

DOGS AND MEN

GUIDES FOR BLINDED SOLDIERS

(By Captain Ian Fraser)

Since the War, when thousands of soldiers of all nations lost their sight, a new need for the dog has arisen among men pursuing honourable activity in a hundred ways.

The practical German was the first to develop the dog-guide, and there are State training schools for blinded soldiers and their dogs and a weekly Government allowance for the animals' upkeep . . .

The dog chosen for this responsible work is the German shepherd dog—a dog similar to the type we call the Alsatian. He is not the show dog, bred for his good looks and with a small head, leaving no room for brains: he has a wide, fine head, an amiable temperament, and a sturdy body. He needs all these characteristics for his anxious work. He (or it may be she) walks by his master's side as would a sighted friend. He wears a harness carrying a semi-rigid lead, just long enough conveniently to reach the blind man's hand and substantial enough to enable the sightless walker to feel every movement of his guide. The dog walks by his side, but a few inches ahead of him and has been taught to allow for the width of the person he is guiding. He will

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Ian Fraser, Lord Fraser of Lonsdale (1897-1974) was blinded at the battle of The Somme. He was unceasingly active in public life as an LCC member, MP, and governor of the BBC, but will always be remembered for his work with the blind at St Dunstan's and the British Legion. Guide Dogs for the Blind Association was founded in 1933.

not pass an obstacle or cut a corner so closely as to bump his master. The pair, dog and man, must work together. The commanding intelligence is the man's who determines his movements according to his own knowledge of the route he wishes to take, his own sense of obstacle, and the indications which his dog gives him of what is to be seen.

Not only will the animal guide him round obstacles, but he is taught to "check" immediately a step down or up from the

pavement to the road or *vice versa*, or a flight of stairs or even a ladder across the pavement, or an over-hanging signboard is approached. When the dog "checks" the man feels his movement through the leather lead and "checks" also, listening, feeling a little with his foot or with his stick, or in some other way seeking to ascertain what obstacle or danger has caused the dog's hesitation . . .

The blinded soldier is instructed during his training that he and he alone is to care for, talk to and caress his dog. It is a point of honour with a man's family and friends not to intervene and so an extraordinary friendship grows up between man and dog. It is the basis of all that has to be done in common. The dogs start their training between 18 months and two years old, and this takes three or four months. They learn first to obey. To come when they are called, to retrieve, to turn, to the right or to the left on the word of command, to stop, to go forward, and to proceed faster or slower. Then training begins on the road, when the sighted instructor takes the dog out and teaches him how to behave in traffic, round obstacles and so on. At the end of the three or four months period the dog is ready for training with the blind man, and the two then work together for three weeks at the end of which time dog and man may go home . . .