

Last Living 9/11 Ground Zero Search Dog Returns To World Trade Center Site

Bretagne the golden retriever was just 2 years old when she traveled with her handler to New York after the World Trade Center attacks. Today, the 15-year-old pooch is officially retired from rescue duties, but she still works as a service dog in elementary schools, helping special needs students learn to read.



TEXAS TASK FORCE 1 VIA FACEBOOK Bretagne, the last living Ground Zero search dog, visited the former World Trade Center site ahead of the 13th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

By Meg Wagner

A heroic dog is heading back to the site where she earned her superpup status.

Bretagne the golden retriever is the last surviving rescue dog who searched Ground Zero after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

This week, the 15-year-old pooch returned to the Manhattan site for the first time since 2001, her fur now more white than golden. At her side was Denise Corliss, her longtime handler and owner.

"Seeing this kind of took my breath away a bit, similar to how the pile was the first time I saw it," Corliss, told the Today show. "It's so calm and peaceful now, unlike the chaos of before."

Bretagne and Corliss arrived in New York City about a week after the attack on the World Trade Center. The Texas-based duo was part of a group brought in to relieve the first wave of first responders from duty.



The rescue effort was Bretagne and Corliss' first together.

Corliss' first taste of search and rescue came years before. Already part of a local disaster relief team, she volunteered to play a victim during a training drill.



COURTESY DENISE CORLISSE ANDREA BOOHER/FEMA

Bretagne was just 2 years old when she traveled to New York City to search Ground Zero after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Test organizers buried her in rubble so the pups could find her in a disaster simulation. She laid there for hours before she heard a dog sniffing around her. Soon, he was barking on top of her, telling the human rescue teams she was there.

“Even though it was a test situation, I remember feeling so relieved,” Corliss told the Daily News. “And I thought, ‘What must this really feel like to someone in a real situation?’ I wanted to give that feeling to other people.”



COURTESY DENISE CORLISS The 9/11 mission with Corliss and Bretagne's first together. They spent ten 12-hours a day on the pile.

Corliss brought home the tawny puppy in 1999 and immediately began training her for search dog duties. Especially astute dog-handler pairs are selected to help federal teams during national emergencies.

In 2000, the two made it into the ranks of Texas Task Force 1, meaning they were officially cleared for national disaster duty.

During the 9/11 mission, the then-2-year-old Bretagne worked 12-hour days alongside about 300 other pooches.

Most nights, the teams were lucky if they got four hours of sleep, Corliss said.

When the rescue dogs weren't searching the rubble, they served as an impromptu therapy dogs for the human rescuers.

"You'd see firefighters sitting there, unanimated, stone-faced, no emotion, and then they'd see a dog and break out into a smile," Cindy Otto, a vet who cared for the dogs at Ground Zero, explained. "Those dogs brought the power of hope. They removed the gloom for just an instant."

Corliss said at one point Bretagne dashed from her side to tend to a morose firefighter. Even when Corliss ordered the well-trained dog to come back, Bretagne stayed by his side.

"It was like she was flipping me the paw," Corliss said. "She went right to that firefighter and laid down next to him and put her head on his lap."

While Bretagne is the only known surviving dog who worked at Ground Zero, another 9/11 pup — an English springer spaniel named Morgan who worked on Staten Island — is still alive, too.

After 9/11, Corliss and Bretagne helped in rescue efforts after Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita and Hurricane Ivan.

Bretagne retired from rescue work six years ago, and Corliss is determined to carry on the working dog tradition. Since Bretagne's retirement she's trained two other working golden retrievers: Aid'N and Taser.

But even in her dog days of retirement, the 15-year-old Bretagne still working. Today, she travels to Texas elementary schools to help students with special needs. Some pupils who have trouble reading are much more comfortable talking to a friendly dog, Corliss said.

"She's had a life of service," Corliss said.

Soon, the two will travel to Beverly Hills for the American Humane Association's annual Hero Dog Awards ceremony. Bretagne is one of eight pups up for the top prize.