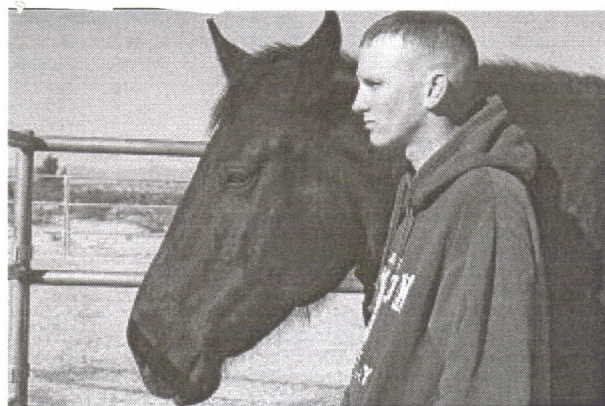


## Wounded Marine Forms Unique Bond With Horse

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Marine Corps News| by Lance Cpl. Lauren Kurkimilis



Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, Calif. -- Lady Justice was born to be butchered. Her life was created for the purpose of harvesting estrogen from her mother during pregnancy. Lady Justice, a newborn foal, was labeled a by-product of this industry to be sold for slaughter. Her fate changed when she was rescued by an organization called Anamali, who found her a home at Vandenburg Air Force Base, Calif. She was cared for and given a life of worth.

Cpl. Stephen Kirkwood III spent his childhood around horses on his grandparents' farms in Holland, Mich. His father was an Army Ranger and in 2008, when Kirkwood was 18, he left home to follow his family's military tradition and joined the Marine Corps.

During her time in the Air Force, Lady J performed security sweeps along the shoreline and in wooded areas unreachable by vehicle. She was an integral part of military operations and even helped discover a marijuana farm worth \$3 million on the outskirts of the base. Lady J eventually developed white line disease in her hoof and after 10 years of loyal service was considered no longer fit for duty. It looked as though her fate was once again uncertain.

Kirkwood was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment and came to call Twentynine Palms home. In Sept. 2011, he deployed for the second time to Afghanistan. While on a foot patrol, Kirkwood was seriously injured when he was hit by an IED. He took shrapnel to the legs that caused him to lose 20% of the flesh in his left knee and 10% of the tendon. His life and military career were forever changed.

Since Lady J was no longer able to earn her keep at the Air Force base, she was taken in by the Jack Auchterlonie Memorial Equine Sanctuary in Twentynine Palms where she and many other retired and disabled horses are cared for and rehabilitated.

Kirkwood is now in Wounded Warrior Battalion West and stationed aboard the Combat Center. When he and his peers are given the chance to work with the horses at JAMES, two unique stories collide and an unexpected friendship is born.

### **A friendship found**

Although Kirkwood helps to care for many of the other horses on the ranch, he took to Lady J almost immediately because of the challenge of her size and demeanor and now she holds a special place in his heart.

"Lady Justice caught my attention from the start," Kirkwood said. "I don't know, I think it's from the way she looks. She's big and intimidating, but she's soft and sweet too. She really just drew me in."

Kirkwood has become comfortable with Lady J and learned her personality very well.

"She's very laid back and when you get to grooming her," Kirkwood said. "It's like she knows she's a princess in some way. She just loves the attention. When she's in her stall, she looks calm and she looks relaxed but as soon as we get her in the turnout, she wants to go. She gets very anxious to please me and follow my commands. She's got energy but not so much to where she can't stand still. She's experienced."

After two years of living at the sanctuary, the owners and staff of the ranch have completely cleared Lady J's white line disease and she is now able to saddle-up again.

"I haven't gotten a chance to ride her," Kirkwood said. "They don't have a saddle big enough for her yet. But looking at the way she walks, at her stride, I can tell she would be a very smooth ride. The way she sways her hips when she walks would be easy to follow. When you ride a horse, you don't put your feet in the stirrups and try to stand and you don't just try to stay perfectly still. You have to move with the horse and develop a rhythm."

### **Building a bond**

Lady J and Kirkwood have spent the past month developing their trust for one another. This is an integral part of horsemanship.

"The horse has to trust you to make proper decisions when telling it what to do and you have to trust the horse to listen," Kirkwood said. "The whole work up to riding builds that bond, builds that trust between you and the horse. It goes both ways."

Kirkwood has developed a specific routine with caring for Lady J.

"Usually I'll groom her and then I'll pick her hooves, basically getting her comfortable with me," Kirkwood said. "I'll pet her down and I try to just stay calm, not make any sudden movements. If I'm brushing her or anything, I always keep one hand on her so she knows where I'm at. Horses have a pretty big blind spot so she needs to know where I am. If I do that, she'll look after me and make sure not to step on me."

It took weeks of familiarization before Kirkwood was ready to take the 1,900 lb Lady J out of the stable.

"Once I had her out in the turnout and I had her lunging," Kirkwood said. "When you're lunging a horse, they're running but you're sending them out and you're telling them when to turn around. When you do that, the horse starts to understand that you're the one giving the commands so you're the leader. And eventually, because horses are pack animals, they see you as the leader and they will have respect for



you. They'll look to you for guidance, for security."

Despite Lady J's massive size, she is known to be gentle and sweet. Even the owners noted that she has grown fond of Kirkwood and is happy to be in his company.

"When I got done lunging her and took her out of the turnout, she was right there behind me, almost asking, 'What do I do next?'" Kirkwood said. "She wanted to please me."

### **Healing hearts**

"I think that coming to this ranch helps give us a better perspective on other people's injuries or illnesses," Kirkwood said. "You can't just go into Wounded Warrior Battalion and look at someone who is ill and not injured for instance and think, 'You're just ill, not injured? Oh, you're fine.' You can't judge them like that. Well, it's the same thing here. A horse may not be injured but maybe they've been abused. So that horse may look normal to the eye, but in fact, they're ill too."

These Marines are a part of the horsemanship program hosted by WWBn and visit the sanctuary twice a week to care for the horses, develop the unique bond between man and beast and will eventually come to ride them.

"I've had horses my whole life," said Kirkwood, "I really like working with Lady Justice. It relaxes me and when your mind is relaxed so is your body. When your body is relaxed you can actually learn to heal."

