

Veterans Can Benefit from Hearing Dogs

BY STEVEN C. STERRY AND CARLA BEYER-SMOLIN

Steven Sterry joined the Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter (VAAVC) in July 2021 and has been a strong core member of the chapter. He told the VAAVC Chapter earlier this year, the good news that he had received approval to receive his third Canine Companion, Zochi. HCAA Chapter and Membership Coordinator Carla Beyer-Smolín asked Steve to share his story with HCAA.

My hearing loss occurred because of exposure to shipboard gunfire during the Vietnam War. I was stationed aboard the Guided Missile Cruiser USS Galveston in 1965 and 1966, and over a nine-month period, we provided gunfire support to the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps units in South Vietnam. We fired 6 – 6” 54 caliber guns from two barbettes (large turrets). Our projectiles were about half the weight of a VW Bug and our guns shot them 26 miles inland with unbelievable accuracy. After leaving the Galveston and reporting to the USS Prairie, a destroyer tender (repair ship), I realized that my hearing had deteriorated, and I also experienced chronic tinnitus.

For 20 years, I was employed by the State of California Employment Development Department (EDD) in their Veteran Services Programs and served, as well, in other field office and division staff support assignments. While helping veterans with employment and employability issues, I felt that I was also being called to religious ministry to the veterans who I had been helping in my work at EDD. In 2005, I entered the seminary, at Biola University, and after retirement from the EDD, I was ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Church.

I then served for 18 months as acting chaplain to the 6/52nd Army Reserve Air unit at Los Alamitos, California until their regular chaplain returned from active duty in the Middle East. I later completed my master’s degree in Christian Apologetics at the age of 71, and was ordained in 2014, as a priest in the Independent Old Catholic Church.

I have served as community sponsor to three Veterans in Prison (VIP) groups at the California Institution for Men, in Chino, California, and the one Veterans in Prison group at the California Institution for Women, in Corona, California. Veterans in Prison groups are open to all inmates who have served in the military.

I currently serve as director of ministry and education for the United States Conference of Chaplains; I am an affiliate member of Cru Military Ministry and



serve as an ombudsman and military outreach member for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. In December 2016, I was accepted as a priest in good standing by the Anglican Diocese of the West where I now assist at Saint Stephen’s Anglican Church in Tustin, California, and serve as a member of my Diocesan Bishop’s Executive Committee.

My first Canine Companion was a skilled companion service dog, Brianna, a Labrador/Golden Retriever cross that was given to my first wife, Norma, who had multiple sclerosis. Brianna was a skilled companion dog trained to work with people seriously disabled and unable to care for the dogs themselves. It was my responsibility to maintain Brianna’s health and keep her groomed and fed. My wife and I went through three weeks of team training. After Norma passed away in 2002, I was allowed to keep Brianna until her death in 2007.

My second Canine Companion, Montera, was a hearing dog, like Zochi. She was a Labrador/Golden Retriever mix and was given to me in 2009. When I graduated with a master’s degree, the department chair not only called me to the podium but also called up Montera as well. After Montera reached the age of 13, I applied for a successor hearing dog in April 2021. Montera retired two months later and passed away in January of this year approximately two months before her 14th birthday.

I brought my third Canine Companion, Zochi, home on June 11, 2022. She is a pure Labrador Retriever. Like Montera, Zochi alerts me to sounds that I cannot

hear. For example, when somebody rings the doorbell or knocks on the door, Zochi alerts me by nudging me with her nose and then takes me to the source of the sound.

Zochi was initially trained as a service dog, but after a failed placement, it was discovered that she was more suited to be a hearing dog. So, in addition to alerting me to sounds, Zochi can pick up things that I drop, bring me my slippers, or bring me her leash or vest when I ask for them.

There are many advantages to having a hearing dog. They can alert their handlers to sounds, like alarms, cellphone rings, people at the door, and, among many other things, people calling their name. Many of these sounds I would miss because of the character of my hearing loss. Having a hearing dog also makes me more approachable to other people. I have even had service members sit down and talk to my hearing dog as if they were telling her their problems. People rarely forget me because they remember my canine companions that traveled with me while I was performing my ministerial and veterans activities.

Veterans are given priority in the application process for all Canine Companion Service Dogs and you can find the application process on the their website, canine.org. Canine Companion's support of veterans is genuine. Throughout the process, I felt honored and respected for my service. For a veteran with PTSD or other mental issues, that can be a game-changer. At my team training graduation last June, with tears in her eyes, the training coordinator for my Hearing Dog Program presented me with Canine Companion's challenge coin. Whether or not I deserved those tears, I felt honored to receive her acclimation, and I will never forget that moment nor the coin.

The Service Dog Veterinary Health Insurance Benefit (VHIB) is a special program at the United States

Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) that will provide veterans with veterinary care and medications for their service dogs. This program is handled through the Prosthetics Department of each VA Medical Center. The veteran's doctor must recommend the veteran and their dog for this program and show that there is no comparable technology that is more suitable. Montera was approved under this program. I have applied to place Zochi under this program, as well, and was told there would be a good chance she will be approved. This program is open only to service dogs that have been obtained from member organizations of Assistance Dogs International— Canine Companions is a member of that organization.

I found HLAA through Raegene Castle from the HLAA Peninsula Chapter at a class reunion and joined some of the Peninsula Chapter online meetings. I joined the VAAVC in July 2021.

I believe there are many veterans with hearing loss who would benefit from membership in HLAA and the VAAVC. While the VA provides first-rate equipment to those veterans, it provides very little mental health or moral support. We have that potential to reach all those veterans who need us.

The Veterans Across America Chapter (VAAVC) meets virtually every third Tuesday of the month. For more information, go to hearingloss.org/hearing-help/communities/veterans/. Join the VAAVC here at hlaagroups.hearingloss.org/g/HLAAVeterans. **HL**

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Carla Beyer-Smolin is chapter and membership coordinator at HLAA. Reach out to her at cbeyer-smolin@hearingloss.org.

Are you a veteran living with hearing loss, tinnitus or other auditory issue?



HLAA stands ready to help our nation's veterans live successfully with hearing loss and related issues. In addition to a complimentary Online Membership and first-time convention registration, you can participate in the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter.

The mission of the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter is to provide education, be an advocate for veterans with hearing loss and to provide a support system to help them return to civilian life.

For more information, go to hearingloss.org/Veterans or email chapters@hearingloss.org.



HLAA Veterans Luncheon at the HLAA 2022 Convention



Mitchell Levy, Hamilton CapTel Product Manager



Rob Leonard, Information Security Manager/U.S. Army Veteran



HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter (VAAVC) Members and veteran convention attendees enjoyed seeing each other face to face at the HLAA 2022 Convention. Hamilton CapTel sponsored the luncheon. Left to right: Michael Meyer, vice chair of the HLAA board of directors; Carla Beyer-Smolin, HLAA chapter and membership coordinator; Don Doherty, VAAVC president; Bill Kelley; Jim Rau; David Schible, VAAVC vice president; Peter Liszewski; Jennifer Tiziani; Carol Halla; and Ron Drach.