

## A Day at the VA

by Steve Reiman (with Lily & Jordan)

They were fathers and grandfathers. They were young with family members present; they were elderly and alone. Two were women. Although all were convalescing vets at the VA hospital in White River Jct, there was something that set them apart from the patients I see each week at the Fletcher Allen Health Care Facility. All of the people we visited were military personnel. These men and women had served or were currently serving to protect our country.

I came in with my German Shepherds, dressed in camouflage outfits sporting the rank I used to proudly wear. The staff immediately accepted us as privileged members of their team and gave us orders to visit all patients whose rooms were not isolated. And, visit my Sheps did in real military style. They played ball and Frisbee with staff, visitors, and patients alike. They snuggled up to people who wanted to sink fingers into fur. They brought smiles and laughter everywhere.

One gentleman was particularly memorable. As we entered the quarters he shared with three others, I noticed him staring blankly at the wall. Perhaps he served under General Patton with my father in the German campaign. I brought the captains to a smart sit and said “Hi, Soldier, do you want to pat a Therapy Dog?”

The elderly veteran slowly turned toward me and then noticed my canine military escort. A toothless smile paraded across his face like none I have ever seen. It was ear to ear and caught the attention of all who had marched with us into his room. Indeed, it was the first time anyone had seen that man smile. The captains noticed it too and knew they were welcome to burrow their noses into his side while he enthusiastically patted them.

The reactions were the same everywhere we went. It was a time for all of us to relax and watch the magic that came out of a mix of dogs and military pride.

We were there a long time that day. We left tired and happy we invested our time and energy to visit all of the wonderful people at the VA Hospital. It is the least we can do to honor these wonderful men and women.





**Therapy Dogs**  
OF VERMONT  
UNLEASH A SMILE