

'Wedding' for Service Dogs Storm & Tucker Celebrates Life-Saving Role Dogs Play Providing Veteran Mental Health Support

Paws of War and Operation VEST Partner to Put the Spotlight on Suicide Prevention

SMITHTOWN, NY, UNITED STATES,
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EINPresswire.com/ -- More than 100 guests, including veterans, first responders, and over 20 service dogs, gathered at Smithtown Landing for a deeply meaningful ceremony: the “wedding” of service dogs Storm and Tucker. The entire event including a reception with food and wedding cake, was made possible thanks to a generous donation from Donato Panico, the operator of Smithtown Landing Catering and Country Club. Hosted by [Paws of War](#) and [Operation VEST](#) and with the support of the

Suffolk County Police Department, the event’s focus was on recognizing the vital and life-saving role service dogs play in supporting veterans facing post-traumatic stress and other invisible wounds of war. Click [here](#) for images and video from the wedding.

Storm, a Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix, and Tucker, a Mini Australian Shepherd, met when their handlers Michael Sweeney a Navy Veteran and Paws of War Volunteer and Jenny and Stefan Hespeler Co-Founders of Operation VEST brought them to Paws of War’s weekly service dog training program. Like the men and woman who participate in the training the dogs bonded quickly. The relationships that are built at this program reflect the strength and healing that emerge when veterans and service dogs train together. Trust is established along with lasting partnerships that are rooted in mutual support and shared experiences.

September is Suicide Prevention Month, a national crisis that demands continued attention. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, approximately 20 veterans die by suicide



Michale Sweeny US Navy Veteran, Officiant Donna Casey, Jenny and Stefan Hespeler Co-Founders of Operation VEST

each day. The suicide rate among male veterans is nearly 60% higher than that of non-veteran males, while female veterans face a 92% higher risk compared to their civilian counterparts. These statistics reflect the urgency of expanding programs that offer proven support systems.

“The bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood are strong in the service dog training program. We experience first-hand, the friendships that form as we work and learn together. We feel this training is very helpful and healing for those who struggle after separating from the military or after they have served as first responders. This program replaces the camaraderie and relationships that many are missing. We all have each other’s backs,” said Jenny Hespeler, Co-Founder of Operation VEST.



Storm Tucker Wedding Party

“

Storm and Tucker symbolize the power of structured training, shared purpose, and unconditional support. When veterans participate in our programs, they gain tools for healing.”

Robert Misseri

Robert Misseri of Paws of War added, “Storm and Tucker represent more than companionship. They symbolize the power of structured training, shared purpose, and unconditional support. When veterans participate in our programs, they gain tools for healing and a renewed sense of connection. That is how we save lives.”

The ceremony also served as a call to action. Programs like those offered by Paws of War and Operation VEST depend on public support to continue serving veterans in need.

[Donations directly fund service dog training.](#) weekly support sessions, and outreach efforts that have proven to reduce suicide risk and improve quality of life for those who served.

Community members who care deeply about preventing veteran suicide and supporting those who carry the invisible wounds of war can make a meaningful impact. Every contribution helps sustain life-saving programs and strengthens the bonds between veterans and their service dogs.

To support these efforts, visit www.pawsofwar.org and www.operationvest.org. Your support can help save lives.

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About Paws of War

Paws of War is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charitable organization whose mission is to honor and support veterans, active military members, and first responders with services that enrich their lives through the rescue and training of service dogs for independence, adoption of companion animals, rescue of overseas animals in war zones, and other essential services to assist our heroes in need. Since 2014, Paws of War has rescued more than 5000 animals, many cared for and rescued by our troops serving overseas to safety in the United States. Paws of War has provided over 950 Veterans and First Responders with service and support animals rescued from kill shelters for over 10 years and has placed over 800 animals for adoption. To learn more about Paws of War and the programs provided or donate, visit its site at <http://pawsofwar.org>

About Operation VEST

Operation VEST is committed to ending veteran suicide by addressing the urgent and varied needs of those who served. With over 20 veterans lost each day and more than 250,000 suicide attempts annually, our mission is clear: raise awareness, eliminate stigma, and build strong, local networks of support. Through community events, social media outreach, and strategic partnerships, we connect veterans to one another and to vital resources—because together, we create change. Every dollar raised stays on Long Island, directly impacting lives and strengthening the path to healing. Learn more at www.operationvest.org.



Service dogs “Bride” Storm Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix, and “Groom” Tucker, a Mini Australian Shepherd



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