

Remembering U-Tapao ...

History of the 635th Security Police K-9 Section U-Tapao RTNA, Sattahip, Thailand 1968-1976

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On March 21, 1968, Sergeants Fred Cobb and Joe Balboa departed Kelly AFB, San Antonio, Texas, aboard an Air Force C-141. Thirteen K-9 handlers and twenty dogs for assignment and staffing of the K-9 section (Military Working Dog) accompanied them on the assignment to U-Tapao RTNA, Thailand. Fifteen (15) dogs were each assigned a handler. The payload included five (5) additional female canines (Tina 9M69, Storie 9M70, Ara 9M72 and Kelly 9M73), including one pregnant female (Lita 9M71) were also aboard the flight.

The flight to Thailand was not without incident. The first leg of the trip found our group landing at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska for a refueling stop and then onto Yokota, Japan for fuel and repairs. The group departed the plane to exercise the dogs, followed by a “short trip to the Airman’s Club.” Story has it that the plane wasn’t the only thing that got its “tank full!” Finally, some seventy-two hours later, March 24, 1968, our troops and dogs arrived at their new home – U-Tapao RTNA, Sattahip, Thailand. According to A1C Dave Broeker’s diary entry on March 25th “Today we processed in 15 troops who had arrived at 2300 hours on March 24th.”

Upon arrival in Thailand, the men and dogs received a royal welcome! Sgt. Cobb remembers, "The base really welcomed us to Thailand. We literally got the red carpet treatment". When the two C-141’s arrived (one plane carried dogs and handlers and they were accompanied by Col. Cady, K-9 Director and TSgt. Tom Swartz on the second plane). Once on the ground, TSgt. Ben Cox and A1C Dave Broeker met the troops and dogs. TSgt Benjamin Cox, had come from Tan Son Nhut, RVN to assist in the construction of the kennels and A1C Broeker had arrived in June of 1967. A1C Broeker had previously been assigned as a handler at Westover AFB, Massachusetts and was transferred to U-Tapao only to find out that the facilities were not yet ready as an operative K-9 Section. Dave stated that his first nine months at U-Tapao “were the most anxious he ever served while in the USAF.” On March 26th the day following In-Processing for the first wave, he officially joined the K-9 group and two weeks later, on April 6th, he was assigned one of the unassigned canines, Ara (9M72) and became a “working handler”.

As of March 24th, 1968, the original members of the 635th Security Police K-9 Section (called the First Wave), included the following: Sergeants Fred Cobb (King 0A07) and, Joe Balboa (King 66X0) and A1C’s Dave Broeker (Ara 9M72), Peter Christiano (Kriss 72X5), Jim Hannon (Bullet 1M95), Larry Hickman (Diablo M543), Harold Horn (Smokey X430), George Julian (Tarzan X810), Jay Lantz (Mac 7X34), Bill Lark (Puppy II X821), Ron Lewis (Buster 3X71), Carl Newcombe (Ted M201), Garry Parkhurst (Rex 675X), Tom Stewart (Ringo 5X46), Bob Stillabower (Zorro X193) and Fred Woodard (Nav M828). The Kennel Master was TSgt Tom Swartz and the Assistance Kennel Master was TSgt Ben Cox. A month or so later, on May 5th, 1968, Jim Dorris and Bob Recenes joined the first wave to help out at the kennels and it wasn’t long until they were assigned dogs.

Life for the unit had now begun and there was plenty of work that needed to be done to get the unit operational. Sgt Carl Newcombe remembers "The kennels were nothing more than wooden covers with our dogs on stake out chains." The kennels were "the shape of a tent with a sand box in front." He also remembers "riding on the first bulldozer with the Red Horse Engineers to clear the jungle for our post to be assigned."

On April 25th at 1100 hours, Lita (9M71) gave birth to five (5) puppies at U-Tapao. She delivered three (3) males and two (2) females. One of the puppies died on May 14th. The birth and the death of one of the pups had become part of our history. Our Air Force "pups" were now home! Their history had begun and the 635th Security Police K-9 Section was now operational and "in country."

The four (4) puppies were to be presented to the Prime Minister of Thailand (Thanom Kittikachorn) as official gifts from the U. S. Air Force to the Thai Government. This gesture by our government was to ensure that the Thai government would begin their breed with the "elite of the military working dogs" provided by the United States Air Force.

In July of 1968 the United States Air Force presented the Prime Minister of Thailand, Thanom Kittikachorn, five female canines and four German shepherd puppies, as a gift of appreciation from the United States of America. The females arrived at U-Tapao RTNA, Thailand on March 24, 1968 with our original troops. The four puppies were born on April 25, 1968, as Sentry Dog "Lita" (9M71) delivered a litter of five (three males and two females) "pups" at U-Tapao RTNA, 635th Security Police Squadron, K-9 Section.

The female canines were to be used for breeding at the soon to be established Royal Thai Palace Guard kennels at Karot RTAB, Bangkok, Thailand. At the ceremony held at U-Tapao, the turn over was completed as Thai military officials accepted the gift of our canine warriors, including the Thai born "pups", officially became property of the Thai Government.

TSgt. Tom Swartz (Kennel Master), Lt. Colonel John Cady (USAF Chief of Veterinary Medicine – Thailand), A1C Peter Christiano, A1C Robert Stillabower, A1C Carl Newcombe, A1C Harold Horn and Joe Balboa represented the U. S. A. F. at the "official" turn over of the five adult dogs (Tina 9M69, Storie 9M70, Lita 9M71, Ara 9M72 and Kelly 9M73) and four puppies. Seven military officials represented the Thai Government.

In July, the second wave of personnel arrived. A third wave arrived on September 22nd aboard three C-141's from Texas. The second and third waves along with the inclusion of our OJT handlers consisted of the following identified personnel: SSgt Jack Williams and Rufus Turnham, Sergeants Dennis Reichmuth, Rick Armondo, Dave Capps (Tiki 6X69), Jim McIlwain (Thunder X912), Welden Ivey (Jerry X561), Nicholas Romano, Ron Saville (Shep 69M1), Ken Smerecki (Shannon M868) and A1C's Bob Ebersole (Girl), Gilbert Cymbalist (Gretchen 63M5), Al DeWolfe (Shannon 37M4), Jim McAulay, Chuck Gehringer (Brutus X321), Dwight Knowles (Pistol 540M), Jim Center (Shep 69M1), Ricky Jennings (Duke 62M7), John O'Donnell (King 41M3), Bob Lange (Lucky 9M18), Wayne Luker (Mac 3M72), Greig Parker (Ed 53M4), Dale Burton (Mister 63M8), Van Rine (Nero), Gary Parker, Jim Pottieger (Major 4X08), and Wayne Wood (Tarzan X810). Several OJT handlers also joined the section between the third and fourth waves. As the new teams arrived, Sgt Cobb and Sgt Balboa commanded the Late and Midnight Flights.

Greig Parker remembers "The first main gate of U-Tapao that I recall seeing was what can best be described as three outhouse style guard shacks with rope strung between them, and just down the road to the East was the "Happy Home", a local bistro.

In mid-summer SSgt Richard Matlock relieved TSgt Cox as Assistant Kennel Master/Training NCO and in December TSgt Rosendo Perez relieved TSgt Swartz as the second Kennel Master of U-Tapao.

In late 1968 the teams moved into their permanent kennels on the southwest portion of the base. The 635th SPS K-9 Section now had a real home for our dogs and training facility. Once all was settled on the home front, it was time to relax. The "puppy pushers" of U-Tapao knew how to relax! A1C Bob Lange remembers fondly, "New Land belonged to the dog men. Every bar had a dog's head painted on the door. If there was no dog head – you didn't go in." These men worked hard and they played even harder!

Throughout this time at U-Tapao, life went on day-to-day like it did everywhere else in the world. Day-to-day life though is not without incident, especially in a place like Thailand. TSgt Jack Caldwell, a Tiger Flight Supervisor (68-69) recounted an incident that occurred during his tour.

"Thai Navy 'Seals' from Sattahip attempted to make an unannounced and unauthorized penetration of U-Tapao through the perimeter covered by the K-9 troops. Needless to say, all of the Seals were captured, some were bit by the dogs and manhandled, and all were visibly impressed. The Seals (15-20) were delivered to a Thai Navy NCO at the West Gate where they were asked for 100 push-ups, stripped of their weapons, gear, boots, and clothing (except for shorts), forced back into the boondocks and ordered to be at their base for reveille at 0500; it was then about 0100. I did not hear of the outcome but understand such practice penetrations were thereafter prohibited."

It has been reported that the Thai Base Commander "really stuck it to them." They were escorted off the perimeter in one of our security deuce and a halves. It should be noted that the "first alert" of the intruders was sounded by Sergeants Cobb, Burton and Hannon - who also affected the capture - Way to go K9!

TSgt. Caldwell also remembered:

"Part of my nightly chore was to check the K-9 post along the South/West perimeter situated behind the bomb storage area, running between the highway near the Moonlight Inn and the Gulf of Thailand. This was jungle with thick vegetative growth and plenty of snakes, etc. It should be noted here that the K-9 post was a common site for panthers, cobras, kraits, and many other things that crawled, walked, and stalked in the tropical environment. Sgt. Joe Balboa was the Tiger Flight K-9 supervisor. We rode together during the nightly post check and at any other time I was required in that area. The K-9 troops were only faces in the dark as we made our way around the isolated posts reserved for K-9 troops. Time did not permit me to get to know them but I had a healthy respect for them as never during that year did I find any one of them neglecting their duties".

A1C Greig Parker related an increase in military activity. "During Tet '69 I was the K-9 post at the end of the runway and I remember how ominous the planes seemed and how small I felt, standing alone with Ed, looking up as flight after flight of B-52s took off. The planes gulping for air and wobbling their massive wings in the extraordinary turbulence created by each proceeding

flight; and wondering where the hell could you possibly run to if one of the planes lost its lift and crashed ... no where!"

In 1969-1970, "K-SATs" (K-9 Security Alert Teams manned by K-9 personnel) were established to respond to alert by the K-9 Post. We were our own first response teams, backed up by Tiger Flight to maintain the integrity of the security of the seventeen (17) miles of the base perimeter.

During the fall of 1970, our handlers also took on a new responsibility as our personnel started the training of the first Thai Nationals as canine handlers. Sergeants' Randy Mellon, Bill Cummings, Chuck Meaders, Jerry Snyder, Bernie Turnbloom, and Bill Spott were instrumental in this training program. To say the least, this was a task that is remembered by all involved. The first step in this extremely difficult undertaking was to learn the Thai language. They were then challenged to translate the language into a "working format" that the Thai Guards could understand.

The Thais had just as much difficulty with this task. First, because of language barriers, sometimes "sit" just didn't come out "sit" when the Thais commanded it. Our handlers, along with the Thais, laughed, cursed, cried and applied a whole bunch of first aid for "minor dog bites." Second, was the ability of the Thai handlers to control the animals? As you might imagine, the canines sometimes out weighed the Thai handlers! The Thais really started to wonder what they had gotten into but we were sure that they were receiving the best training in the world.

On January 10, 1972, U-Tapao was the recipient of one of a total of six Sapper Attacks on Thailand bases. The Sappers were detected by K9 team Al Stoltenburg and Mac 3M27 (K9-3) attempting to penetrate the defenses from Sukumvit Highway along the northern end of the base. Al sounded the alarm after taking cover from handgun fire. One of the Sappers was killed in the bomb dump when attempting to exit the base through Gary Daggett and King 271X (K9-4) post. The Sappers threw over 100 satchel charges, but only three actually detonated. The three B-52s damaged by the charges all flew missions within 24 hours of the attack.

1972-73 saw the influx of more Patrol Dog and Detector Dog handlers from stateside bases and handlers rotating out of Vietnam to supplement the shortage of personnel at U-Tapao. Sergeants' Mitchell Tarazon, Harold Hartford, and Scott Burpee, along with several others, arrived from bases in Korea. Our role was beginning to change as the Thai Guards occupied more Sentry Dog positions to augment our section strength. Some of our personnel concentrated on Controlled Substance Detection as our handlers were retrained in Okinawa and state side bases and returned to work the base and surrounding areas controlled by the armed forces.

In 1973 SSgt Vernon Anderson remembers, "Watching the "18 Day Bombing War. All day long, B-52's took off and B-52's landed" as our military might was thrust upon the Vietnamese targets.

1974 found the Air Force beginning the transition of property to the Thai Air Force at U-Tapao. 2nd Lieutenants Uthai Munyanon and Sommai Theampracha arrived at U-Tapao from Takhli Air Force Base to take possession of twelve (12) dogs to be transferred for service and patrol. The canines were assigned to Thai Air Force personnel for "retaining." According to Group Captain Suchin Wannaroj, all commands were taught in English. The training continued for three months before the teams were put into service. Dogs that have been identified are: Duck, Frank, Fred, Duke, Fritz, Mike, Ford and Troy.

According to the Group Captain, all of the canines were of "very good discipline and were very active. They were really excellent on guard on base." The RTAF Security Battalion had many

chances to demonstrate the performance of the K-9 to RTAF personnel and others. All of the K-9 served in the RTAF for about 1-2 years. Some of the dogs developed problems with their legs, and others with their hearing and sight. They were all retired at about the age of 13-15 years of age.

In 1974–75 there were only about 6 U.S.A.F. Sentry/Patrol Dog handlers assigned to U-Tapao. The Thai Guards now controlled the perimeter and the majority of the kennels. Sgt. Gary Adams remembers in 1975, “All the Thai Guards on base went on strike, including the K-9 handlers. So the Americans divided up the dogs (around 60 dogs I think) and maintained them until the strike was over (about 2 months).” During this time, when other bases in Thailand were closing, MSgt Crutchfield (his second tour), and other handlers went to Naknom Phanom RTAFB and picked through their dogs for replacements. They brought back approximately twenty (20) dogs for replacements at U-Tapao. K-9 Hasso, Hitler, and Sam have been identified as three of those canines.

1975-76 found the base down sizing, soon to be slated for closure. Sgt. Larry “Joe” Haynie was one of the last remaining U.S.A.F. handlers assigned to the section. He departed the station “mid month of June 1976” and the base closed on June 20, 1976. According to the USAF Museum, “The last (United States) flag to fly over U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Air Field, Thailand” was lowered at retreat ceremony on March 19, 1976. U-Tapao RTNA had been the only installation in SEA supporting both B-52 bomber and KC-135 tanker operations. Beginning April 18, 1966, bomber and tanker missions had been conducted on a round the clock operation.

Major F. T. Satalowich, DVM, MSPH was assigned to the 11th USAF Hospital at U-Tapao during that time period. The directive from CINCPACAF, Hickam AFB HI/SGV, was to euthanize all MWD that were Tropical Canine Panleucopenia (TCP) suspect or past the age of peak performance. This decision was made at the Air Force Military Working Dog Center in Texas, without veterinary input from the U-Tapao. It is understood that resource management decisions are based on many factors, such as value of item, expected usefulness of item and cost of removing equipment or items from the Focus Theater. In this instance the AFMWDC had another consequence to consider, the introduction or spread of a foreign animal disease by that resource. That disease was Tropical Canine Panleucopenia, which we knew very little about at that time. The agent causing the disease was not known and it was only presumed to be spread by a tick. It was Dr. Satalowich’s opinion that the MWD at U-Tapao were TCP negative. It was the opinion of CINCPACAF that all dogs in SEA were exposed and infected; to them the terms were synonymous. This was epidemiological incorrect. Serological data from 6 Nov 75, 6 Feb 76 and 6 April 76 proved that point. The spread of TCP depended on presence of the organism and a suitable vector. For some unknown reason, the U-Tapao MWD were historically negative all of the time that MWD from other Thailand military installations had suspect and positive dogs. Dr. Satalowich’s stressed this epidemiological principle and pleaded that as other bases in Thailand closed, that suspect MWD not be send to U-Tapao. At that time the withdrawal of troops from Thailand was a national priority. His pleas went unanswered. Although CINCPACAF finally accepted Dr. Satalowich’s epidemiological data, CINCPACAF informed him that the decision had already been made at the AFMWDC to proceed with the triage and euthanasia. In a report issued in May of 1977 Dr. Satalowich’s assumptions were proven correct. Military decisions are made on information available and often on short time schedule and sometime by biased well-meaning individuals. One only need recall the Gen. Billy Mitchell’s air power tale. Whether some of the MWD at U-Tapao could have been spared if a more informed conservative epidemiological approach had been taken will never be known. A command decision had been made.

This was a gruesome task for all U-Tapao personnel in the MWD unit and the veterinary section. Some seventy (70) MWD were euthanized and necropsies performed. Only 3-4 dog necropsies a day could be humanely and satisfactorily performed, with numerous tissue samples from each animal collected and submitted to the Armed Forces of Pathology at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC for analysis. Thus the task continued for days and weeks. Some of the handlers presented their dogs for the procedure; some could not emotionally handle the process. Thus the dogs would be mildly sedated to assist other handlers to manage them and to ease the stress for all involved. TSgt Jack Walters, a veterinary technician, assisted Dr. Satalowich in this necropsy process, preparing laboratory specimens and the collecting of all body parts so that each MWD was individually buried with dignity and military honors.

F. T Satalowich, Lt. Colonel (Retired) summed up the events this way, "All of the men of the 635th Security Police K-9 Section, along with the MWD, provided a top security mission for the B-52 Squadron and the support groups. Each man formed a team with his dog; they bonded in a special way as only men in battle can do. Their lives and those they protected depended on it. They came away from that mission with 50 % mortality, when they left their dogs behind. Our task was hard, but theirs was heart breaking."

Sgt Larry Haynie recalled that two of our canine "heroes" were fortunate enough to make it out of Thailand, as "Tarzan and Bang were transferred to Yakota, Japan to continue their service in the Corp". Both canines were detector dogs and they lived on to continue the heritage of U-Tapao."

As we reflect on our tours at U-Tapao, we all ate, slept, checked our mail, cried and consoled each other and occasionally had a drink, now and then, to "take the edge off" of our individual situations. Between 1968-1976 we witnessed the crash of a KC-135 into a local village at the end of the runway, the bomb dump blowing up, and the crashes of B-52's during taking off and returning from bombing missions, along with other day-to-day military occurrences. We witnessed fatal plane crashes and helped each other through personal tragedies. We had the horrible task of holding canines in our arms as they were put down. No one "really" complained about the hot days of training, the rains and cold of the monsoons, the smells and occasional "unidentified solids and liquids" that we found on our uniforms and finally the charms of our dog teams – Oh, that special aroma! Lastly, we were always glad to see our friends "rotate" – we knew that we were next and soon we would be home with our loved ones once again.

Who would have thought some thirty plus years later, that we would be rejoining our flight mates? It is great that we so lovingly recall the bonding that we had with Brutus, Thor, Pistol, King, Little Joe, Bullet, Navigator, and Shep, along with the rest of the true heroes of our service to our country. I still subscribe to the theory that the "brains run up the leash."

Some people think that they were "just dogs" and that we were "just dog handlers." We all know the true reality of our time at U-Tapao. The companionship that we shared with this "military property" will never be replaced. When we left our dogs, we also left a little piece of each of us in U-Tapao, Thailand.

We will always be remembering U-Tapao...