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[christopher.goodman@ind.amedd.army.mil](mailto:christopher.goodman@ind.amedd.army.mil)

Contact: SPC Todd Goodman

DSN 486-8144

COM 06371-86-8144

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Dog recovers from open heart surgery

By Spc. Todd Goodman

A urologist, a trauma surgeon and a dog are in the operating room. As strange as it may sound, it's no joke. It's another example of successful surgery at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.

On Aug. 19, a bomb-sniffing German Shepherd named Sgt. Ronnie was medically evacuated from Iraq. He had developed acute medical problems and was promptly brought to a veterinary facility at Pulaski Barracks, where he was diagnosed to have a large collection of fluid around his heart.

"The diagnostic workup and surgical care exceeded the veterinary assets and equipment available here in Germany," said Lt. Col. Danny Jazarevic, Chief of Vascular Surgery at LRMC. "So the commander opened our doors to him."

"It is important to offer these brave, four-legged Soldiers the best possible care," said Col. Rhonda Cornum, LRMC commander and urologist. "If we have to use human as well as veterinary physicians and equipment in order to care for them, then we are happy to be able to offer it."

Sgt. Ronnie underwent an echocardiogram of the heart and CT scan. The ECHO is an ultrasound of the heart that shows the motion of the heart, fluid and tumors in the area. The tests revealed a heart tumor, said Jazarevic. Both he and Cornum immediately volunteered to take care of his problem. Assisted by a team of veterinarians, anesthesiologists, nurses and medics, Sgt. Ronnie underwent open heart surgery and the removal of the tumor.

"Fortunately, I had done a lot of dog surgery in the past," said Col. Cornum. "I did some at the Institute for Surgical Research at Brooke Army Medical Center, and some at the Military Working Dog Center at Lackland Air Force Base."

Mix her experience in with Lt. Col. Jazarevic's years as a cardiac and trauma surgeon and it's no surprise that Sgt. Ronnie pulled through the operation.

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## OPEN HEART SURGERY 2-2-2-2-2-2

“Ronnie recovered in record time,” said Jazarevic. “He thanked his doctors for saving his life in the only way he could, by kisses and face licks.”

The surgery was a first for LRMC. Plenty of heart surgeries have been performed in the past, but none ever have involved a canine for a patient.

Although Sgt. Ronnie made a full recovery, his military career is over. No more running through the Iraqi desert sniffing out bombs and saving lives. He has been medically retired, and evacuated back to the United States to retire with his handler, who also retired from the military, said Cornum.

The reward for the team that saved his life is the fact that Sgt. Ronnie lived to see retirement. Both Cornum and Jazarevic are animal lovers. Each owns and/or breeds horses and dogs. Giving a working dog the same treatment a human would have received is something in which the doctors take great pride.

“To be a surgeon at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center is a distinct privilege,” Cornum said. “Every day, I am honored to take care and operate on the heroes returning from the war. It is no different for a Soldier like Sgt. Ronnie. He is an animal of a higher order because of his function, training and purpose. Dogs like him are valuable members of a team.”

“To me this is as natural as taking care of any other patient,” he said. “Working dogs deserve the same care as other Soldiers. Cutting edge surgical and medical care provided at LRMC is for all of our Soldiers and as long as I command this fine institution we will proudly keep the LRMC doors open for two and four-legged patients alike.”