



# Rex's Dental Appointment

Late one steamy Cam Ranh Bay afternoon, I returned to my hooch to find my roommate, Dr. Victor E. Anspaugh "bummed" over a disagreement he had had with his supervisor. Vic was the junior "Vet" assigned to the 483rd USAF Hospital back in '71. His boss intended to "put down" one of the Sentry Dogs that had recently lost 13 pounds and would no longer bite during attack training. The Major's diagnosis was Kidney failure but Vic insisted that the dog was suffering from gastritis secondary to severe dental problems. Vic asked me if I'd look at "Old Rex". In true "MASH" fashion (which is how everything seemed to work at the 483rd Hospital) I, of course, said yes.

As it turned out, I was the Dental Officer on Duty scheduled for the next week. I would be the only one who would be in the Dental Clinic that Sunday. Further enabling our "mission" for Rex was the fact that our Commanding Officer, used to catch the "Milk Run" to Saigon on Friday afternoons and didn't return until late on Mondays. So, it seemed, his clinic was ours for the weekend.

On Sunday morning, Vic transported his gas machine (to sedate Rex) from the Vet Clinic. I prepared the dental clinic for my four legged patient by "borrowing" a Gurney from the E.R. situated next door to the Dental Clinic. Rex and Sgt Patrick Higgins (his wary handler showed up around mid-morning.



Rex was "gassed" by Vic to the point of unconsciousness where I could safely work on his "action" end. Poor old Rex had fractured off both lower canines (undoubtedly on his chain linked kennel), and had exposed the pulps of both of them. A tooth is a tooth. A dentist is trained to repair teeth, I knew that I could help Rex. So after some discussion with Vic, I started. Access to each tooth was different from what I was used to. But, the anatomy of the teeth was the same.



Rex was under general anesthesia for over 3 hours that day. Even though we had locked both clinic doors to assure "security" of this covert operation, everyone and their grandmother seemed to show up at the clinic for a peek and, of course, pictures. There was no keeping this quiet. In those days, Veterinary Dentistry was unheard of and the only way that I knew how to treat that K-9 soldier was the same way that I treated his 2-legged counterparts. I did 2 root canal fillings on the fractured canines and prepared them both for crowns.



Photo Above: "Doc" Engelmeier, Vic & Dr Art Kobal, (another dentist)

In addition, he had a very large cavity in his lower right tricuspid. It could not be repaired, so I extracted that tooth. It remains the toughest extraction I've ever done in my career. At this point, Rex's anesthesia got a little light and he yawned. Needless to say, I cleared the deck by at least 4 feet.



Finally, I made my impressions of the lower teeth. We were through until it was time to fit the crowns.



Rex was then smuggled out of the clinic and returned to the kennels. Where he slept off the effects of the anesthesia. Over the next week, I waxed-up the crowns with help from a dog anatomy book I had found in the Hospital Library. My real dilemma came when it was time to cast the crowns. It never crossed my mind to use anything other than gold. After all, that was how I had been trained. Our clinic laboratory technician refused to have anything to do with this case but did agree to issue me enough gold (over 2 Troy ounces!!) if I gave him properly completed paperwork. Without hesitation, I took a form 513 and filled it in. I used Rex's actual service number, gave him the rank of Airman First Class, the full name of Rex Harrison, and boldly signed it. I completed the casting and polishing of the crowns at night. Two weeks after the first appointment, Rex was again covertly knocked out for his crowns to be cemented in place.



After a little manual adjustment, he was good to go. Vic told me that Rex soon gained back his 13 lost pounds, went back into training, and returned to duty.



I thought that was that. It was a good story and I had the pictures to prove it. However, I was one naive young Captain to think that I could make 2 ounces of gold disappear from a military clinic unnoticed. Approximately 2 weeks after Rex had returned to duty, I was summoned to Col Jones' office. Was he mad !!! He chewed me up one wall then down another. That day, the Colonel added a new word to my vocabulary...." Leavenworth". The only thing that saved me was the fact that Rex had been saved. Because Rex had returned to duty, there would be no Leavenworth but because of my unconventional acquisition methods, there also would not be any commendation for saving such a valuable Air Force resource.

Because of Rex, I discovered and made friends with the boys on K-9 Hill. The handlers befriended me and let me come over there for pictures and such. I was even allowed to see what the dogs teeth could do.



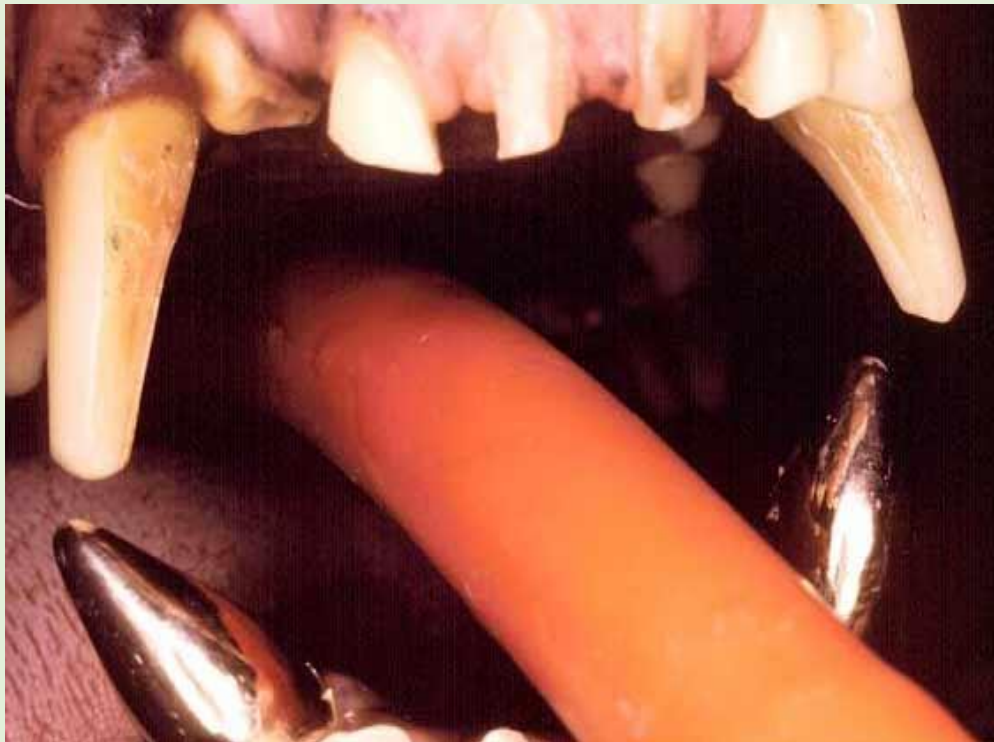
Above my picture of me with that big training sleeve being attacked by a patrol dog.

I also have a great picture of the NCOIC with the best Sheppard I've ever seen. He was a patrol dog and was trained to do all kinds of tricks. Though they were the brave troops who guarded us at night, we day timers never saw them. They had to get their sleep during the day.

But my best K-9 hill story involves those giant lizards. Now, you must realize that as an inner city boy from Pittsburgh, I really, really, really don't like reptiles. The handlers bet me that they had red, white and blue lizards up on K-9 hill. And, further, that some of them were 4 feet long. Well, there was no way I was going to believe that. But I was wrong.

It seems that these giant lizards had a taste for the dog food and could be lured out of the thick brush with it. After I was dumb enough to bet some beer, one of the handlers threw some food over the fence. Before you knew it, a half a dozen "small" lizards darted out of the brush. They were only 2 footers but were enough to scare me.

Shortly after a second cup of food went over the fence, we heard what sounded like a large marine crashing through the brush. And that's when I saw the biggest #@\*% lizard I have ever seen. I still get flashbacks. But even more remarkable they had a red head, a blue tail and a lot of white spots on their bodies. Needless to say, I bought the beer. I have some pictures of the lizards ( but through the chain link fence-there was no way I was going on the other side to photograph them.) They were difficult to photograph because they were remarkably fast.....which only made them even scarier. Rex really looked cool with his gold teeth! The handlers promised to send me one of them eventually after Old Rex went on to meet his Maker. I left Cam Ranh Bay in the late Spring of '71.



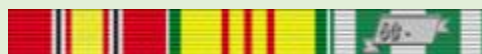
I never got my gold tooth though, probably because of the shameful way our government disposed of our courageous 4 legged soldiers at the end of the war. I salute all of you former handlers, especially the boys from Cam Ranh Bay's K-9 Hill. And, I share your grief over the loss of Rex and all his brothers at the war's end.

Sincerely,

"Doc"

Robert L Engelmeier, Col USAF-Ret

All Photos Courtesy of Robert "Doc" Engelmeier



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