

Paws for Effect: Support Pup Sage is Popular on USS Gerald R. Ford



Sage, a three-year-old female Labrador Retriever, deployed aboard the world's largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) through Mutts with a Mission, watches the Thanksgiving Turkey Trot 5K on the flight deck, Nov. 23, 2023. *U.S. Navy | Chief Mass Communication Specialist Mike DiMestico* Captain Rick "Powder" Burgess took command of the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) just eight days before it was to sail on its first full-length combat deployment. In putting the new ship through its paces he would be employing 23 different new technologies, but his first decision as commanding officer involved a 24th innovation – the Navy's first-in-class vessel, its largest, longest and most advanced, would have a specially trained dog aboard to boost morale and help the crew go the distance.

The three-year-old female Yellow Labrador named Sage was on board as the Gerald R. Ford left Norfolk in May 2023 for duty that was expected to involve being near the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

"I made the decision to deploy with Sage. That was not directed by admirals or anyone else," Burgess said. "I wanted to bring her on in an effort to help Sailors with the resiliency piece, which has always been a challenge. And you know it's probably always been a challenge, but we were coming off a couple years with Covid, and we were having longer deployments."

While military dogs have seen duty on land and aboard ship doing security duties, Sage was specially trained to bring peace of mind and comfort, both sorely needed by Sailors

battling loneliness and stress, close confines and combat tempo. Sage was provided by arrangement with a Virginia Beach non-profit called Mutts With A Mission, founded to provide disability and support dogs for veterans and first responder organizations.

“And I saw her as a free opportunity, honestly, to help out with Sailors. And so, Sage is unique in many ways, she’s the first of the program,” Burgess said.

“Ideally, the way the program is conceived, between the ages of two and three these handpicked dogs will go through training. They will get immersion, they’ll find out or figure out how to climb up and down ladders. They will do all that part of it, the logistical side of it. Then they come to the crew, at the age of three, and they’ll stay until they’re 10 years old.”

Sage’s job is to help Sailors handle immense emotional stress and the Ford’s first journey would prove to be an unanticipated stressor when war broke out in Israel on Oct. 7. A five-month tour turned into an eight-month endurance session of homecomings delayed, including three about-faces from homeward bound back to a Middle East aflame from Syria to Gaza and on down to the Red Sea. That’s also where the second demonstration dog, a male named Demo, served aboard USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CG 69), which replaced Ford on deployment.

“We had an extraordinarily low number of admissions for suicidal ideations compared to those folks that previously deployed, so clearly Sage obviously contributed to that success,” Burgess said.



Sage, a three-year-old female yellow Labrador Retriever, is deployed aboard the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), May 3, as part of the Expanded Operational Stress Control Canine pilot program. *U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jackson Adkins*

Fans on Ford and Beyond

While the new ship, new captain, new crew and new dog were all getting their sea legs, the sweet and gentle creature quickly developed a fan base.

“We learned early on too there was a new thing on ‘Green Sheet,’ which has the daily schedule for the crew to look at ... someone came up with the idea to put a paw print by where the events [were] and where Sage would participate. And we immediately saw attendance double, triple, quadruple,” Burgess said.

“Come for the dog, stay for the talk,” was the goal of shipboard presentations where Sage held court for groups of sailors, as COMNAVAIRLANT [Commander, Naval Air Force Atlantic] PAO Dawn Stankus told Navy Times. The playful pup was center stage as the Navy’s mental health teams aboard ship described the options available for seeking help.

Coral Gables, Florida, psychiatrist Arthur Bregman has internationally recognized expertise treating ADHD, depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse disorder, and many other issues for a wide range of ages.

“It’s the 20- to 40-year-olds, the Millennials, who are our new Greatest Generation,” Bregman said of the current generation of military service members with that perfect description of the age range on a naval vessel from the youngest Sailors to the senior officers.

“There’s a powerful health benefit,” Bregman said of Sage’s healing skills during the week in January that the Ford and Carrier Air Wing 8 returned home. “It decreases depression, reduces anxiety, lowers stress ... it’s just so good to have a dog involved, to be attuned to our behavior and emotions.”

Bregman’s insights come from his fame, from Europe to America in print and broadcast news stories, on his pinpointing of the

global peacetime crisis known now as Cave Syndrome. From Covid then to the aircraft carrier now, people have felt the effect of being trapped emotionally and physically in close confines for so long and then have trouble adjusting to the outside world.

Whether before groups or one-on-one, Sage was a valued emotional resource, Burgess said.

“She made an appreciable difference on people. There were many examples of Sailors going to her handler and saying, ‘Hey, could I just spend five minutes with Sage?’ Again, we don’t know if that saved somebody from going down and seeking admission for mental health reasons or otherwise, but she was a calming presence. and every time Sailors got to spend time with her, it was meaningful.”

Sage’s popularity soon grew to include not only the Sailors and Marines of the attached air wing but also every ship in the Ford Strike Group. This led to Sage being outfitted with proper PPE [‘pup protective equipment’] and heading via helo to the guided missile cruiser USS Normandy [CG 60], goggles and booties and all of that, she did great. They fenced off part of their flight deck for her and the crew to come to her,” Burgess said with a proud smile.

Burgess asked the cruiser’s captain why he wanted Sage to hold court on the flight deck rather than inside the ship. “It was a logistics problem. The entire crew wanted to get in there ... the entire crew wanted to see her.”

With both ship and crew back home and preparing for the next deployment, Sage remains on board many days of the week continuing her permanent assignment to the ship. And as her captain is certain, she is very much a member of the crew.

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