Veterinary Career Paths in the Military

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Most people in the veterinary field are only tangentially aware that some of their colleagues serve in the military. They may remember a classmate who received an Army scholarship and avoided a hefty student loan burden or a nearby practice owner who serves in the US Army Reserve and takes off on an occasional international adventure.

However, hundreds of veterinarians serve in the Veterinary Corps of the US Army and even more work as animal care specialists, the military’s terminology for veterinary nurses. (See By the Numbers, page 48.)

Why does the military need so many veterinarians and veterinary support team members? Those who fill these positions are often asked this question by civilians and fellow soldiers alike.
The Veterinarian’s Role

The military needs veterinarians to play supporting roles in global missions, much as it needs physicians and lawyers. US Army veterinarians are the only clinical veterinarians in the Department of Defense and support all military branches.

Military veterinary team members provide full-service medical and surgical care for military animals of all species in the US and while deployed on missions abroad. Not long ago, military veterinarians treated the charging cavalry horses and long-suffering pack animals that contributed to successful campaigns. Currently, those same veterinary teams treat the courageous explosive detection dogs that save lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Army veterinarians and animal care specialists also provide services to military family pets at bases all over the world to maintain clinical proficiency. The surgeries they perform and the illnesses they evaluate at home prepare them to manage sick or injured working animals in a combat environment.

US Army veterinarians also play a vital public health role, working with physicians and preventive medicine specialists to develop zoonotic disease prevention strategies for service members who will work in international locations. They supervise teams of food inspection soldiers who help ensure all food and beverages purchased by the Department of Defense come from safe sources and are stored and prepared appropriately.

The majority of Veterinary Corps officers come on active duty through the Health Professions Scholarship Program, which pays tuition and living expenses for 1 to 4 years of veterinary school. This program has a minimum 3-year active duty service obligation.

Others enter the Army through the Direct Commissioning program after they graduate from veterinary school and begin in practice. These soldiers often receive a generous student loan repayment bonus in exchange for a 3-year service commitment. A similar loan repayment and bonus program exists for graduated veterinarians who are recruited into the US Army Reserve.
Unique Roles
Opportunities are ample for Army veterinarians and animal care specialists who want to move beyond the typical mission set. Veterinary team members who support the special operations community must often be airborne-qualified, which means 3 weeks of intense training and ongoing jumps to maintain their ability to parachute into a combat setting, if necessary.

Along with providing clinical support for the most elite among working dogs, team members work with local populations on animal health projects that help create goodwill and stabilize dangerous situations. Humanitarian and disaster relief efforts often use Army veterinarians and animal care specialists to provide assistance worldwide.

The US Navy’s Marine Mammal Program has several Army veterinarians and animal care specialists who work alongside civilian specialist counterparts to provide care for the program’s dolphins and sea lions.

The Long Term Health Education and Training program also provides appealing options for veterinarians who are considering a longer military career. This program will pay for Army veterinarians to receive an advanced degree or participate in a wide variety of clinical and research-oriented residency programs.

The Veterinary Corps includes board-certified surgeons, radiologists, emergency/critical care specialists, laboratory animal veterinarians, pathologists, and preventive medicine specialists. These specialists work in a variety of roles in clinical medicine, preventive medicine, and research and development. Many specialists transition into academia, industry, or private practice after retiring from the military with a full pension and generous benefit package.

Special Standards
This military commitment comes with a unique set of obligations and sacrifices. All uniformed Army veterinary team members must meet

To Learn More
- Contact a healthcare professions recruiter about uniformed career opportunities in the military: goarmy.com/amedd/veterinarian.html
- For more on Dr. Garber’s experiences: elliottgarber.com/army-veterinarian
- Find civilian job openings: usajobs.gov

Resources
- Civilian Veterinary Job Openings. usajobs.gov/Search/?keyword=veterinary
- US Army Health Professions Scholarship Program. goarmy.com/amedd/education/hpsp.html
- US Army Medical Department Veterinary Corps Educational Opportunities. vetopportunities.amedd.army.mil/edopps.html
- US Army Medical Department Veterinary Corps Reserve Components. vetopportunities.amedd.army.mil/reserve
- US Navy Marine Mammal Program. public.navy.mil/spawar/Pacific/71500/Pages/default.aspx
the same physical fitness standards required for all soldiers and undergo a series of medical tests before being accepted for service. They are often required to move every 2 to 3 years and must leave families and pets behind for training and deployments that can last up to 1 year.

For those considering joining the US Army Veterinary Corps, which celebrates its 100-year anniversary in June 2016, these obligations should be considered alongside the financial benefits and rewarding missions.

**Conclusion**
The military provides a unique opportunity for veterinarians and veterinary support team members who are interested in serving their country, traveling the world, and expanding their professional horizons beyond traditional roles in a small animal practice.

**Reference**