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Peace of mind for our troops overseas

By Gaillyne M. Ferguson
For Journal Register News Service

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PACT's first military foster family with Service Member Andrew, Siberian Huskey and companion animal, Sasha and the Weiner family of Downingtown.

Serving in the military is unpredictable. A soldier never knows when they will be uprooted from everything they know and sent to a foreign land. Though most of us relate deployments to wartime, the truth is, thousands of soldiers are deployed during peacetime and for humanitarian efforts year-round. Today, there are over 200,000 troops deployed overseas for various reasons. The people, cultures and languages are strange. They leave behind everything they know and hold dear; everything that provides them the least bit of comfort. The horrors they witness during war and serving on humanitarian missions are memories that will no doubt, affect them for the rest of their life.

[Military](#) and health professionals have tried for centuries to understand the psychological damages experienced by our military personnel. They have learned that sometimes, it is the simple things like [pictures](#), letters, videos and trinkets sent to our soldiers overseas that often help them get through each day. It is comforting to the soldier to know someone back home cares. Thanks to today's technology, the peace of mind afforded to today's soldier is way beyond what was offered to their predecessors. [Skype](#) has enabled the soldier to talk with his or her family, see their spouses and children, and ensure their family that they are okay. And now, thanks to PACT for Animals, they can catch the antics of the companion animal they were forced to leave behind.

For generations, the majority of those being deployed have been in their early to late twenties except during both World Wars, the Korean War and Vietnam where soldiers, both young and old, were drafted. A soldier's tour of duty can be as little as four months to several years but their notice to deploy is usually only a few weeks to two months. This leaves little time to make necessary arrangements for their personal obligations.

One such obligation is caring for a companion animal. When deployed, soldiers are often forced to surrender their best friend and constant companion to a shelter, unless they are lucky enough to have a family member or friend who will commit to the companion animal's care until the soldier returns [home](#). Boarding is an option; however, one companion animal could run a soldier between \$20 and \$50 per day at a cost of \$7,300 to \$18,250 annually. A one to two year deployment involving two companion animals would be a huge percentage of a soldier's pay according to Buzz Miller, founder of PACT for Animals; a Montgomery County based non-profit organization founded in 2010 which now helps service members find foster homes for their pets while they are deployed.

Miller stated that "the sad reality is many of these soldiers are [single](#) and between the ages of 18-30 and boarding is not financially feasible. They love their companion animal who is often their whole world. They don't know who to give their companion animal to and are often forced to take their best friend to a shelter where they will be euthanized or adopted to a third party never to be seen again by the deployed soldier."

Miller also explained that many times a spouse who remains at home will care for the pet; however, additional responsibilities such as a second [job](#) to meet financial obligations or raising children as a single parent places undue hardship on the family and they are forced to surrender the companion animal while the soldier is deployed. There are also military families where both spouses are enlisted and deployed within a short time of each other. Whatever the case may be, to many deployed soldiers, losing their companion animal is like losing a child.

PACT for Animals implemented the Military Foster Program in the summer of 2011. Since then, they have placed four dogs in foster homes in 2011, fifty companion animals in 2012 and to date in 2013, three companion animals have been placed in foster homes with another six more military families applying to PACT for foster homes. PACT, which stands for People/Animals=Companions Together, operates in the Eastern United States, mainly within a 2-3 hour drive of Philadelphia. Its founder, Melvin "Buzz" Miller left his lucrative Philadelphia based business and real estate [law firm](#) in 2003 to focus on the welfare of animals. The companionship Miller's own adopted rescue dogs have provided him over the years and what he witnessed at a shelter would change his life forever. He realized when he was in his sixties that even though he was living very comfortably from the proceeds of his law practice, something was missing in his life. Today, he devotes his time and money to PACT; is the president and CEO of Buzzy's Bow Wow Meow in Narberth, Montgomery County and is a leading national advocate against breed selective legislation, particularly in regard to pit bulls.

A short conversation with a PACT volunteer at the Montgomery County SPCA Perkiomenville shelter led this author to want to know more about PACT. Next week, the Community Connection will go behind the scenes with Miller and his PACT organization and learn how his efforts are changing the way the [military](#) prepares soldiers for deployment and provides soldiers peace of mind. It truly is a remarkable story and one that needs to be shared.

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Peace of mind for our troops overseas — Part 2

By Gailynne M. Ferguson
For Journal [Register](#) News Service

Thursday, January 17, 2013



A [military reunion](#)

For nearly 35 years, Melvin “Buzz” Miller dedicated his life to making the rich richer and as one of the nation’s top [business](#) and real [estate lawyers](#); it was obvious that he had a passion for the law. His lucrative practice enabled him to live very comfortably, wear designer suits, drive luxury automobiles and own beautiful [homes](#). Unfortunately, like most people as they get older, he felt as if something was missing in his life. He was no longer excited about his work, yet he wanted to make a difference in the world while he still had the chance. His difference would be made in his main passion: “the human-animal bond.”

Miller always had a bond with his dogs but nothing like the one he had with his rescue dog, Max. For years, Max slept under Buzz’s desk at his law firm. Buzz found his stress was reduced, his blood pressure lowered and his overall well-being as an individual improved every time he would pet Max.

When Max passed away at age 19, Miller reflected on the life the two of them shared and how special it was to always be together.

His love for animals led him to become a life member of the PaSPCA but during a board meeting, a tour of the facility put him face to face with lines of young, [healthy](#) dogs being prepared for euthanasia. It is the sad reality of unwanted animals in a shelter. Miller dropped to the floor, sat down and cried like a [baby](#). He knew what he had to do. Soon, he found himself holding fund raisers for several Delaware Valley animal shelters. He closed down his law practice in 2003 and focused on

furthering the human-animal bond. In 2007, he opened Buzzy's Bow Wow Meow in Narberth, Montgomery County; a holistic pet store where he also strived to educate the public on the human-animal bond.

Buzz learned of military personnel being deployed that were seen opening the doors to animal shelters with tears streaming down their face as they said goodbye to their best friend for the last time. For many servicemen, **surrendering** their pet to a shelter had been their only option. This was the catalyst needed for Miller to launch PACT's Military Foster Program. Founded in 2010, PACT's mission was to develop, implement and administer programs to benefit pets and their humans, but by 2011 their niche became a Military Foster Program.

Now a PA 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, PACT flyers are distributed and endorsed by the Pennsylvania National Guard to deploying soldiers as "an alternative to the unwanted surrender of beloved pets (dogs or cats)." Utilizing his business law experience, Miller drafted an application for soldiers looking to foster their pets <http://pactforanimals.org/military-adopt.php> and a separate one for those wishing to become foster families <http://pactforanimals.org/foster-application.php>. Soldiers are encouraged by PACT to complete the on-line application for a foster family at least a month in advance to match the appropriate foster family to the soldier's pet.

Those interested in becoming foster families must complete an on-line foster application and provide veterinary and personal references. All requirements are listed on the PACT website www.PACTforanimals.org. Once reviewed, introductions with the family and the PACT animal are made. Before any decision is made, a home visit will be conducted by PACT.

If approved, a representative of PACT will ensure a smooth transition for all involved. All pets must be neutered or spayed for the protection of all animals involved. The animal's diet, containment/management crating issues, housetraining, outdoor exercise, preventative veterinary care, behavior and manners training are among the issues discussed.

Before the PACT animal is turned over to their foster family, a Military Foster Agreement is signed by all parties involved, including PACT. This agreement lays down the terms and conditions of fostering which includes the agreement to provide food, shelter, fresh water, care, supervision, **exercise**, love and attention for the PACT animal. It also requires the foster family to commit to sending deployed troops textual and photographic status updates of the foster pet at least monthly and videos whenever possible.

The most important issue to remember is that even though a foster family may enjoy the animal's companionship, the pet will be returned to the owner at the end of the deployment. Provisions within the agreement allow the foster to continue the relationship with the pet at a time that is convenient for the owner and foster family. The Agreement also provides for an extension of the foster if the deployment is extended and a right of first refusal to the foster volunteer should the soldier not return from duty or be unable to care for his or her pet upon return. Continued support is provided by PACT and if needed, trainers will help with any behavior issues that may arise. To date, the program has successfully placed over 50 animals and applications for fostering and placement are coming in every day. For Miller, he is content knowing that he is making a difference for our soldiers and their pets.

In the final segment, the Community Connection will look at several soldiers' success stories, how you can help as well as the future of PACT.

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Reunited: Peace of mind for our troops overseas

By Gailynne M. Ferguson
For Journal Register News Service

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A special thank you from the
Bartons.

Over the past two weeks, the Community Connection has been honored to share information about PACT's Military Foster Program which provides foster homes for the companion animals of our deploying troops. Whether deployed in peacetime, wartime or for humanitarian efforts throughout the world, PACT is offering our warriors an alternative to surrendering their best friends to an animal shelter. It is without a doubt an act of kindness and support that has been long overdue to our troops.

Buzz Miller's idea is growing rapidly as more people are learning of PACT's Military Foster Program. With over six companion animals placed in foster homes in just the first few weeks of 2013 and pending [applications](#) for many more placements, Miller expects the growth to continue and surpass last year's 50 foster placements. "If this rate continues" Miller stated, "we are looking at finding over 100 foster homes for our soldier's pets which means we need more people willing to foster animals and support PACT financially to help us cover the costs of our administrative expenses, staff and supplies." PACT's program is like a well oiled machine. From the initial [application](#) process to the reference checks, home visits and introductions, PACT is there to support the foster families throughout the entire experience to ensure smooth fostering for the companion animal until returned to their military owners.

PACT's advertisements and flyers are popping up all over the Delaware Valley and beyond. Articles have been in various newspapers, on websites and Facebook. The Military Foster Program has caught the attention of radio and television news [programs](#) for the past two years and now has the full support

of Brigadier General John Gronski of the Pennsylvania National Guard in Indiantown Gap. One only needs to talk to those who have opened their hearts and homes to the military's companion animals to realize that it has saved these pets lives and impacted both the soldiers and foster families. The reaction of both the pets and the soldiers when they are reunited is priceless.

Valley Forge resident, David Calvaresi, noticed an advertisement for PACT while searching Craig's List for adoptable dogs. Considering that the program helped those that were sacrificing so much for our country, he and his wife Deborah quickly agreed that it would be the right thing to do and a way for them to give back to our soldiers. They started the application process and soon, when everything was ready, Kathleen Barton brought her two beautiful dogs to meet the Calvaresi's, their three teenage children and their boxer rescue, Duke. After some initial growling and snarling the three dogs were running around the yard as if they were always together.

"I was anxious over leaving my babies with a strange family so far away," said Kathleen. "I was so happy to have such a nice family watching my girls." After Kathleen and Andrew Barton deployed with the Air Force to Afghanistan, Sasha, a 95 pound Cane Corso and Vada, a 40 pound German shepherd quickly became a part of the Calvaresi pack. "To be honest I was a little worried the girls would not want to return home because of how well they had it there. Vada and Sasha are two of the most loving dogs I have ever come across. Who wouldn't want them?"

Though going from one dog to three is not without its trials, Calvaresi described the four month foster experience as "great." For David and Deborah's children, each of the dog's individual personalities left an impact on them and a bond they will always cherish. "They were sweet and adopted us just like we adopted them. The most difficult part of the whole process was letting them go at the end."

Kathleen was pleased with David and his family. "The Calvaresi's were so good with communicating to us from here to Afghanistan. They posted all kinds of pictures from the holidays. When we returned from the deployment Sasha seemed to have been caught off guard. She came out, looked at us and hesitated. Once she realized it was mommy and daddy she took off with her sister Vada and just jumped into our arms. They literally jumped on me, knocked me down and we started to cry. They covered me with kisses. It was a homecoming to remember forever."

The Calvaresi's were the first foster family to reunite the foster animals with their deployed owners. Kathleen and her husband gave them a token of their appreciation for the care they provided Sasha and Vada while deployed: a shadow-box with a folded American flag that was flown on a combat mission across Afghanistan by one of the pilots who flew Kathleen's plane. According to Kathleen, the folded flag and certificate were "a one-of-a-kind gift. It cannot be replicated."

"It is easy to come up with reasons why you can't participate in this program," said Calvaresi. "You don't have the time, the resources, the money, etc. The reality is there is a very large need here, and Buzz and his staff make it very easy and provide as much support as you need. If you have a love for animals and want to give a little something back, I highly recommend participating in the program. It is rewarding on so many levels. Knowing that we were able to ease the burden and create one less worry for someone who is sacrificing so much for us and our country makes it all worthwhile."

Patrice Smith and her husband Max took in Riley, a female Boxer/Treeing Walker Coonhound mix (BT Hound), from a Massachusetts marine that was being deployed to Afghanistan. After the Smith's 14 year old Lab mix passed away, they yearned for another dog. An article in the Philadelphia Inquirer told of PACT's mission and having been involved with an alternate Christmas shop through their church that provides gifts for various non-profit organizations, they felt the Military Foster Program would be a great match for them. Like most dog owners, they knew first-hand how difficult it was to come home to an empty house that once had a vibrant healthy pet greet them at the door.

They couldn't bear the thought of soldiers going overseas only to come home to an empty house with no best friend there to greet them.

"We have a fairly large wooded yard with an electric fence and live close by to a large Delaware County park. Riley trained quickly to our fence and spent his days fascinated by the critters he spotted. He loved the walks in the park." When Ashlee and her marine husband Justin arrived to pick up Riley, he went into the protection mode at the sound of the doorbell. Once Ashlee called his name and said, "Riley, it's us," his tail started going and he literally jumped up into their arms." An impressive sight given the fact that Riley was nearly 60 pounds! "It was obvious that they were glad to see each other. This is a way for those of us who can't help in a tangible way to help those serving our country and their pets. It is good for us and benefits everyone involved."

Both the Calvaresi's and Smith's had completed their first fostering and are now on their second "tour of duty." The Calvaresi's have stayed in touch with the Barton's, even watching Sasha and Veda while the Bartons went on vacation for ten days. They now have welcomed Samson, a boxer into their home. Initial arrangements for Samson fell through with no time to make other arrangements before the soldier was deployed. Sadly, Samson was surrendered to a shelter. When PACT got word, they contacted the Calvaresi's about fostering another dog. They agreed and Samson was rescued from the shelter the next day and brought to stay with the Calvaresi's. They never had a chance to meet Samson's owner but through the wonderful world of technology, they have been in constant communication with him, sending pictures, videos and texts about Samson's well-being.

The Smiths have also entered their second tour fostering two pit bulls, nine year old Kato and eight year old Karmen for Captain Harris who has recently been deployed. Though Captain Harris' dogs are well traveled, having been to Italy on a peace-time deployment and various transfers within the States, this deployment would be too dangerous. Patrice and Max took in the 60 and 45 pound dogs with open arms. "They are so loving and sweet" said Patrice. "They give tons of kisses. They will be so hard to give back."

Max said "It just feels good to do something for someone who risks their life for us."

Hearing the kind words of fosters and service members are heartwarming. Reading a certificate presented to Buzz Miller by Brigadier General John Gronski of the Pennsylvania National Guard for his efforts in helping the military during deployments was absolutely humbling.

"...The morale of our country's troops, especially in war zones, is a necessary component to their well being. Many companion animals in this country are treated like family members. Without a close friend or relative to care for them, military personnel are often forced to relinquish their beloved pets to animal shelters, which can result in the animal being adopted or more likely euthanized due to overcrowding....For the men and women who put their lives on the line to protect our country, this Military Foster Program is crucial to both the animal's well-being and the owner's peace of mind...It gives me great comfort knowing that the military personnel we depend on can rely on PACT's Military Foster Program for their companion animals while they are deployed."

When Buzz Miller walked away from his lucrative law practice in 2003, he set out to make a difference. For the many companion animals, both cats and dogs, that PACT has saved from euthanasia and the peace of mind he has afforded so many deploying troops, he has definitely met his own challenge of making a difference and will continue to do so. Hopefully, these unselfish acts of kindness bestowed upon our troops by members of our communities will continue. We can all do a little part to ease the minds of our soldiers by caring for their companion animals while they are away. If you would like to help PACT with this program or learn about their similar foster programs with Children's Hospital in Philadelphia or the Ronald McDonald homes in the Delaware Valley for

families of sick children, please, go to www.pactforanimals.org to fill out the foster application or to donate. All information remains confidential and will only be released with permission of the parties involved.

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