

To whom it may concern,

I am submitting the below and attached news article for your consideration in relation to the Government undertaking consultation on proposed changes to veterans compensation and rehabilitation legislation.

Military Working Dogs live and serve their entire lives within the confines of a Defence Establishment kennel bank and in service to the nation. The role they play cannot be replicated by man or machine and as a handler when the time comes, it is our greatest honour to retire these dogs into our care.

The financial burden is something we consider, acknowledge and accept when we agree to retire these dogs. However, I would submit that not all handlers can afford these costs. In the interests of giving these serving canine members their just retirement, our handlers will do everything they can to ensure the loyalty of these canines is repaid in a home, warmth, food, medication and veterinary costs.

Money is not inexhaustible, and using my own experience as an example, I have retired two Military Working Dogs Ajax and Cowboy who both had to be euthanized 2 years into retirement. The cost of surgery and ongoing care would have been in the realm of \$10,000 each which I could not afford.

The agony of making the decision to lose your best friend and work partner is heart breaking and something our entire canine handler workforce will go through in order to ensure our canine workforce is treated with the respect, care and attention they so rightly deserve. In the interests of looking after all of our members, I would respectfully request Military Working Dogs are considered in changes to Veterans compensation and rehabilitation legislation. Senior care of these dogs should be the goal instead of end of life care.

Submitted for your consideration,

Marc.

A Service Like No Other

Specialised Search & Explosive Detection Dog 'Cowboy'



I first met Cowboy in 2015 when he was four years old and I was attending the United States Air Force Specialized Search Dog program at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas. As the foreigner on an international course, I was already the outsider and that was never more evident that when we went into the kennel bank for the first time to assess and pick our dogs. The Marines stormed forward, making a beeline towards various Labradors as though they had been told which to choose and which to avoid! I found myself wandering further and further to the back of the kennel bank where I could see the only red warning tag in the whole kennel. Endlessly bouncing up and down, up and down was a black Labrador; Specialised Search Dog Cowboy V696

“What’s’ the red tag for” I asked one of the instructors. “He’s got into a couple of dog fights but don’t let that put you off, he’s a diamond in the rough that one” and how they were right. Here was a dog with exceptional obedience, full of boundless energy and drive coupled with an amazing nose. It was Cowboy who taught me how to become an off-leash detection dog handler and it struck me when we graduated course, I could never explain to him what he had done for me.

Fast forward to our return to Australia and I had an opportunity to look into the background of this incredible canine. Cowboy’s military career began with the US Armed Forces when he was trained as an Improvised Explosive Detector Dog for the US Marines. I was fascinated to discover he’d completed a tour of Afghanistan kennelled at Camp Leatherneck. His records state that on 13 Jun 2014, Cowboy and his handler were travelling in convoy behind a Husky Vehicle Mounted Mine Detection System when it was hit by an IED. While suffering no physical injury, Cowboy started to demonstrate aggression to other dogs, timidness, clinging to the handler, depression and further signs of PTSD. It struck me when reading his story, no one could explain to Cowboy the service he performs, the impact he has had and the lives he has saved. But Cowboy could feel fear and he could feel alone. Reading his medical history, it was evident that it was thanks to the care of his handler and the support of the military veterinarian staff that they were able to get him through it.

Explosive Detection Dog (EDD) Cowboy 2135 has served in the Royal Australian Air Force for six and a half years, however his military career has lasted his whole life. At 11 years of age (nearly 70 years in dog years), Cowboy was presented with the Canine Service Medal from the Australian Defence Force & Trackers War Dogs Association in 2022. The Canine Service Medal is awarded to any Dog employed in its duties for a period of no less than five years’ service and Cowboy has performed his duties exemplary including one that I will be forever in his debt.

On the night of 19 May 17 my retired Military Working Dog Ajax passed away. I had been teamed with Ajax for 8 years and we had completed our own tour of East Timor in 2010-2011.

His passing affected me deeply and returning home from the Vet alone that night, I was scared, alone and incredibly sad.

'Cowboy' was recuperating at the house after an injury to his leg. He could not have known what had happened, but he seemed to know something as he limped out of his crate. He didn't fret and he wasn't looking for attention; he just sat there with me until the morning. It was thanks to his care and his support that I got through it.

Cowboy's career came to a close this year when he retired from the Air Force. The Military can never truly thank him for what he has achieved. Medals, news articles and parades won't mean a thing to a dog. I can never explain to Cowboy how, in a moment of sadness, he kept me from being afraid. But what I can show him is love.

What he will feel is happiness and it is my honour to be there for him now that he's finally come home.

WORDS: Sergeant Marc Douglas

