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COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN

BY ELLEN PILIGIAN **UPDATED** 11/12/2015 AT 4:01 PM ET • ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED 11/11/2015 AT 1:51 PM ET

Christine Weber Bouldin will never forget the first time she saw Felix, a special needs cat she rescued from Afghanistan in 2008. She was at Bagram Airfield, her final deployment of her eight years of service in the US Army.



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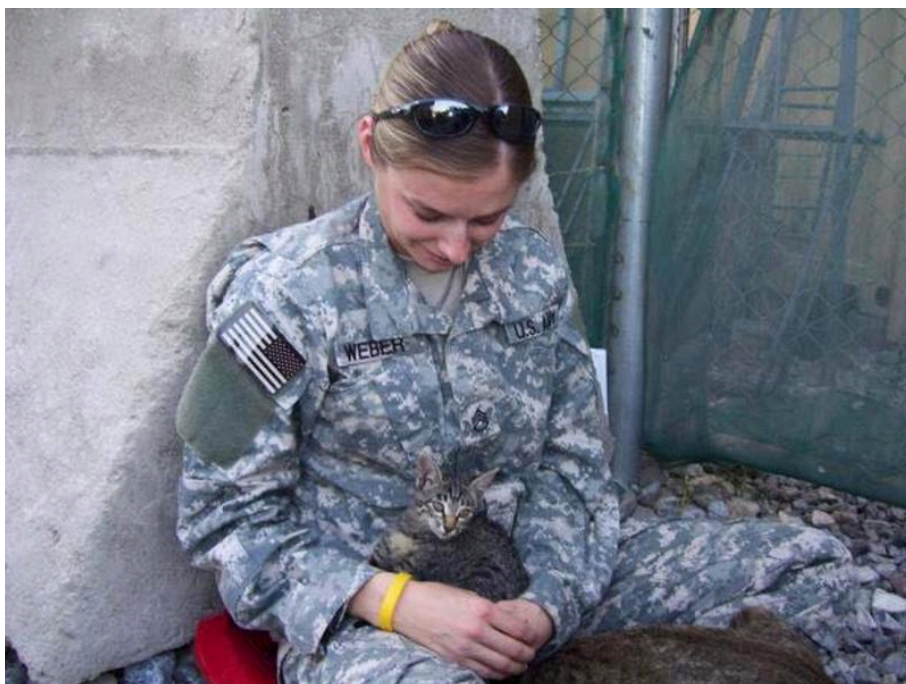
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The lifelong animal lover — Bouldin even smuggled in some hermit crabs in the pocket of her cargo pants to keep her company — was told there was a cat and her kitten wandering around the base. She immediately went searching for the pair, having heard people were throwing rocks at them.

Bouldin spotted them: A lean, striped tabby with a month-old kitten who had big ears and difficulty walking.

“I'd never seen a cat like that,” Bouldin, 34, who thought she appeared to have something like Parkinson's disease tells PEOPLE. “I felt so sorry for her. She couldn't stand up and would flip over.”

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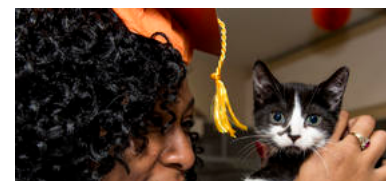
COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN

Felix hissed at Bouldin at first but as the mother showed trust, even rubbing against Bouldin's legs, Felix warmed up to her. Bouldin grabbed some aseptic milk and packages of tuna from the chow hall, the beginning of a daily routine. Soon Bouldin was holding the skittish kitten steady as she ate and walked to help her from flopping over.

One day Bouldin, a Signals Intelligence analyst, decided to do some research, Googled “cat Parkinson's” and started watching dozens of videos.

Felix had Cerebellar Hypoplasia (CH), a non-progressive but permanent condition that occurs in kittens exposed to a virus before they are born. It affects their motor skills but leaves them otherwise as healthy as a normal cat.

Bouldin started wondering how to get both animals home. Then, that month, the mother, whom Bouldin had named Sandy, disappeared. “After her mom took off, I worried someone would catch Felix or hurt her.”



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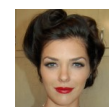
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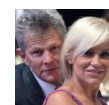
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Because pets weren't allowed, Bouldin and a friend tried different ways to contain Felix to keep her safe, including piling sand bags up to confine her. But Felix was too clever, recalls Bouldin with a laugh. "Even though she could not walk, she could climb up that sand bag wall and then fall out on the other side."

Finally a friend constructed a little house for Felix where Bouldin would visit twice daily often with treats and toys the soldier's mother shipped from North Carolina.

Felix became dependent on her. "She was so sweet and I could tell she appreciated me taking care of her when her mom left," says Bouldin. "She makes me cry sometimes still because she looks at me like I'm her mom."



COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN

Bouldin was feeling desperate with no way to get Felix home. Even the canine unit dismissed her when she asked if Felix could ride back to the States with them.

Then Bouldin's luck changed. The canine veterinarian, who gave Felix some shots at Bouldin's request, told her about an American woman nearby who did animal rescue work in Kabul.

"It was the first time I started seeing actual hope," says the normally cheery Bouldin. She contacted the woman, Pam Constable, who traveled for her job and could watch over Felix in Kabul and eventually take her back with her to the U.S.

That fall, Bouldin paid a driver \$300 to pick Felix up at the back gate of the base to ferry Felix to Constable's pet shelter in Kabul.

"It was a little over an hour to get to our base from Kabul, and you're always in



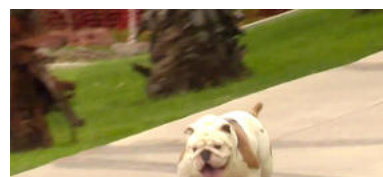
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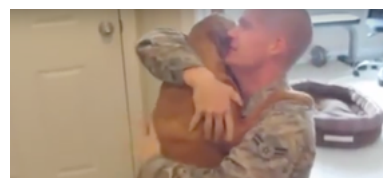


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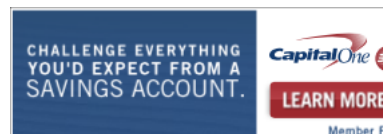
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danger of IEDs ... I was worried about her. I didn't know if I'd see her again — if they wouldn't allow me to bring her home. I'm pretty sure I cried,” Bouldin remembers.

Felix did make it home, but it was after quite a journey.

“She was one of the most special animals we had,” says Constable, who helped care for many of the dogs and cats at the rescue house.

At first, Constable like Bouldin was alarmed by Felix. She quickly realized Felix had a neurological disability and decided to keep the kitty close when she traveled, rather than leave her with the other rescues.

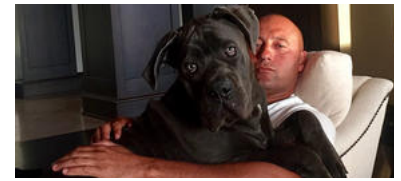
For roughly six months, Constable got to know Felix in ways Bouldin didn't get a chance to, like waking up to Felix in the middle of the night. “I'd hear her like a little crab crawling around on my bed, and even though she was [disabled] she would pounce on me. She was a riot, a very sweet little kitty, very affectionate.”

“She would do this amazing thing when she wanted to use the litter box. She would put her front paws in and then flip herself over like an acrobat,” she continues. “She found ways to do what she needed to do. It's very inspiring to see an animal like that just fight to live because so many people underestimate them.”

Felix did require some patience, too. “She had a lot of special needs, making a big mess all the time, eating and using the litter box. But I never minded any of it because I was so taken with her and her intrepid spirit.”



COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN



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Meanwhile, Bouldin, who'd stayed in touch with Constable, returned home in February 2009. She had to wait until the spring for Constable's return to Virginia, paying close to \$2,000 in shipping costs to fly Felix home. "I didn't even care what I had to pay," says Bouldin, "I would have probably paid more."

She drove five hours from North Carolina to get her cat. Felix was a bit skittish at first, Bouldin says, "But she warmed up to me fairly fast."

As for Constable, "I knew I was going to miss her ... But I was very glad she made it through all of that back to the person who had rescued her."

Today, Felix lives in Lakewood, Colorado, with Bouldin and her husband, William, and Gus, a male cat Bouldin took in shortly after Felix's return. She calls them "two peas in a pod."



COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN

Bouldin, who studies marketing at University of Colorado Denver, credits Felix for helping her through a lot over the years, including a painful breakup after the Army, different homes, jobs and a marriage. "She is still a very much an important member of the family."

In fact, while looking for their first home, Bouldin kept wondering how Felix would adjust. "Where will her litter box go? Will Felix hurt herself anywhere? She can go upstairs but cannot get down," says Bouldin, who uses baby gates to block any stairs.

If anything, Bouldin says, "I think Felix has prepared us for children in a way, like making sure everything is safe for her and that she is happy and cleaning up

after her.”

Not that anyone could take Felix's place. Bouldin, who considers Felix “an angel sent to me from God,” says she can always count on the cat to lift her spirits. “She greets me, and her little tail vibrates because she’s so excited.”



COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN

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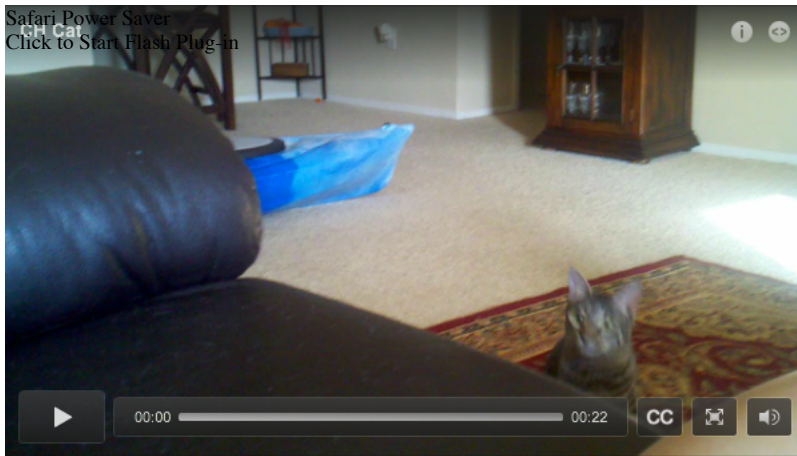
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Cerebellar hypoplasia (CH) occurs when a cat's brain does not develop properly before it is born. The usual cause is feline panleukopenia virus (FPV) which the mother is exposed to during pregnancy. If the virus infects her kittens, it inhibits the growth of the cerebellum, which controls smooth movements.

An underdeveloped cerebellum causes a variety of CH symptoms that are easy to detect, according to Dr. Heidi Barnes Heller, DVM, clinical assistant professor of Neurology/Neurosurgery at the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Wisconsin, Madison.



CH cats often appear to be marching or over-reaching because they can't gauge how high to lift their legs. They typically have a tremor when they focus on a task such as eating. Their head may bob or appear to peck at their food. They are often referred to as “wobbly cats.” CH is not infectious or contagious because the virus is no longer active once they're born.

“The virus does its deal and that's it,” says Dr. Curtis Dewey, DVM, associate professor, Section of Neurology/Neurosurgery at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. “It won't progress. If it's progressing, then it's probably something else.”

An MRI is the best way to diagnose CH but it's usually not necessary since symptoms are often easy to spot. An MRI can rule out other diseases that may mimic CH.

Although CH doesn't “improve” the cats usually learn to compensate for their disability and may appear to get better. Sometimes as kittens begin to walk they may at first seem worse. Some may not be able to walk and require more care. Otherwise, CH cats are like any normal cat.

COURTESY OF CHRISTINE BOULDIN

“Prognosis is excellent for a good quality of life,” says Dr. Evelyn M. Galban, DVM, Section of Neurology and Neurosurgery Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital University of Pennsylvania.

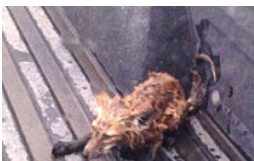
Owners do need to take special care of CH cats, such as providing large, low-sided litter boxes and determining if dry or canned food is easiest for them to eat. Galban also advises keeping them away from stairs and balconies where they could fall.

CH cats should also stay indoors, safe from predators and other dangers. And never declaw a CH cat. They need their claws to stabilize themselves and climb.

For CH cat info online, two groups that also have active Facebook pages include [Cerebellar Hypoplasia Cats & Kittens](#) and the [CH Kitty Club](#).

An excellent source for general cat health is the [Cornell Feline Health Center](#).

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