

Service Dog and Chance Encounter Saves U.S. Marine Veteran with Invisible Wounds

by Barry Smith
Boot Campaign

You never know when something that drops into your lap might be a lifesaving gift from above. For U.S. Marine Corps veteran Michael Menegay, a four-legged friend saved his life so that he could reclaim it.

Originally from the Dallas-Fort Worth area in Texas, Menegay completed his four-year military service meritoriously as a corporal in 2008, having served on two deployments overseas as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In one year alone, he participated in more than 600 combat missions, including nearly 300 involving post-blast and weapons caché explosions. He left the Marines with the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with combat distinguishing device and, as a parting remembrance for the hundreds of concussive blasts he sustained, invisible wounds.

For the past decade, Menegay has battled post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a rare traumatic brain injury (TBI) that interferes with his motor function, causing his hands to shake uncontrollably at times. The variety of pain medications he has been prescribed over the years have been to no avail.

“There was an incident several years back when I was emotionally wrecked with my life and I put a loaded gun to my head and wanted to end my life,” reflects Menegay. “But this creature from God jumped into my lap, knocking the gun away.”

Lola, a black Labrador retriever, has been Menegay’s service animal and constant companion since 2009 when he rescued her at the age of five weeks from a puppy mill. Five years later, she was the one rescuing him.



“Even as I say this I tear up with emotion because I see now how life is truly beautiful,” confides Menegay. “That year I could have been one of the 22 veterans that commit suicide every day, but it wasn’t the path God planned for me. I now see my purpose in life is to shed light on the invisible wounds that many veterans face each and every day.”

Michael would not have adopted Lola except for the suggestion of his step-mother who thought a companion pet would help him and the fact that he thought Lola would be great for duck hunting. Lola turned out to be gun shy, but, thanks to the suggestion of his then therapist, over the next two years Michael and Lola trained together every other weekend so that she could become the service dog that she is today.

“Now Lola performs tasks like helping me stand up on my feet if I lose my balance, she will retrieve objects that have fallen out of my reach, and she often puts her body between other people if they get too close to me,” Menegay explains. “She really watches my six and comforts me when I have nightmares or an emotional reaction such as anger, anxiety or sadness. We are inseparable.”



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While Lola saved his life, Menegay is the one responsible for steadily taking back control of it. He has made measurable strides in managing his invisible wounds thanks to the assistance of Boot Campaign. The national military non-profit based in Texas specializes in working with veterans struggling with TBI and PTSD through its health and wellness program that partners with top-tier treatment and training providers across the country.

Menegay started his program with 32 days at the Centerstone rehabilitation center in Bradenton, Fla, where they helped ween him off his medications. Next, he completed a 30-day stint in Virginia Beach, Va., at Virginia High Performance, where his customized regimen focused on strength training, nutrition and relaxation techniques. He then headed back to Texas for nine weeks of specialized brain treatments and cognitive processing therapy UT Dallas and UT Southwestern. He is continuing to progress through an outpatient plan.

Menegay credits his opportunity with Boot Campaign to a chance meeting with combat wounded U.S. Army Staff Sergeant (Ret.) Robert “Bobby” Henline during a game of darts in 2016.



Sergeant (Ret.) Robert “Bobby” Henline

“I was six months clean, but then I hit a road bump in my life and started back on the wrong path, so I moved to San Antonio to get back onto my feet,” admits the San Antonio resident. “I went into a local bar to have a drink and that’s where I met my best friend and mentor Bobby Henline. I didn’t know it at that time, but now I believe he saved my life. Bobby has a way of helping veterans that no other person can do.”

Henline, a Boot Campaign Veteran Ambassador and professional comedian, became Menegay’s connection to the organization and Morgan Luttrell, the Navy veteran who founded the health and wellness program.

“Bobby’s hilarious, but he wasn’t cracking jokes when I met him,” adds Menegay. “He was very laid back, just having a good time, playing darts, and that’s when I challenged him to a game and shared my story with him that night. Throughout the next couple of months, we started hanging out together and he pretty much took me under his wing. He introduced me to Morgan Luttrell at a Boot Campaign event, and Morgan set me up with their health and wellness program and got me right back to the path I needed to go on.”

Since going through the Boot Campaign program, Menegay is now on a personal mission to give back. Last year Menegay, Lola, Henline and Henline’s service dog Daisy ran a series of 5K and 10K races in 13 states over 42 days for the “Run Like You’re On Fire” tour in support of veterans with invisible wounds, Boot Campaign and Retrieving Freedom, an Iowa-based non-profit dedicated to training service dogs.

The unique team of four are garnering attention and will appear in an upcoming motion picture titled MBF: Man’s Best Friend. Slated for release in theaters Spring 2019, the film explores the parallels between the treatment of wounded military veterans and “last chance” shelter dogs.

The team’s film debut led to opportunities with Animal Planet and the Outdoor Channel. MFB star Tim Abell, a former Army Airborne Ranger and host of Outdoor Channel show Grateful Nation, will see them again when they appear on an episode that will air later this year. They also will appear on an upcoming episode of Animal Planet show Amanda to the Rescue.



When not helping to raise awareness about the challenges veterans face post-service, Menegay enjoys kayak fishing, spending time at his family’s cabin in Interlochen, Mich., and woodworking. He hopes to turn this latter activity into his own business shortly, one that will feature the wooden American flags he crafts from scratch. One thing is for sure, he will not be doing anything without his four-legged companion Lola.



“I highly recommend to any veteran who is going through a tough time in their lives, to go out and get a dog at a last-chance shelter”

“They will make your life better in every way. You can save a life and in return he/she will save yours.”

- U.S. Marine Corps veteran
Michael Menegay

Learn more about Boot Campaign and its Health and Wellness Program at www.BootCampaign.org.