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Local therapy dogs have been welcoming home our troop members from Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere for almost four years. These welcome home celebrations are organized by the Diablo Valley Flag Brigade (DVFB) and the Pleasanton Military Families (PMF). All participating therapy dogs are members of the DVFB Petting Officer Pack. They have attended numerous celebrations throughout Alameda and Contra Costa counties, from Oakland to Oakley, from Martinez to Pleasanton.

Each celebration begins with the Warrior Watch Riders (WWR), a group of motorcycles riders wearing their leathers, escorting the honoree to the site of the celebration from an airport or local restaurant. The honorees are often stunned

when they first see the WWR, as the celebration is usually a surprise. Even those with experience in military intelligence have no idea of what is about to happen!

Once the honoree arrives at the site of the celebration, frequently the home of family or friends or perhaps a public park, there are usually at least 100 and up to 400 people waiting for them. The human welcoming committee may include political officials from all levels of government and representatives from military support and veteran groups (VFW, American Legion, Blue Star Moms, Livermore Military Families, Vietnam Veterans, etc.), as well as family and friends and others who know the honoree (teachers, school principals, long-time neighbors, etc.). Firefighters and police officers also frequently attend. Presentations to the honoree include certificates, medals, special coins, an American Flag, and other items.

The therapy dogs facilitate relaxation and enjoyment for the honoree and audience, putting everyone "at ease." Usually the dogs come up about halfway through the formal portion of the celebration, when the honoree is still pretty stunned by what's happening. The dogs are all specially trained "petting officers" known for their friendliness. They approach with tails wagging to say welcome, shake the honoree's hand as if to thank them for their service, and sit at (or even lie down on!) their feet. Honorees are presented with bookmarks bearing the dogs' pictures so they can "bookmark this day in their lives" and also receive patches representing the Petting Officer Pack that state, "You Are Our Hero." The entire mood of the event lightens up due to the presence of these special dogs.

The importance of having therapy dogs at these special events was expressed by one honoree, an Army First Lieutenant, who wrote, "The night of my Welcome Home Celebration was a great surprise and has filled my mind with very special memories.... There were many people there representing different groups to present gifts and express their thoughts and appreciation for my service... [D]uring the presentations there came a most unexpected face walking up to me, looking up at me with a wagging tail.... He gave me a warm welcome and added a special smile to my face." *

The mother of a Marine Corporal wrote, "At my son's Welcome Home Celebration, there were many surprises in store for him, but I think the biggest smile on his face came when Lawrence, the Livermore Lab, was introduced.... What a special dog Lawrence is. Thank you for sharing him." *

To view slideshows of welcome home celebrations visit diablovalleyflagbrigade.com and click on Welcome Home Slideshows. The therapy dogs have also marched in parades, attended Veterans Day ceremonies, comforted family members at the dedication of a bench in memory of two fallen heroes, and attended other military-related events.

Bryan Welden, President of the DVFB, says, "The therapy dogs... educate the community members attending these events about the important role dogs play in aiding our soldiers, just through their presence, and they show the honorees that the entire community, including dogs, appreciates what they are doing for our country."

*From *Successful Tails: The Wonders of Therapy Dogs* by Patricia H. Wheeler.

Hazel Jacoby has been a therapy dog handler since July 2006 and has taken her Newfoundlands to many East Bay nursing homes, libraries, camps, and community events. She and her Newfie, Chex Mix, are registered with [Therapy Dogs Inc.](http://TherapyDogsInc.com).

*Patricia Wheeler, PhD in Education, has been a therapy dog handler since November 2002. She and her two dogs, Lawrence and Albert, are registered with Therapy Dogs Inc. and have put in over 3,000 hours at various sites and programs throughout the East Bay. For more information about Patricia and her book, *Successful Tails: The Wonders of Therapy Dogs*, visit phwheeler.com.*

Main article photo by: Patricia Wheeler



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