# Man's best friend

*The assistance dogs trained by Scottish charity Bravehound are making life bearable for disabled veterans, finds* ***Felix Petit***

Images **Phil Wilkinson**

I have a gangly two-year-old red setter called Muckle, named after my favourite lighthouse Muckle Flugga in Shetland. We are rather fond of one another and he largely responds to my commands unless a squirrel enters play in which case all bets are off. We rub along nicely in a companionable yet unprofessional manner. Yet our bond is a world away from the partnership enjoyed by a group of veterans whose lives have been transformed – and in some cases saved – by being given a Bravehound assistance dogs.

Bravehound was founded ten years ago by Fiona Macdonald, a former opera singer whose father suffered from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after serving in the Royal Navy. Owning a dog is one of the easiest ways of helping those with mental health issues, and the charity's dogs are specially trained for that role. In the past decade the charity has trained up to five dogs a year, with 24 veterans currently paired with dogs. With each dog costing £6,500 to train, it's an expensive business, but without Bravehound's intervention, who knows how those veterans would have coped.

'Having a Bravehound assistance dog doesn't allow people to hide away from life,' said Macdonald, who recently enlisted the help of Hollywood stars Jason Isaacs and Willem Dafoe to raise funds for the charity. 'The dog has needs and this forces the veterans into a positive routine of care. Bravehound meets all of the living costs for an assistances dog's entire life so that the cost of keeping a dog is not another stress in a veteran's life.'

One such veteran is Billy XXXXX, a veteran of 40th Regiment Royal Artillery who served in Kuwait, Iraq and Northern Ireland. He is unashamedly emotional about the impact his assistance dog has had on his life. Billy was paired with Max four years ago, at a time when he was battling a raft of mental health issues from his time in the military. Things were so bad that Billy struggled with substance abuse and suicidal thoughts. 'Max is a little light in a deep dark bottomless pit,' says Billy.

Like all Bravehound dogs, Max has undergone specialist training for the task at hand. A symptom of Billy's PTSD, plus a brain injury he received from an artillery explosion during The

**UNSHAKEABLE BOND:** Cocoa the springer spaniel is a lifeline for Archie Douglas, a former Major in the Royal Regiment of Scotland.

**RIGHT:** Billy and Max. **BELOW:** Bravehound has 24 veterans currently paired with dogs and has trained five dogs every year for the past decade.

Gulf War, is poor memory. He takes a variety of medications and needs to take them at 9 o'clock each day. Max has been trained to retrieve Billy's medications as soon as he hears *One Love* by Bob Marley, which Billy has programmed his smart speaker to play each day at the appropriate time. 'Max enjoys a range of reggae music, but he doesn't move a muscle until he's heard the first two beats of *One Love*,' says Billy.

As we speak, at a temporary Bravehound training centre on the outskirts of Edinburgh, Max sits patiently between Billy's knees, Billy strokes him reflexively as he recounts stories of the difficult times he has faced. 'Max is never out of my sight, he waits for me to go to sleep and then leaves me to head for his own bed in the living room six or seven metres away, but I can always see him through the open door. I wake up between ten and fifteen times a night and Max is always there to comfort me.'

*'I wake up between ten and 15 times a night and Max is always there to comfort me'*

Later, in the grounds of Dalkeith Palace I speak to another ex-soldier, former Major in The Royal Regiment of Scotland and Afghanistan veteran, Archie Douglas, following his monthly training session with Bravehound. Archie was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour shortly after leaving the military. In July 2014 they operated and removed a significant portion of the 'hand sized' tumour, following this up with a year of experimental radiotherapy and chemo. This left Archie suffering from seizures and with a damaged and scarred brain. Critically his treatments worked and for over five years he has been cancer free.

Whilst largely recovered Archie still suffers from unexpected bouts of partial body paralysis, sensory hallucinations and if he focuses too hard for too long what he terms 'smart attacks' where he develops a migraine, can no longer see faces and the world starts skipping like a poorly buffered video. This is where his Bravehound dog, a springer spaniel called Cocoa, comes in. Cocoa is trained to bark or attract attention if she notices that something is wrong with her master. Archie, whose sense of humour is firmly intact, says he loves to test this in his home town of North Berwick by pretending to fall down in public as part of Cocoa's ongoing training.

'We moved to North Berwick from Edinburgh several years ago,' says Archie's wife Allie. 'In a smaller community Archie finds it easier to find his way around. Cocoa and her distinctive Bravehound harness make Archie very recognisable'. Whenever Allie drops Archie anywhere and people ask what to do if he encounters an issue, she says simply that 'the number's on the dog' as Cocoa's harness displays critical emergency information for Archie. This, says Allie, gives her 'significant peace of mind and another safety net if ever it's needed'. Archie adds, with a twinkle in his eye, that 'I'm allowed to leave the house again'.

The veterans and dogs I have met have been extraordinary, and have forced me to view my own gormless setter Muckle in a different light and to realise the full scope of his amiable uselessness. Meeting the Bravehound veterans has demonstrated just how invaluable assistance dogs can be as companions and essential life lines to those with daily struggles.