

A lot of fight left in the old Devil Dogs of Moss Creek

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Marines never quit.

Not even when they're 92 years old, clinging to their golden years in a Beaufort County gated community. The Moss Creek Marines are about 30 strong. The youngsters in the group are in their 70s.

"We look like 'The Spirit of '76,'" said commanding officer Fred Will. But since forming in 2007, they have raised more than a quarter of a million dollars for Marines.

With the buildup of the war on terror in the Middle East, the old veterans with no staff and no overhead launched what they called Operation Adopt a Deployed Marine Combat Unit.

Over the next six years, they adopted 76 units totaling more than 34,500 Marines and Navy corpsmen.

They shipped them combat boot socks, personal hygiene items, 50 large coffee urns to heat water for shaving, enough Baby Wipes to cover a small state, and more than 25,000 pillows purchased through the Pillows for Patriots program and Harris Pillow Supply in Beaufort.

In short, they sent whatever was on the wish list of Marines in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Now those troops have come marching home.

Thousands of them are mangled by war, physically and mentally.

And the Moss Creek Marines have a new mission.

"We locked in on providing psychiatric service dogs for Marines with physical and mental disabilities caused by traumatic brain injuries and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," Will said.

The Moss Creek Marines raise money through a golf tournament, tennis tournament, activities with the Italian American Club, donations, grants and public solicitation.

They've been allowed to raise money at three local Starbucks locations, and at Jim 'N Nicks BBQ Restaurant in Bluffton.

One night a young woman came into Jim 'N Nicks and got to talking with the Moss Creek Marines.

It was Kyria Henry, who founded the Paws4People foundation in 1999, when she was 12 years old. It now has a branch called Paws4Vets, which places customized assistance dogs with veterans and military dependents living with various disabilities.

After doing their homework, the Moss Creek Marines decided to work through that foundation to help wounded veterans.

"We are hopeful that we can raise enough money over the next year to provide service dogs for at least 50 of our disabled Marines," Will said.

Paws4Vets works with the Marine Wounded Warrior Battalion-East based at Camp Lejeune, N.C., which identifies the Marines in need. So far, the Moss Creek Marines have helped five Marines raise the \$10,000 they need to "pay it forward" with Paws4Vets to get a dog. They gave each of them \$1,000, and will give each of them \$2,000 more next month when they celebrate the Marine Corps' birthday. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs does not cover service dogs for mental health disorders. It says there is not enough clinical evidence to prove the dogs help and sticks to "evidence-based" treatment, like drugs.

The Moss Creek Marines were miffed to discover that bills to mandate a scientific study by the VA repeatedly died in Congress. A 2009 bill co-sponsored by U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham was assigned to a committee, where it died. A 2010 bill sponsored by then-Rep. Henry Brown Jr., a Charleston Republican, passed the House 403-4 but died in the Senate.



But the 2010 Defense Authorization Act required the study, the Military Times reported. After being halted once, it is apparently back on — testing 220 veterans — half paired with a dog specifically trained to address PTSD and half paired with an emotional support dog. The Moss Creek Marines didn't need a study to launch Operation Helping Heroes.

One of the veterans they are helping lost both his legs in his second deployment to Afghanistan. It happened the day after his son was born. Cpl. Tony Mullis' service dog, Madison, seems to understand. She helps light up dark places, pick him up when he falls, maneuver into crowds, and bring a sense of comfort that someone — like his fellow Marines in Afghanistan — always has his back.

"It has to be frustrating," Will said. "They've served their country, been seriously injured and then cut loose." That's why old Marines never quit.