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Firefighters gave a final, farewell salute to the last 9/11 rescue dog

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Before Bretagne the golden retriever died, she received one final salute - for her hard work, for her gentle ways, for her service in that devastating place 15 years ago.

Panting at the end of a thick leash, the elderly dog was gently lifted from a truck and placed on the veterinary office sidewalk outside. Then she hobbled slowly toward the building, passing more than a dozen men and women dressed in blue, their hands raised to their foreheads in a somber salute.

After it was done, they carried away her limp body, draped in an American flag, reported the Houston Chronicle.

It was the end of the 16-year-old dog's lifetime of service, and in some ways, the closing of a devastating chapter in the nation's history. Bretagne was the oldest known surviving dog that scoured Ground Zero in 2001 during search and rescue efforts after the Twin Towers fell in New York City, said the Cy-Fair Volunteer Fire Department, where the golden retriever was a member of the crew. Old age led Bretagne's longtime handler, Denise Corliss, to make the difficult decision to euthanize the dog Monday.

"Some may say that the most a dog could be is a pet," the fire department statement said. "However, to the over 400 members of the Cy-Fair Volunteer Fire Department, Bretagne was a civil servant, a hero and is family. We will remember her fondly, and continue serving the community with her as inspiration."

Bretagne earned national fame last year when Bark Box, the New York-based dog treat delivery service, invited the golden retriever and Corliss to the big city for a canine-themed 16th birthday bash. The dog was flown in an airplane and picked up by a limousine. She was wined and dined at 1 Hotel Central Park as their first "pup of honor" and thrown a birthday party fit for humans. She even wore a party hat.

"She represents the working dogs, in the disaster box in particular," Corliss said in a video documenting their trip. "And you know, they are all deserving for a day like today."

Corliss and Bretagne became a team in 1999, when the electrical engineer brought the 8-week-old puppy home in hopes that she, as a civilian, could train with the dog to be a disaster relief duo, she told NBC's Today in 2014.

"I was so excited about doing this, but I didn't have the appreciation of how life-changing it would be," Corliss said. "It took 20 to 30 hours a week easily to stay on top of training. This is what I did when I wasn't at work."



D FAHLESON/AP

This Sept. 11, 2002, photo shows, K9 Search Specialist Denise Corliss and her search dog Bretagne in Houston, Texas. Bretagne the last known living 9/11 search dog has died in a Houston suburb at age 16.

In 2000, she learned they'd qualified to be official members of Texas Task Force 1, an urban search and rescue team.

That same year, Bretagne became a full member of the Cy-Fair Volunteer Fire Department crew and the founding canine member of its K9 Search and Rescue Team, the department said. A certified FEMA disaster search dog, the golden retriever responded to multiple natural disasters across the country, including Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, and after the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, Bretagne traveled to New York City with Corliss to look for survivors amidst the rubble.

At that time, she was just 2 years old. It was the duo's first deployment, Corliss said in the Bark Box video.

"We were there to try to find survivors, and when our task force arrived in Ground Zero, I just couldn't believe the magnitude of it. And then I looked down to her and she seemed stoked and ready to board," Corliss said. "Towards the end of our mission, it changed from a search mission to a recovery mission. I was just so grateful to have a K9 partner that helped me get through it."

The duo worked for almost two weeks, NBC's "Today" reported, searching for 12-hour shifts but never finding any survivors. On Bretagne's first mission, Corliss told the TV station, she slipped and fell from a wet metal beam but quickly recovered.

As they continued searching for survivors, and then remains, Bretagne became like a therapy job, not to just Corliss, but other volunteers. Once, Bretagne ignored Corliss's commands to sit and stay at Ground Zero, she told "Today," instead trotting up to a somber firefighter sitting on the ground.

"I was surprised that she wasn't listening to me, but she really wasn't - it was like she was flipping me the paw," Corliss told the show. "She went right to that firefighter and laid down next to him and put her head on his lap."

In her final years, Bretagne "volunteered" at a local elementary school, listening to first graders learn to read and comforting children with autism. Corliss took the dog to meet former president George H.W. Bush last year, the Associated Press reported, and was nominated for the Hero Dog Award from the American Humane Association in 2014.

"She still has this attitude of putting her paw up and saying, 'Put me in, coach!'" Corliss said about the dog in 2014. "She absolutely loves it."

Corliss and Bretagne returned to the 9/11 memorial that same year. They walked the memorial, side by side. When the duo returned to New York City a year later for Bretagne's birthday party, Corliss said the trip was slightly more upbeat.

Their hotel bed was draped with a banner that said "Dog's Best Day." Room service brought the aging Bretagne a gourmet burger. They rode in a taxi to Times Square, and Corliss teared up when they discovered a sign there wishing the golden retriever a happy birthday.

At a dog park in the city, a woman on the board of the "Friends of Hudson River Park" presented Bretagne with what she called the "doggie equivalent of the key to the city," a small silver bone-shaped charm from Tiffany's.

The National September 11 Memorial and Museum even dedicated a cobblestone in the name of Bretagne.

"I've had several canine partners," Corliss said in the Bark Box video. "But Bretagne is that one dog for me."