In the Army we are taught to always hope for the best but be prepared for the worst,” he said.

Later that day, Rivera’s mind was all over the place. He was mentally exhausted and was having trouble concentrating on his work. However, some unexpected help came in the form of a “Bear-hug”, which was just what he needed to unwind and decompress, even if it was for just a few minutes.

Bear, an Australian-German shepherd, loves going around different offices to get treats and greet his friends. As a service dog, he has been trained not only to follow commands but also to give emotional support.

Sometimes something as small as giving a belly rub to a pet can make a difference in a Soldier’s mental state. For this reason, service members could benefit from having available animal therapy during deployments.

According to U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Marimar Rivera-Medina, the public affairs operations sergeant of the 113th MPAD, interacting with Bear gives her a sense of peace.

“Spending time with Bear allows me to let go of all the stressors I carry with me throughout the day,” she said. “He really gives you his unconditional love, and when you are so far from your loves ones, feeling that can really make a difference.”

According to the Department of Defense Instruction 6490.05, it's common for Soldiers to experience adverse "physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral reactions when exposed to stressful or traumatic events in combat or military operations...these are normal responses to extremely abnormal conditions."

Pet therapy could help mitigate the effects of the Combat and Operational Stress Reaction (COSR), also known as "battle fatigue". COSRs can significantly impact service members' mental health and welfare.

This is where service dogs can help.

"The canine sense of smell is much stronger than humans. They can be trained to identify the smell of cancer, adrenaline, and many other chemical changes within a person," said Bear's owner. For example, they can pick up on the signs and symptoms of an anxiety attack even before it starts.

Moreover, according to U.S. Army Capt. Ryan Hunton, a division surgeon with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, service dogs—like Bear— "can positively affect the mental health of Soldiers and provide operational stress reduction at a time when our missions and exercises are increasing."

There's no way to know what other stressful situations or news headlines, Soldiers are going to wake up to in the future. Nevertheless, Bear-hugs might help them bear and overcome the challenges they might face.

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