

# (GUARD) MAN'S BEST FRIEND

HOW A SOLDIER'S MISSION  
IN THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS  
SAVED A RESIDENT OF A  
DIFFERENT BREED

BY STAFF WRITER Tatyana White-Jenkins



**AFTER DEPLOYING TO THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS IN RESPONSE TO HURRICANES IRMA AND MARIA, SPC STEFANIE DEMANINCOR OF THE NEW YORK ARMY NATIONAL GUARD'S 105TH MILITARY POLICE COMPANY RETURNED HOME WITH A FULL HEART AND A FOUR-LEGGED FRIEND.**

While working with the Virgin Islands Police Department in Frederiksted, St. Croix, SPC DeManincor was assigned to assist with patrolling, conducting crowd and traffic control, and enforcing the curfew that was put in place on the island to reduce traffic and safety risks in the weeks following the hurricanes. Next door to the police station, Soldiers transformed an abandoned building into an ad hoc base of operations that would set the stage for a heart-warming encounter.

Upon first entering the building, the Soldiers found a group of stray dogs on the balcony. One dog in particular caught SPC DeManincor's eye – a fearless and friendly six-month-old pit bull mix that SPC DeManincor would later name Ava.

"[Ava] and a bunch of other dogs were just hanging out on this balcony," SPC DeManincor said. "Me and a bunch of the members of my squad would feed her because she was the only one who actually wanted to come over [to us]. She wasn't scared of us like the other [dogs]."

Every dog has its day, and the day Ava locked eyes with SPC DeManincor marked the day both their lives changed for the better.

Ava's welcoming spirit stood out to SPC DeManincor and instantly won her over. The young pit bull's charm quickly garnered her popularity among the other Soldiers. "Soldiers in



New York Army National Guard SPC Stefanie DeManincor with newly adopted Ava.

Photo courtesy ASPCA and SPC Stefanie DeManincor

other squads would see her as well, and everyone was talking about this friendly dog that was coming up and letting them pet her," said SPC DeManincor. "Typically, when dogs are in survival mode, they may show signs of aggression. But I didn't see that with [Ava] at all. She let us pick her up and pet her. She was just so sweet. I knew she was friendly and her temperament was awesome. That's what really drew me to her and I got a little attached."

During their deployment, SPC DeManincor and the rest of the 105th were housed on a cruise ship docked in Frederiksted. Other units and organizations also stayed on the ship, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The ASPCA had sent a response team to St. Croix to assist animals that had been abandoned or strayed as a result of the hurricanes. Hundreds of animals were left starving and homeless after their owners were forced to evacuate before Hurricane Irma hit the island. In the weeks following the hurricanes, the ASPCA and other similar animal welfare organizations worked desperately trying to provide food, shelter and medical care to dogs, cats, horses and goats that were left behind.



LEFT: A fellow Soldier of the 105th Military Police Company gives Ava a drink of water near the building used by the unit as a base of operations while in St. Croix.

RIGHT: Ava enjoys the snow as she plays in her new backyard in Rochester, N.Y.

Photos courtesy SPC Stefanie DeManincor

When SPC DeManincor heard about a Soldier from an Infantry group who adopted a dog from the island, she instantly thought about Ava.

“I thought ‘well, if they could do it, maybe I could too,’” SPC DeManincor explained. “I asked around to anyone who would listen to find out how [to go about the adoption]. I got in touch with the ASPCA team on the boat and they were super helpful.”

SPC DeManincor spoke with Joel Lopez, the ASPCA director of planning and field operations, and the process to officially make Ava her own began. Members of the ASPCA went to survey the building where Soldiers first saw Ava and the other dogs. They were able to locate the owner of the building, who surrendered rights to all the animals on the property. Ava was found wandering on a nearby street and was taken to the ASPCA’s emergency shelter. SPC DeManincor later met the pet workers at the shelter and was overjoyed to see Ava again.

After spotting Ava, SPC DeManincor said she excitedly told ASPCA members, “Yep, that’s the dog I want.”

Once Ava received her vaccinations and health certificate, SPC DeManincor signed the adoption papers and Ava was on a flight that same day.

“I took her to the airport and Sali Gear, founder of Island Dog Rescue, was flying dogs [off the island]. So I got her on a flight to get to the States,” explained SPC DeManincor.

Island Dog Rescue is a non-profit with the goal of saving animals abandoned in the U.S. Virgin Islands and finding them homes on the mainland. Before Hurricane Irma made landfall in the islands, Island Dog Rescue coordinated with local pet shelters and successfully evacuated over 300 dogs to the safety of Gear’s farm in Virginia. Ava’s flight with Island Dog Rescue brought her to Florida. SPC DeManincor was still deployed in St. Croix, so she had to find a way to get Ava from Florida to her home in New York.

“Out of the goodness of Sali’s heart, she figured out a way to get Ava from Florida to Virginia where she lived,” SPC DeManincor said. “She actually kept Ava for about a week and a half until I was able to get home.”

Gear kept Ava on her farm, then coordinated a private plane to get Ava as close to SPC DeManincor’s home as possible. Ava became quite the frequent flier before finally reuniting with her new owner at her new home in Rochester, New York.

“I think Ava was on four to five separate flights from Florida all the way up to Rochester,” noted SPC DeManincor. “It took her a while, but honestly it was so worth it. I was running out of options since there weren’t a lot of commercial flights flying out of St. Croix. I didn’t know any [group] other than Sali and her organization that could help get my dog to where she is now. What they do is incredible.”

Once her travel arrangements were established, the next big decision concerning Ava was selecting her name. SPC DeManincor’s fellow Soldiers had their own ideas for what the charismatic pup should be called, but Ava’s owner knew best.

“Other guys in my squad were naming her ridiculous things like Cinnamon and Patches. Some wanted to name her Ricky and I said ‘no, that is not happening,’” SPC DeManincor laughed. “Ava just seemed to fit her so well, and was better than Ricky.”

Ava is now thriving in Rochester, despite a drastic change from her native climate.

“She’s adjusted to the snow really well,” SPC DeManincor said. “She actually loves it. I have a huge backyard and she’ll just run and play. I was so surprised. She’s doing great and she loves her life now.”

Reflecting back, SPC DeManincor said that deploying to the U.S. Virgin Islands to help the people there was an incredible experience.

“It was really humbling,” explained SPC DeManincor. “You don’t really understand the type of devastation that happens until you are actually there and you are in it. We really felt like we made an impact down there, not just with me adopting a dog, but in working with the local police department in general.”

While, according to SPC DeManincor, the journey to bring Ava home still at times seems unbelievable, she said she feels lucky that her mission in St. Croix ended with a fetching souvenir.

“She’s just a great dog,” SPC DeManincor said. “There’s a different appreciation rescue dogs seem to have. She seems so happy, and it seems like she appreciates what we did. Sometimes I still can’t believe it. I look at pictures of her on the island and I’m like, ‘Wow, what a difference.’ It’s an experience I will never forget.” ●