

# 'Helping is Healing'

## A VFW Life member in Arkansas created a community of veterans to answer the call of service after natural disasters

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A battle-worn Marine of 30 years, Sgt. Maj. Lance Nutt cannot tell the story without tearing up.

He and members of his Sheep Dog Impact Assistance team, a group of war veterans and retired police, fire and emergency response officers, were helping clean up the devastation of a tornado that ripped through Wynne, Arkansas, in March.

The EF3 twister with wind speeds of up to 165 mph sliced through the eastern Arkansas Delta town, killing four people and leaving a mile-wide path of destruction.

Nutt and his “Sheep Dogs” traveled to Wynne, set up camp at a nearby state park and began walking through the town and offering aid.

“We came across a man who had lost the roof on his home,” Nutt said. “There were three large oak trees that had fallen in his yard, and he was using a small chainsaw. You could tell he had taken all day to clear one tree with that little chainsaw. You could see the exhaustion on his face.”

He offered assistance to the man, who looked back at him skeptically.

“He wanted to know how much we would charge,” Nutt said. “I told him we were here to help.”

The Sheep Dogs cleared the three trees within an hour, and the man, who earlier seemed defeated by his own progress, began smiling and laughing with Nutt’s team.

### ‘A DESIRE TO SERVE’

The tale is symbolic of Nutt’s Sheep Dog Impact Assistance program. Veterans who return

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after serving in conflict and retired police officers, firemen and EMTs suffering from the stress and trauma of their jobs all have their own fallen trees to deal with.

“Our nation’s heroes have a desire to serve,” said Nutt, a life member of VFW Post 3031 in Rogers, Arkansas.

He said when a veteran’s tour of duty ends, his or her sense of purpose may end as well. After a life of intense service, suddenly they find themselves sitting on the couch with nothing to do, Nutt added.

That is where problems arise. Veterans’ suicide rates are alarmingly high as a result. Last year, according to the National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, 6,146 veterans took their own lives. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for post-9/11 veterans, accounting for 22.3 percent of all veteran deaths.

“We were helping the town of Wynne begin their recovery,” Nutt said. “But we are also helping our individuals begin their own recovery.”

The Sheep Dogs Impact Assistance program idea was triggered in Nutt’s mind during the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. While with the Marines, Nutt brought a group to Louisiana to help those in need.

“We lost men in combat in Iraq,” he said. “That was part of the job. I came home, and I was thankful, but some of our brothers did not. And others who did come home started killing themselves. I thought, ‘How, as a leader, did I fail them? I became angry and began blaming myself. Then Hurricane Katrina came, and I watched. Here we are failing the public again. I had to get up and do something.’”

Nutt was sworn into the Marine Corps by his father, a retired Navy aviator, in 1988.

The younger Nutt deployed to the Persian Gulf as part of Operation Desert Shield/Storm. He later attended the University of Arkansas at Monticello, where he earned degrees in business management and communications.

He returned to the Marines in 1995 and served as a recruiter and instructor until 2000.

Nutt then left the Marines to manage corporate sales for major retail marketing companies in northwest Arkansas.

But with the war on terror in full swing, Nutt re-enlisted, joining the 3rd Battalion, 24th Marines in 2003.

“I grew up with the company of heroes,” he said, referring to his family who also served in

the military. “The definition to serve was ingrained in me the day I was born.”

### **‘SHEEP DOGS TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS’**

In 2010, Nutt created the Sheep Dogs. It began slowly, mostly in Arkansas. His team would travel to disaster sites, helping locals deal with ravaging tornadoes and floods. Newspapers began reporting about the teams’ work in Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Alabama, Kentucky and other areas, and attention grew.

“It changed how I felt about myself,” he said. “Helping is healing. Helping others can help yourself.”

Gene Roberts, the owner of a pizza restaurant in northeast Arkansas, was one of the first Sheep Dog members in the Jonesboro, Arkansas, chapter.

Roberts volunteered at first; he later became a police officer and then officially joined the Sheep Dog organization.

He and Nutt were friends in college, and Roberts traveled to southern Louisiana with Nutt after *Hurricane Katrina*.

The impact of the group came to him and, like Nutt, he becomes emotional when telling the story.

A young soldier returned from Afghanistan. He had been injured and was using a walker and wheelchair. Someone told the Sheep Dogs that the man did not have a ramp leading to his home and he had to negotiate steps.

“The Sheep Dogs went to his house with donated materials,” Roberts said. “We built a porch with a large staircase and wheelchair ramp. His family said they could not afford it, but we told them it would not cost them anything. We got a picture and a hug and it was worth it. There was not a dry eye out there when we were finished. Sheep Dogs take care of business.”

The first few years for the Sheep Dogs were “nasty,” Nutt said. It was constant trips to disaster scenes. He saw the vast devastation of tornadoes in Joplin, Missouri, and Birmingham, Alabama, and flooding in his home state.

Then, things slowed down.

“We needed to fill in gaps between the disasters,” he said. “What do we need to do to get off the couch?”

That was the mantra of his new programs. Nutt developed “Get Off The Couch,” a program designed to bring Sheep Dogs together for camping and hunting trips, fishing and other

events just to maintain the camaraderie they need.

He also created Warrior PATHH for posttraumatic growth help with a seven-day training program.

“It is the next step of life,” Nutt said. “It is the second mountain. We climbed the first one already [with combat and service] and now we are faced with the second one. This truly defines our legacy as human beings.”

Participation in the Sheep Dog Impact Assistance program has grown to 20,000 members in 20 states.

“It has been amazing,” Nutt said. “I am beyond proud of what this is. We lost veterans because they gave up on themselves. We are reminding people never to give up on themselves.”

VFW Department of Arkansas Commander Jeffrey Byrd, a member of Post 2330 in Searcy, Arkansas, said his VFW Department wants its members to join with other organizations to help veterans.

“We encourage all our local VFWs to partner with the Sheep Dogs,” Byrd said. “Many of the groups like Sheep Dogs and We Are The 22 are all doing the same thing — helping veterans.”

There is a deep brethren among veterans, he added. He believes in the power of his “buddy checks,” times when he picks up his cell phone and sends quick text messages to fellow veterans.

“It’s a two-second text just to check on others,” Byrd said. “You are reaching out to let them know you’re there.

“There’s not been a sense of real belonging at times. You’re seeing the closing of local VFW chapters. Sheep Dogs allow retired veterans to go and talk about their experiences with others without people judging them.”

Arkansas currently counts 72 VFW Posts with approximately 10,000 members.

Jonesboro VFW Post 1991 opened its doors earlier this year for the Sheep Dogs to present their program and to recruit members, Commander Robert Murphy said.

“Anything that can get people together will help,” he said.

The Sheep Dogs also have worked with We Are The 22, a group dedicated to helping veterans in volatile situations. During a recent Sheep Dog meeting in Jonesboro, members

of that group also briefed each other about their programs.

Wes Holt, a member of the We Are The 22 Arkansas chapter, said that in the five years his organization has been in existence in Arkansas, members have lost only one veteran while responding to 500 calls in the state.

“We help de-escalate things,” Holt said. “If you have law enforcement coming to a situation with a veteran with a gun threatening to harm himself with lights and sirens going, it won’t go well. The only real reason why we do it is because we are all brothers.”

Several Sheep Dog members also are involved in the other assistance programs.

The northeast Arkansas Sheep Dog group has 12 members and meets the third Thursday of each month. If they are not planning outings or assistance programs, they are just gathering together to see each other.

In February, Gene Roberts was given the 2022 Northeast Arkansas Sheep Dog of the Year award for his work.

“This is personal,” Roberts said “We have friends who may be in trouble emotionally and need help. Sheep Dogs help keep the wolves away.”

*This article is featured in the 2023 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Kenneth Heard. Heard is a former newspaper and television reporter based in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He currently is the media information director for the Craighead County (Arkansas) Prosecuting Attorney’s office.*