

Publication: The Dominion Post, Date: Jul 5, 2009, Section: Local, Page Number: 9 [[Continuation](#)]

Hope for a new lease on life

Prison program trains dogs for ex-soldiers

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The effects of living on the streets in war-torn Afghanistan can still sometimes be seen in 2-year-old Tazie.

She crawls low through the grass as if she's trying to stay out of view. She freezes in place if a helicopter flies overhead. A loud noise might make her dive for cover.

But, in the nearly two months

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since Tazie arrived in America, there are more signs of a bright future ahead than reminders of a frightening, lonely past.

Tazie came to the United States through AfghanDogZ, a program that rescues dogs from war zones and brings them to America for rehabilitation and training. Inmates at U.S. Penitentiary at Hazelton work with the dogs on a daily basis and give them constant companionship. When Tazie's training is

complete, she'll be placed in the care of a U.S. soldier suffering from severe post traumatic stress disorder — someone who might not be able to return to a normal way of life without her, paws4vets Executive Director Terry Henry said.

"The key part is they will share that common bond. They both came out of a war zone — they heard the bullets," Henry said. "That should enable them to come out of that shell. There's no medicine they've got so far that can replicate it."

Tazie is the first dog to arrive in America as part of the program. She's living and working with two

SEE HOPE, 2-B



Submitted photo

Tazie, a 2-year-old dog from Afghanistan, relaxes in the grass at the U.S. Penitentiary at Hazelton.

Publication: The Dominion Post, Date: Jul 5, 2009, Section: Local, Page Number: 10 [[Back](#)]

HOPE

FROM PAGE 1-B

female inmates at USP Hazelton and has a new lease on life, they said.

When Tazie first arrived, she was scared and hesitant around people. Now, her trainer said, she's friendly and loving. She likes to snuggle and wants nothing more than a good, long belly rub.

"You can tell she's had to go through some obstacles in her life," Counselor Lisa Johnson said.

Tazie is different looking than many of the other dogs in the paws4vets program, which uses mostly dogs rescued from U.S. shelters or donated by breeders. Tazie is thin and has a long tail that curves into a permanent hook shape at the end. She's covered in tan spots on her white fur and on her pink skin. She has a big spot circling her left eye that adds a sweetness to her pretty face. She loves playing outside with basketballs and has a new-found love for peanut butter.

"She'll do anything for snacks," Johnson said.

She's unique, she's seen a lot and she'll be one soldier's saving grace.

"Her mission is to find that veteran who is so deep into PTSD that the only thing that might pull him out is that common bond," Henry said.

In Tazie's case, they are looking for a veteran with complex PTSD, which could include problems with agoraphobia and connecting with people.

Tazie is still in the early stages of training, but some of her "cell mates," other dogs in the paws4vets and paws4people programs being trained at USP Hazelton, showed off some of the skills she'll likely learn during her stay.

These dogs can pick up objects and place them into containers. They can open a refrigerator door by tugging on a rope on the handle. They can take clothes out of a dryer, they can turn lights on and off and bring you your shoes.

One of the dogs can even read. Her trainer shows her a sign that reads "sit," "down" or "turn" and she does just that.

In all, the dogs learn between 90 and 100 commands, Henry said, and some are trained and certified as service dogs.

vice dogs.

And they do it all for some love and a couple of Apple Jacks.

Henry has two other dogs in Afghanistan who have been rescued and are awaiting transfer to the U.S. One of the dogs had been used in surgical experiments and was starving and emaciated when she was rescued.

To get Ebony, a shepherd mix, and Golden, a Golden Retriever mix, here, the organization needs to raise about \$3,100 per dog to cover travel expenses and their flights, Henry said. Training and placement cost about another \$4,600 each.