

## **Our Journey with Service Peace Warriors**

*By Richard and Cobra*

I'm a U.S. Navy disabled veteran with 28 surgeries or procedures behind me. In 2019, everything came to a head — years of chronic pain and PTSD reached a breaking point. It was dark. I had disturbing thoughts, and my wife, after more than 30 years by my side, was burning out trying to help me carry the weight. We fought — fights that scared me because of how bad my temper had become.

Through it all, I'm incredibly lucky that my wife and children stood by me. They understood, but they were also the ones hurting. They were the ones who suffered the most through my pain.

For the past six years, my life has been a constant cycle of surgery, recovery, and preparation for the next procedure. It's been exhausting — physically, emotionally, mentally.

At the suggestion of my therapist, I looked into the idea of a service dog. On a whim, I called the Spokane VA. That call led me to Service Peace Warriors (SPW), and from that moment on, my life began to change.

It's been an emotional rollercoaster — in the best possible way. In June 2023, I had my initial interview with SPW. Driving that far alone, without my wife or any of my dogs, was nerve-racking. I was a wreck. After the interview, the wait to hear back was filled with anxiety. Then came the call: I was accepted, and they already had a dog in mind — one that could assist with my mobility needs and PTSD.

In September 2023, my wife and I traveled to the SPW farm to meet the team. That's when we met Cobra. No other dogs were brought out — they already knew Cobra was the one. They were right. We connected instantly. On the way home, I was in tears, overwhelmed by what this could mean for our lives.

I probably drove the SPW staff a little crazy with all my calls checking for updates on Cobra and the next class. I just needed to feel like we were moving forward.

Then I got the call: my class would begin in May 2024. It was finally time.

On May 24, 2024, class started. There were 9 or 10 of us — veterans and first responders, each of us dealing with our own battles. We'd all seen tough things, and many of us were used to running toward danger to protect others. But as we stood there, watching our dogs being handed over, every single one of us was in tears.

What followed were eight weekends of training for us, the dogs already knew what to do— public access, restaurants, shopping, air travel simulation, and more. We went to places like Costco, Lowe's, the mall. We learned how to walk with our dogs, how to handle a leash, how to trust them and let them do their job.

Cobra helped me right away. The very first night in the hotel, he comforted me during a night terror. Since then, he's gone everywhere with me. He helps with my mobility, balances me when I stand, and keeps me grounded. He helps me manage pain, emotional overload, stress, and panic. Cobra is always there — he is truly my “ride or die.”

Even simple things that once felt impossible — grocery shopping, dinner with friends, going to a movie, flying to see family — are now within reach again. I can live my life.

One of the most touching moments in this journey was meeting Cobra's puppy raiser. They did an incredibly selfless thing — raising this amazing dog for someone they'd never met. We stay in touch, and Cobra is always excited to see them.

My wife saw a change in me within two weeks. Not just in my mood, but in how I carry myself. I've also made unexpected friendships with fellow handlers — we've built a support network around our dogs and shared interests.

Cobra has also changed how others interact with me. People smile, say kind things, and that positivity has rubbed off. I'm less jumpy. I'm more open. My mind, which was always on high alert — scanning for danger, identifying threats — now has something positive to focus on: Cobra.

This one small act of kindness created a ripple effect. A puppy raiser gave their time and heart. SPW trained Cobra and gifted him to me. And now, my wife and I are proudly raising a puppy for SPW, hoping to give another veteran or first responder the same gift we received. It gives us joy, purpose, and a way to pay it forward.

Without a doubt, Cobra and SPW saved my life — and my marriage. I found them just in time.