

# Star-Telegram

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By: J.R. Labbe

War Horse, director Steven Spielberg's movie adaptation of a children's book, is a fictional story about an unbreakable bond between a young military man and his horse. But true stories about horses and warriors are being written right here in North Texas, and lives are changing through the therapeutic benefits of the relationship that can develop between the two.

Just ask Robert MacTamhais, a 37-year-old Hurst resident who traveled in convoys from December 2008 to August 2009 from Kuwait to Baghdad to the Iranian border as a combat medic with the Army's 167th Medical Detachment.

"I got lucky," MacTamhais said. "I didn't see all that much, but I saw enough."

MacTamhais, who served in the military for more than 17 years, was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, which manifests as severe anxiety attacks.

"The fire alarm at work went off for no reason one day," he said Monday. "A half hour later I had such an anxiety attack I had to go home."

The Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran is receiving help at Rocky Top Therapy Center in Keller, which provides military veterans and their families equine-assisted psychotherapy and therapeutic riding through a \$289,622 grant from the Texas Veterans Commission's Fund for Veterans Assistance.

MacTamhais participates in traditional counseling sessions with a doctor at the VA Clinic in Fort Worth, but for the past couple of months he's been working once a week with Brooke Knox, director of Horses for Heroes, and Mel, his therapy horse, who's "as calm and sweet as can be," MacTamhais said.

"Don't get me wrong -- my doc is a great doctor and I love him to death," he said.

"But horse therapy works much better.

"With Brooke and the horse as a distraction, it keeps me on even keel," he said. "We talk about what kind of week I had, what progress I'm making -- or not making. Last week we just walked out in the pasture. I'd had a bad night the night before. We walked and talked. It was a really good session."

Warriors don't open up easily about what's going on inside their heads, Knox said. The horses are a way to get beyond the defense mechanisms.

"We use the horses to get under their radar," Knox said. "Feedback from the horse is not direct or threatening. But a horse will always respond with distrust if you're inconsistent. I can ask a client what's wrong, and he'll say everything's fine. But when the horse won't respond to his commands, I can say: 'Coca-Cola won't come near you. What's up with that?'"

EAP is not a riding program, although Horses for Heroes does provide hippotherapy that uses the horse's movement to strengthen muscles, coordination and balance.

Chris Orahod of Garland medically retired from the Air Force in 2010. The Seattle native was a transportation specialist who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2003. A veteran of the Iraq war, Orahod receives physical therapy three times a week at the Dallas VA hospital -- where he also volunteers -- but sought out Rocky Top because he wants to be able to take his wife horseback riding one day.

"I'm actually scared of horses," Orahod admitted Thursday. You would be, too, if you were bucked off one at the tender age of 10 or 11. "That first day at Rocky Top, I was pretty freaked out."

Thirteen sessions later and Orahod, who is confined to a wheelchair, is standing in the stirrups, reaching for rings and feeding Babe carrots from his hand, held open by his physical therapist. His core strength is improving, and his goal is to get in a saddle and take his wife out riding.

Rocky Top Executive Director Michael S. Hogg, whose combined Air Force and Navy service totals 23 years, wants Horses for Heroes to be the premier veterans treatment program in the country.

"We can't cure these men and women," Hogg said, "but we can improve and maintain their quality of life and help them enjoy it as God intended them to."

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