



# A Soldier's Best Friend

Only one thing could help Danny Kimbrell with his PTSD: a very special dog.

**A**rmy paratrooper Danny Kimbrell served in Afghanistan for five months—but the memories haunted him for years. When he returned home to California in 2003, Danny suffered persistent nightmares of being attacked. To stave off the dreams, he would stay awake, sometimes for two days straight. But the sleep deprivation only made him feel worse, and in 2005—as he prepared to return overseas after being recalled to service—Danny finally sought medical help. The diagnosis: PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental-health condition that can result from experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event.

Even though in a given year 300,000 to 500,000 veterans who served in Afghanistan or Iraq can experience PTSD, Danny was surprised by his doctor's conclusion. "It didn't seem like I had seen enough stuff to warrant that," says the 35-year-old. "I felt weak." He was discharged from the military a few months after his diagnosis and started going to doctors, trying medications and exercising to the point of exhaustion just so he could fall asleep. Nothing seemed to work—until he joined forces with a dog.

In 2009, hoping to lift his spirits, Danny brought home a playful 8-week-old corgi puppy. He named him Tyler, and it wasn't long before the exuberant pup—who loved chasing leaves and making friends with other dogs—lightened Danny's mood. "One day my therapist said to me, 'When you talk about your dog, you're a completely different person,'" says Danny. "'Have you ever thought about getting Tyler trained as a service dog?'"

Danny hadn't realized that PTSD service dogs even existed. He took Tyler through a series of classes to certify him as a psychiatric service dog, and what happened next was



From top: Danny with his new dog, Penny; Tyler.



astounding: Tyler started helping Danny overcome problems that had plagued him for years. The corgi learned, for example, to stand between Danny and anyone who approached. This made Danny feel more comfortable going outside and talking to strangers, which he had long avoided. At home, if Danny got anxious, Tyler knew to lie in his lap, covering him with 25 pounds of calming pressure. Tyler would even wake Danny up from nightmares by licking his face. "My eyes would open and I would tell him that I was all right," recalls Danny. "I would cuddle him like a teddy bear and fall back asleep."

With Tyler by his side, Danny gained the confidence to pursue a new calling—as a dog trainer. In June 2016, he found the perfect match for his talents at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, CA. The foundation's Pets for Vets program pairs veterans suffering from PTSD, traumatic brain injury or other service-related mental-health conditions with specially selected shelter dogs.

Danny now helps other veterans train their new pups to act as service dogs. The program is free, and veterans receive free dog food from Purina for the life of their pet.

In 2016, Tyler passed away from lymphoma. Danny was devastated, but his progress didn't falter. He recently adopted a pit bull mix named Penny and is overseeing her training as a service dog. One day, Penny will help Danny teach other vet-and-dog teams essential skills. In the meantime, she has won the heart of Danny's 5-year-old daughter, JoAnn. And Danny still marvels over all the ways Tyler helped him. "From the day you enter the military, you're paired with a battle buddy," he says. Tyler became Danny's battle buddy back at home: "That dog gave me security, love and the ability to step forward out of the darkness."

—Mary Kate Frank

