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### **Casualties by Design**

The Vietnam War has long been viewed as a humanitarian tragedy for the people of Vietnam and the American soldiers who fought there. Attempting not to detract from that tragedy, there is another story of love, companionship, heroism, and heartbreak that must be told. The "Military Working Dogs" (MWD 701st MP Bn) were the dogs trained by the United States government for use in the armed services in Vietnam. After becoming partners in combat with American soldiers, most of these dogs suffered the agony of being left behind to an unknown fate or being destroyed.

Before I continue with this story, I must tell you that I was a young man who was eligible for the draft during the latter portion of the Vietnam War, turning eighteen in 1969. Therefore I watched the daily carnage that was broadcast to the American public via television and newspaper. There is no memory of any mention of the use of dogs to facilitate the war effort, certainly no mention of the use of dogs in combat. Also, something that brought this subject to my attention was someone I know who served as a veterinarian in Vietnam. He has relayed some rather painful stories to me about having to euthanize perfectly healthy dogs. This is still a disturbing memory for him. Finally, I must say that when politicians scheme, with little or no provocation, to spread their social/political agenda through the use of military force, it is the everyday man, woman, and child (and even the beasts of the land) who pay the price.

For most of the twentieth century the United States had been slow to recognize the usefulness of dogs in the military. During World War I the Germans had deployed

approximately 30,000 dogs, the French and British another 20,000 (Watson 103). America had trained no dogs for the war. "The famous dog Rin Tin Tin was a German dog found in a trench after an attack" (Cramer).

World War II would find the United States not prepared for war, and having almost no military dogs was one area that needed improvement. The dogs that the U.S. military did have were those trained for service as sled dogs, primarily for use in Alaska and Greenland. This time, however, the military would take up the cause in earnest. The Army's Quartermaster Corps decided to use dogs to guard supply depots located near waterways, especially along the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, as German submarines had been sighted along the Atlantic seaboard of the United States. The U.S. government put out the call to its citizens and there were more than 40,000 dogs donated to the cause. Dogs had to meet certain height and weight requirements, and could be no more than five years old. Less than 10,000 met these requirements. The rest were sent back to their owners. After working with a wide variety of these donated dogs, the new Canine Corps was coined K-9 by an unknown person in the Quartermaster Corps. The types of breeds that were used were "German shepherds, Doberman pinschers, Belgian sheepdogs, collies, Siberian huskies, malamutes, and Eskimo dogs" (Watson 108).

The Second World War is where the United States learned the value of the war dog. (Note here that the proper name given by the military is the Military Working Dog, but many refer to these dogs as war dogs, MWD, or just working dogs.) War dogs were quickly put to use in the Pacific theater, with dramatic results. The dogs were typically used off leash and worked ahead of and behind troop movements. The dogs were paired with a "handler" who was a soldier that had gone through the human side of the same training that the dog had. As the troops moved through the dense jungle brush of the Pacific islands, the dogs "could alert [their handlers to the

presence of] danger 1000 yards away (Watson). A strong bond naturally developed between the handlers and their dogs during the war. They spent every hour of every day together.

When World War II ended in 1945, the military usefulness of the war dog ended also. Something had to be done with those dogs, and the Marine Corps had just the man for the job. Marine Captain William W. Putney was a veterinary surgeon and war dog platoon leader during the Battle of Guam. According to an article by Cyril J. O'Brian:

It took Putney a year-with staff, of course-to detrain the war dogs at Camp Lejeune. Of the 559 war dogs on the rolls as the war ended, only four were absolutely incorrigible. All of the others went back to their firesides with untold experiences their own protected civilian masters never could have imagined. Some, of course, were permitted to remain with their handlers with whom they shared a war (2).

It is important to note that there is no notation about any consideration other than retraining the dogs for return to civilian life. These were dogs that had in some cases become vicious killers and yet, were able to be retrained to the point that it was felt it would be safe to send them back to their former life style.

Korea was the next place that U.S. war dogs would see action. From 1951 through 1952 war dogs were used on night patrols. The dogs created such a fear among the Chinese and North Koreans that they blared through loudspeakers at night: *Yankee! Take your dog and go home!* Still, by the time the last dog came home from Korea, nuclear war was the big threat. The last training center, at Fort Carson, Colo., was shut down in 1957, and the Army abandoned war dogs (Cramer).

The United States would see almost eight years go by before the use of war dogs would be considered for combat duty again. The war in Vietnam began as an advisory role 1950 when

President Harry S. Truman [sent] a 35 man military group to aid the French fighting to maintain their colonial power in Vietnam. There would be little escalation of the war as far as U.S. involvement until after President John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960. Kennedy increased the number of advisors to 3000, while the Viet Cong from North Vietnam increased their effort to control South Vietnam. This escalation would continue until 1965, when the U.S. would officially enter the war with ground troops. War dogs would be put to use for the U.S. military in the same year (Newton).

War dogs did not suddenly appear just because the military wanted them. Training was needed for both dogs and their handlers before any operations could take place. This training took place at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. There were four types of war dogs that were given basic training at Lackland:

Sentry Dogs. Worked on a short leash and were taught to give warning by growling, alerting or barking. The sentry dog teams mostly were members of Military Police units and patrolled the perimeters of the Army's bases and installations in Vietnam.

Scout Dogs. In Vietnam, Scout Dog Platoons were part of the Infantry. Scout Dogs, trained to work in silence, provided early warning of snipers, ambushes, mines and booby traps, and other enemy forces in the immediate area. Scout Dog Teams were normally assigned the point position (first in line) when on patrol.

Tracker Dogs. Combat Tracker dogs, usually Labrador Retrievers, were used to track and re-establish contact with the enemy after it had been broken and the enemy had fled.

Mine & Tunnel Dogs. Were used to detect mines, booby traps and the tunnels used by the enemy as cover and sanctuary (Vietnam Dog Handler Association).

The combat tracker dogs were also used to locate lost or missing friendly personnel (Merritt).

Additional training was needed for scout dogs due to the nature of their work. It was imperative that the dog be obedient and alert because when under actual working conditions the dog had to give only a silent warning, since barking would alert the enemy. Scout dogs would continue on from Lackland to Fort Benning, Georgia, for the second phase of their training. This instruction was more advanced and specialized, while at the same time all previously learned commands had to be reinforced. Completion of the course at Fort Benning was the last step stateside for both the dogs and their handlers. The next stop was Bien Hoa, South Vietnam (Rubenstein).

When the handlers reach Bien Hoa they receive another dog, which will be theirs for the rest of their Vietnam tour. Many seem to think a dog will not listen to the commands of a new handler, but this is not the case with competent scout dogs. The dogs and their handlers would then spend two weeks training and getting to know each other before being assigned to a platoon (Rubenstein). The next twelve to fourteen months both dog and man would spend their entire lives together. That was the amount of time that U.S. soldiers typically spent on a tour of duty in Vietnam (Bruckner). They became so close it is easy to see why veteran and former dog handler Tom Mitchell said,

When we were sick, they would comfort us, and when we were injured, they protected us. They didn't care how much money we had or what color our skin was. Heck, they didn't even care if we were good soldiers. They loved us unconditionally. And we loved them. Still do (Cramer).

The closeness between handler and dog was part of what made each union so special. Every dog had its own special way of alerting his handler. Whether the alert was to the presence of the enemy, booby traps, mine fields, weapon caches, or some other danger, the handler had to quickly recognize the signal his dog was sending.

Sergeant Gordon Moen of Meskegon, Mich., a handler with the scout dog platoon, admits when his dog "*Has So*" gives an alert, the dog's hair will stand up on its back. Another dog called *Major* has the strange habit of crossing his ears on an alert, while *Eric* puts on an acrobatic act by walking on his hind legs. "Everytime the dog becomes alert, the area is checked out for mines, personnel and boobytraps," said Sergeant Grimes. "These dogs are especially good at detecting ambushes," he added (Rubenstein).

Scout dogs were able to perform feats that saved countless soldiers' lives. For instance, they were in many cases, able to detect the enemy hiding underwater. If the enemy [was] using a reed to breathe through, the canine [would] have little trouble picking up the scent (Rubenstein).

As the war with Vietnam progressed, mine dogs and tunnel dogs would be put into use in 1969 (Newton). While each type of dog was different in its use and the type of handling required, dog and handler inevitably became close.

In 1970 the anti-war protesters in the United States had become vocal enough to make a difference in decision making in Washington. The war in Vietnam was increasingly unpopular and politicians knew it was time to get out. In 1970, President Nixon started the withdrawal of

troops. This would be a slow process that would not completely end until 1975 with the emergency evacuation of the American embassy in South Vietnam (Newton).

Even with the beginning of the withdrawal of the first troops, however, a new problem presented itself for the U.S. war dogs. As the number of troops decreased, the number of dogs needed would decrease also. The problem for the U.S. military was what to do with all of these war dogs. The numbers were quite staggering too. No one knows for sure the number of dogs involved, but estimates range from three (Newton) to four thousand (Mayellö).

The South Vietnamese army was known as the AVRN, and 200 American war dogs [were] turned over to [the] AVRN, who already had more dogs than it could use or handle or wanted. Some of the dog handlers were afraid that this might happen and wanted to take the dogs back with them, but were told that the dogs might be diseased. The U.S. government told the dog handlers that the World Health Organization had passed a ruling saying that no animals were to come out of Vietnam. Years later, the [WHO] denied it ever said any such thing (Newton). Army veterinarians euthanized many; many more were simply abandoned, and in all likelihood wound up as dinner for starving Vietnamese villagers (Mayellö). Some ex-handlers and other military men believe that, after preventing an estimated 10,000 casualties, many of the dogs were essentially abandoned (Watson).

On September 20, 1970, responding to stories in the press of the US dogs being left behind in Vietnam, Rep. John E. Moss (D. California) filed a bill (HR-19421), that would have established retraining or retirement in humane shelters for canine veterans. The bill died in committee (Newton).

The only war dogs that were rescued from an unknown fate in Vietnam were 120 that were part of the first wave of withdrawal of troops, and one other war dog named Nemo. Nemo had been returned to the U.S. as an injured war hero in 1966. Nemo and his handler, Airman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Robert Thorneburg, were patrolling the airbase at Tan Son Nhut at night when they encountered the enemy. Almost immediately both the dog and his handler were shot. Thorneburg took a bullet to the shoulder, while Nemo was shot in the right eye with the bullet exiting through his mouth. Though seriously wounded, Nemo did not give up, and charged ferociously into the enemy who was shooting. Although severely wounded, Nemo crawled to his master and covered him with his body. Even after help arrived Nemo would not allow anyone to touch Thorneburg. Finally separated, both were taken back to the base for medical attention. Both Thorneburg and Nemo eventually recovered from their wounds. Nemo had lost his right eye in the battle and was retired as a war dog. He was used in the Air Force's recruitment drive for war dog candidates and toured the U.S., even making some television appearances. Nemo would not return to civilian life, but rather spent the remainder of his life at the Department of Defense Dog Center in Lackland, Texas (Newton).

Many of the Vietnam dog-handlers have banded together to memorialize the war dogs that served with them. The largest group is the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association (VDHA). They would like to build a national memorial to the four-legged veterans of the Vietnam war, but so far have been unsuccessful in their effort. VDHA has been successful in erecting two memorials locally, one at March Field, Riverside, CA, and the other at Fort Benning, GA.

At the March Field location, a dedication ceremony was held in February of 2000. The Vietnam Dog Handlers Association monument is an 18-foot statue of a German shepherd and

his handler (í ) Beneath the dog and the soldier are these words: They Protected Us on the Field  
of Battle / They Watch Over our Eternal Rest / We are Gratefulö (Watson).

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