



A FUR-FOOTED FORCE

LOVE, ATTENTION AND CARE BREED ELITE
MILITARY WORKING DOGS

by Master Sgt. Tammy Cournoyer
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Only 5 weeks old, Lance, Lindy and Leo are in the earliest stages of what could become a 12-year working relationship with the Department of Defense. As three of 12 Belgian Malinois puppies born over Labor Day weekend in 2003 to 8-year-old Mieka, they'll spend their next month in a closely monitored whelping kennel on Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, before moving to foster homes to familiarize them with the less-furry, two-footed Homosapiens.



Jackson was born at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, atop sheets bearing the Wilford Hall Medical Center monogram. He'll probably never meet his father. Dear ol' dad was on temporary duty in Southwest Asia when he was born, and, although he's back in town, he doesn't visit.

Mom is still around, but Jackson will probably never see her again, because several weeks after his birth, he and his six siblings were placed in different foster homes. But don't feel sorry for Jackson. He has a bright future and a full-time job awaiting him.

Even though Jackson's humble beginnings sound like something out of a Dickens novel, it's all part of

a plan. Jackson is a military working dog in training and was bred and born as part of the Department of Defense Puppy Program at Lackland.

This "puppy program" provides the military with dogs specifically for patrol and explosive detection. The goal is to augment the supply of dogs still being purchased from vendors with additional top-quality dogs.

Lacy Smith, the puppy program manager, believes that breeding puppies in-house will produce an exceptional dog.

"We're hoping to form a more elite dog which will work longer and have less medical problems," Smith

said. "Our dogs will work longer because they enter training at a younger age and ship to the field at a younger age."

The breeding program is also filling an increased need for dogs that has steadfastly picked up, especially in the last year and a half.

"Since 9-11 the demand for dogs has just gone through the roof," Smith said. "Just this year we needed 300-plus dogs. If we rely solely on vendors, we're going to run short. Hopefully, this breeding program can fill that gap for us."

The program has produced nearly 110 Belgian Malinois puppies since its start in 1999. Of those,

about 47 percent have gone on to successful military careers.

"The military has very stringent criteria for dogs, and it's really difficult to make a military working dog," said Smith, whose background is in psychology with an emphasis in animal behavior.

Making a high-quality military working dog begins before birth by selecting the right parents.

"Parents are handpicked for their excellence in genetics — medically and behaviorally," Smith explained. "We want a dog which has good eyes, excellent hips, good elbows and comes from a really nice working pedigree going back generations. We

also test for nerves, detection behavior and patrol ability.”

Once the match is made, the dogs are allowed to breed naturally, if possible, or through artificial insemination. In Jackson’s case, his mother, Urelia, was artificially inseminated by Aaslan.

Although Urelia is untrained and was purchased solely for breeding because of her bloodlines, Aaslan was an “A” litter puppy, from one of the first litters born at Lackland in March 1999. His physical attributes and work ethic have made him a stud of choice.

“You can’t ask for more dog than Aaslan,” Smith said.

After birth, the puppies spend quality time with their mother learning how to just be dogs. At 6 weeks old, humans start playing and socializing with them.

While in the whelping kennel, the puppies are exposed to various objects and sounds to prepare them for facing the world in which they’ll be working.

“At a very early age, we’ll present them with new objects every day,” said Stewart Hilliard, a civilian psychologist and behavioral specialist. “For example, we’ll

take a wheelbarrow in, let them smell it, climb on it and get to know it. Then the next day we may take in a basketball and let them explore that. The end goal is to develop extremely confident and bold adult dogs.”

Taped noise also plays in the background to get the puppies used to outside sounds they’ll hear such as loud machines, vacuum cleaners and music, Hilliard said.

“More than anything else, it’s about socialization and habituation to the environment,” he said.

“We start testing at 8 weeks,” Smith explained. “What we’re looking for is dogs which have a drive to possess objects, whether it be a plastic bottle, stuffed toy, a jingle ball or rolled up towels. Puppies which, when you throw [an object], want to chase it and come back to you, and they keep their entire mouth on that object.”

Smith looks for dogs which show a lot of possession and boldness traits, and are not nervous or afraid of sounds.

At 9 weeks old, the puppies go to foster families to grow up some. The main duty of a foster family is to love the puppy in their charge.

“Foster families are expected to spend time with the dog, raise it much like a family pet with the exception that our puppy needs to be exposed environmentally to a lot of different areas,” Smith said. “So where a family might leave their pet at home when they go out, we want our puppy to go with them.”

Compensating for a mother who’s easily distracted from “nursing duty” by barking at nearby sounds, Janet Mertz uses an index finger and a syringe to deliver 5 to 10 milliliters of puppy formula three times a day into the stomach of each 2-week-old offspring. “Once I insert the tube, I just pinch the paw and listen for a squeal,” she said. “No sound means the tube is in their lungs and you need to try again.”



That includes taking the puppies to sporting events, factories, warehouses or anywhere there are strange noises, slick floors and dark spaces. Basically, Hilliard said, the goal is to expose the puppies to as much as possible, plus show them a good time.

Each puppy has an ID card and vest identifying it as a military working dog in training.

Smith is very particular about who becomes a foster family to “her puppies.” Her uncanny ability to name — and often recognize — every puppy born, is testament to her dedication to their care.

“I can be very picky about my puppies,” Smith said. “I’m not going to put a dog in a home that I think I might have to pull it out of later because of a problem.”

She’s only pulled a puppy twice; each time making her more particular with the next applicant.

Extensive instructions are mailed out with each application. After a home visit, interview and Smith’s blessing, the foster family must sign a contract.

“They sign a contract stating that they’ll care for the dogs the way I ask them to, feed the dog what I provide — no table scraps — and will be held responsible if I find them negligent or if someone hurts my dog,” Smith explained.

If everything is going on track, puppies stay with the families until they’re 7 months old. If they’re



Using a dimly lit basement, two plastic garbage can lids, several tables and a cushioned chair, Lacy Smith (top) conducts a test to evaluate the environmental stability of 4-month-old Belgian Malinois India. “Military working dogs must be able to enter new environments — whether slick, rough, wet, bright or dark while exhibiting confidence and assertiveness,” said Smith, who manages Lackland’s puppy program. Five-month-old Belgian Malinois Ian (above) wrestles with 13-year-old Destin Matthews in a temporary foster home. Destin’s father, Tech. Sgt. John Matthews (right), a military working dog trainer with the 37th Security Forces Squadron at Lackland, shared a five-month deployment to the Middle East with Ian’s father, Rico, in 2002. “I hated to give up Rico after becoming a trainer,” he said. “Taking in Ian was the next best thing. He’s just like his father: tenacious and very vocal. You do need to have patience though — he’s eaten three pairs of my wife’s shoes.”

meeting their potential, then they return to Lackland for pre-training.

“For some dogs, if we see they have potential and they need a little more time before entering pre-training, we might leave them with families for up to 9 months old,” Smith said.

All military working dogs are trained for dual purposes — patrol and detection. If a puppy has the skills and desire to be a military working dog, the signs will appear in the first year, especially during pre-training.

“Patrol dogs need to want to protect their handlers and themselves,” Smith explained. “We want to make

sure that if somebody is really serious about attacking the handler, our puppy is going to withstand the threat of someone coming directly at him, head-first, screaming and shouting, so we do a lot of that during pre-training to make sure they stand their ground.”

Smith said there’s a heavy emphasis on detection now, especially explosives. A puppy with strong sniffer-dog potential is one who strives for a reward.

“All dogs have an intense sense of smell, and every dog likes to sniff,” Smith said. “The trick is getting them to use it as you need it. Every dog will sniff the ground, but can we get this dog who has enough drive for the ball to focus on what we’re

What’s in a name?

Most people have a hard time coming up with a name for one new family pet, so imagine how difficult it can be coming up with names for a litter of puppies. That’s why the staff of the Department of Defense Puppy Program begins well in advance of a pending delivery.

The staff would think of cool names, like any pet owner would, and then pick the best ones.



Traditionally, the litters are named alphabetically and start with “A” litter. Each puppy wears a collar with his or her name for easy identification.

Thanks to ultrasound, the staff has a good idea how many names they need, but they’ve learned to have plenty of names available just in case. For example, Lacy Smith, the program’s manager, was overseeing the birth of “F” litter which included 14 puppies at first count. A second count revealed 15. Fortunately, it was “F” litter, and the last edition was appropriately named Fifteen.

Beginning with the birth of “J” litter, all puppies have been named after deceased war veterans as a way of honoring those who have served. The litter includes Jackson, Jasper, Jaycee, Jordan, June, Joy and Jody. Both first and last names are used, but not together — Jordan is a last name, June is a first name.

The staff finds veterans’ names from different Internet sites.

One breeding female is notorious for producing small litters, so Kylee is the sole representative of “K” litter.

The latest litter to be born includes Lucy, Lilly, Lola, Lindy, Lizzie, Law, Lance, Leo, Lewis and Lane.

Because the current naming protocol will probably rule out a “Spot” in “S” litter, the staff may be inclined to make an exception should they need to use “Sixteen.”

And because the “Q” and “X” pool of names is probably small, Smith is hoping those will be small litters.

— Master Sgt. Tammy Cournoyer

asking, that is, on command to sniff here, and here, and here? They learn that if they detect a particular odor, they’re going to get their ball if they tell us where it is.

“You can’t ask dogs to work for 45 minutes if they don’t want that ball badly enough, because they aren’t going to do it.”

“We do everything to increase the dog’s desire to chase balls, play with objects and search for objects,” Hilliard said. “We need to develop their drive.”

Although Jackson is showing all the signs of following in his father’s pawsteps, good breeding doesn’t guarantee every puppy will be a top dog.

Hilliard said the puppies have to be born with drive; it can’t be taught. Puppies which don’t make the cut are adopted out to private families or other agencies.

Glock, who made it to the 11-month mark, didn’t meet the high standards of a military working dog and was finally cut. Smith says he did show enough potential for police work and is currently making a north Texas police department very happy.

If a professional career is just not in the cards, Smith said there’s always private life.

“All of our dogs end up having really good lives even if they don’t make the program,” Smith said.

“If they fail out at 7 months, and they don’t want to

do anything, not even chase a ball, they get to go lay on somebody’s carpet for the rest of their lives.”

Currently, most dogs cut from the program are ending up in adoptive homes rather than full-time jobs.

Officials are trying to figure out the fiscal benefits of the program: How much money is saved because these puppies are bred for 12 years of service instead of 10? How much is saved because the pre-trained puppies only need 50 days of intense training instead of 120?

“I think if you look at a very large scale, you’ll see that it saves quite a bit of money,” Smith said.

But for Smith, it’s not just about the money. She wants to see the program grow.

“I want to see military units looking forward to receiving our puppies because they know the puppies are better quality,” she said. “I want the military to support the program. I don’t want to keep telling people that [we produce] a better dog, I want them to see it and believe it for themselves.”

While the rest of his siblings sleep, Jackson gets up close and personal with Mertz who spends eight hours a day, five days a week preparing their food, keeping their yard and kennel clean, providing care and attention, and maintaining a log that chronicles changes in the behavior, eating habits or overall health of each dog. “You get to know them like your own children,” she said. “Jackson is a feisty one. If there’s an argument happening, chances are he’s in the middle of it.”



As our van drove through the gate of the 31st Air Base in Poland, it occurred to me how unremarkable it had become interacting with our former Warsaw Pact foes.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we rushed eastward and marveled how extraordinary it was to set foot in such unlikely places as Poland or

Czechoslovakia.

Over the last decade, however, through numerous cultural and military exchange programs, the newness has gradually worn off, much like how the excitement of a new car transforms from a hot topic of discussion to a mere means of conveyance.

But if the novelty of seeing a MiG-21 parked on a ramp has subsided, the fascination of watching the interaction of airmen from two such distinct cultures remains. A group of U.S. airmen traveled to Poland in July to help that nation prepare for the arrival of 48 F-16 Fighting Falcons it purchased from the United States.

Subject matter experts from each nation paired off to compare notes in areas such as maintenance, fire prevention and weapons storage. While there, I realized there was

something else taking place that had become so commonplace in our Air Force that it's probably taken for granted by most. Air Force enlisted people are entrusted with an enormous amount of responsibility.

When the Air Force put together a team representing the essential ingredients to help make the F-16 mission happen in Poland, it drew

heavily upon the enlisted side of the house. That wasn't so with Poland. The technical ser-

geant or master sergeant didn't swap notes with a fellow enlisted member from the Polish air force. Instead, the counterpart was more likely to be a captain or warrant officer.

It's admirable and impressive that these enlisted people hold such positions of authority compared not only with former Eastern European militaries, but with counterparts in our own sister services.

As a young staff sergeant, I deployed to Hungary in 1995 at the beginning of Operation Joint

Endeavor. I still retain not-so-fond memories of dealing with my Army counterpart. The former artillery officer, a captain, didn't understand or appreciate having to deal one-on-one with a lowly staff sergeant.

He was forced to do so because the Air Force places full confidence in the ability of its enlisted force, even though I experienced several moments of self-doubt during this, my first, real-world deployment. But the opportunity to fail or excel was the single biggest influence on my career. I know countless others have shared and benefited from similar opportunities.

When I meet enlisted members such as flight engineers, computer specialists or medical practitioners with skills and expertise coveted in the civilian world, I sometimes can't help wondering why they aren't on the outside making a lot more money doing the same thing.

But could it ever really be the same on the outside? As a member of the Poland site survey team, Senior Master Sgt. Steve Aguilar was entrusted to help his NATO partner make a huge technologi-

cal leap forward as it transformed from the MiG-21 fighter from the Cold War era to a modern version of the F-16. And when the wheels touched down at home station, he felt a sense of mission accomplishment most people never experience.

"I'm glad to be a part of it," Aguilar said.

We're lucky others feel the same way.

— Master Sgt.
Chuck Roberts

Taking the extraordinary for granted

by Master Sgt. Keith Reed



Senior Master Sgt. Tom Vandervort, an Air National Guardsman from the 162nd Fighter Wing in Tucson, Ariz., reviews support equipment with a Polish chief warrant officer during a trip to Poland. Vandervort spent two weeks helping Polish airmen prepare for the arrival of 48 F-16 Fighting Falcons purchased from the United States.