



## History: Vietnam To Early Sandbox

In the early 1960 's, the US advisers to the the South Vietnamese military recommended that a dog program be established. Sentry dogs would protect military bases and scout dogs would enable the troops to attack the VC. The program was a huge failure. The dogs had major health problems, the majority died from malnutrition. Many of the Vietnamese handlers were Buddhist and did not develop a relationship with their assigned dogs. The cost to feed a dog was more than the cost to feed the handler. Within a few years, several hundred dogs had been turned over to the Vietnamese military. At this time the only Air Force involvement had been supporting (with the US Army ) the Vietnamese Sentry Dog program. The Vietnamese military never had an effective dog program.

The communist military strength and firepower in Vietnam increased. As a result, PACAF began a buildup in the area with the addition of troops and better arms and equipment. **Top Dog** was a program in Vietnam to test Sentry Dog's for base security. It was launched two days after a successful Viet Cong attack (July 1, 1965) on Da Nang AB Air Base. Forty dog teams were deployed to Vietnam for a four month test period. Dog teams were placed on the perimeter in front of machine gun towers/bunkers. The sentry dog teams were tasked with early warning. An alert was followed with a rapid response of reinforcements. The test was successful. Handlers returned to the US and dogs were reassigned to new handlers. The Air Force immediately started to ship dog teams to all the bases in Vietnam and Thailand. That the test was successful would have been no surprise to anyone knowledgeable about the capabilities or military history of dogs. One of the early arguments was that dogs could not handle the tropical heat. The fact that dogs had been used in South-East Asia during WW II was ignored. Some in the military have the ability to remember past programs and recycle them . Of course they often take the credit for the *new* program. That credit is then used that for promotion.

The Viet Cong forces feared all military working dogs. A bounty was placed on the lives of dog teams. Interestingly, the bounty was higher on the dog than the handler. The tattooed ear was proof of the dog's death. A leash was proof of the handler's death.

The buildup of forces in Vietnam created large dog sections at USAF Southeast Asia (SEA) bases. Four hundred sixty seven (467) dogs were eventually assigned to Bien Hoa, Bien Thuy, Cam Ranh Bay AB, Da Nang AB, Nha Trang, Tuy Hoa, Phu Cat AB, Phan Rang AB, Tan Son Nhut AB, and Pleiku AB Air Bases. Within a year of deployment, attacks on several bases had been stopped when the enemy forces were detected by dog teams. Captured Viet Cong told of the fear and respect that they had for the dogs. The Viet Cong had even placed a bounty on the handlers and dogs. The success of sentry dogs was determined by the lack of successful penetration of bases in Vietnam and Thailand. Sentry Dogs were also used by the Army, Navy, and Marines to protect the perimeter of large bases.

The Air Force soon had more dogs in SEA than all the stateside locations. In the late 60s, handlers found themselves facing multiple tours. Many handlers completed a tour, rotated to a stateside base and in a few months had orders returning to Vietnam. Often handlers received an assignment to Vietnam after completing a tour at another overseas base.

By 1965, the increased of American involvement in the Vietnam War caused interest in use of scout dogs and later tracker dogs. Scout dogs had been so effective in WW II and Korea. The scout dog program eventually ended up to consist of twenty two Army platoons and four Marine platoons. Scout dogs would alert if they see, hear, or smell enemy forces or booby traps. They will alert on scent that is airborne or scent that is located on the ground. Tracker dogs will only work on scent that is already on the ground. The dog must be given a starting point such as a foot print. Both dogs are tolerant of other personnel and are never trained to attack.

**Safeside** was a test program where scout dogs were used with infantry weapons and tactics by a specially trained Security Police unit established to determine if AF ground forces could defend their new base, Phu Cat AB, RVN.

Over 4,000 dogs served our military in Southeast Asia. As American participation in the war ended, former bases were turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force. Dogs were treated as excess equipment. In some cases they were turned over to the Vietnamese military. The Vietnamese military never had an effective dog program. It cost more to feed a dog than it did to feed its Vietnamese handler. Plus, the average dog weighed 75 pounds and the average Vietnamese weighed 90 pounds. Rumors spread of military dogs being the main course at banquets. Dog meat is considered a delicacy in the Orient! Some dogs were shipped to the PACAF Dog School at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan. These lucky dogs were transferred to other bases in the Pacific area. Two shipments of dogs were made to the DOD Dog Center at Lackland AFB, Texas.

Dogs were shipped from base to base ahead of the base closures. But, it was soon the simple problem of too many dogs. Some excess dogs were reassigned to other Pacific bases, but most were killed. At the end of the American cavalry era, the Army disposed of its horses by machine-gunning them to death. In

our war, the dogs were also killed; only it was done in a more modern humane manner by a lethal drug overdose.

The last American bases were in Thailand. Handlers from bases in Korea were sent TDY to assist in the base closures. SSgt John Grammer was TDY to Korat Royal Thai Air Base. He reported that the veterinarian euthanized as many as six dogs every day, sometimes more, until they were all destroyed. PACAF combat aircraft flew their last strikes in Cambodia on August 15, 1973 and wrote the final chapter to the long, costly history of active American participation in the Indochina War.

The post-Vietnam era found the command focused on readiness improvement. Studies and concept feasibility tests, which led to a new training curriculum, disclosed that the familiar police dog could perform the required tasks. The patrol dog concept was based on the Police Dog Program of the Washington Metropolitan Police Department, DC. In 1969, the patrol dog concept was adopted and implemented. The dog school at Lackland AFB, Texas, was re-designated the Military Dog Studies Branch, Security Police Academy.

Experience in Vietnam revealed that these additional skills were needed for air base security. However, Sentry dogs detection capabilities were offset by the aggressiveness that the dog showed to friendly forces. A sentry dog was a significant danger to friendly forces, when in close proximity. Thus, a new military working dog was needed. With the different training concepts and capabilities as follows:

1. Detect the presence of a force, alert or observe without enemy force detection
2. Assist security forces by scouting and tracking
3. Work safely in close proximity to friendly forces on strike teams, reconnaissance and ambush patrols without becoming distracted or agitated.
4. Accept a new handler with reduced training time.

### **1st Patrol Dog Class**

The 60s and 70s were a time of great change in the use of military dogs. The use of dogs had expanded to all the services. The Army and Marines had used using scout dogs, tracker dogs and mine and tunnel detector dogs in Vietnam. Air Force schools were training patrol dogs in drug and explosive detection. The services had job or specialties that identified the jobs performed. Army dog trainers had a specific code that identified them for Kennelmaster positions or trainer positions. That enabled an experience base to be developed. The USAF never developed that the job codes to that level. Individuals with major experience could end up at bases that either did not have dogs, or did not have positions for their rank. Due to the Air Force adopting the patrol dog concept, bases that would have never considered sentry dogs were able to use patrol dogs. No longer was dog use limited to guarding nuclear weapons.

Tracker dogs team expertise was acquired after the British Jungle Warfare School, located in Malaysia, agreed to train several American tracker platoons. The tracker dog concept consisted of one dog team, a visual tracker (soldier trained to observe visible signs left by the enemy) and several soldiers to provide armed support. The preferred dogs were Labrador retrievers. After reviewing the results, the Army started a tracker school at Fort Gordon., Georgia. Unfortunately, at the end of the Vietnam conflict, the Army schools were closed and much of the expertise was lost. The lessons and skills learned would be forgotten. Australian forces in Vietnam also used several tracker dog teams very effectively.

### **Combat Tracker Teams *American & Australian Forces***

### **Combat Tracker Teams *Australian Teams***

### **Australian Tracker Dogs *Australian Involvement in Vietnam***

#### **Training Methods for Military Working Dogs**

Patrol and sentry dogs differed in attack training. Sentry dogs were trained to attack anyone that they detected. Patrol dogs would attack only on command unless their handler was physically assaulted. The patrol dog could be released on an intruder and the attack stopped if the command was given. The sentry dog was like a bullet once fired. The dog would not stop until he bit the intruder and was removed by his handler. Handlers always assisted each other by playing the role of the "bad guy." In Vietnam, under the challenging procedures, the use of sentry dogs qualified as deadly force. The VC were in such fear of the dogs that a bounty was placed on them and their handlers. The bounty was higher on the dog than the handler.

Sentry dog leash attack training was accomplished with the decoy wearing a thickly padded suit that covered everything but the face. This unwieldy suit was very hot and uncomfortable. Some dogs would only bite someone wearing the suit. By equipment association, they had realized that the "Bad Guy" was always dressed in the attack suit. A special attack muzzle was developed and worn by the dog to discover if the dog would attack off leash. This was the most dangerous attack training for the handler assuming the role of the intruder. Some dogs would stop en-route to the decoy and attempt to remove the muzzle. That was always a heart stopper, especially if the dog was coming after you.

Patrol dog students were sometimes in awe of the sentry dogs. They did not realize that more patrol dog students received dog bites than sentry dog students. The patrol dog was attack trained using a very small protective sleeve. The sleeve consisted of one or two layers of leather and canvas. An ace bandage was used to provide protection from the pressure from the dog jaws. This sleeve offered minimum protection. The dog's job was to bite the decoy. The decoy's job was to ensure that the dog only bit the sleeve. If the decoy did not perform his part of the training properly, Oh well! He or she was given free medical treatment.

Usually if a sentry dog handler was bitten, it was by his own dog. Some dogs did not respond well to being told that they had to stop attacking. It was common for a Sentry dog handler to choke their dogs to get them to release a bite. Some dogs would attack the handler for attempting to stop them from biting the intruder. As years went by the size and bulk of the wrap has increased and once again a protective suit is being used.

In the early 70s, nearly all new dogs were entered into patrol dog classes. Dogs in sentry dog classes were a mixture of older dogs or dogs that were over-aggressive or under-aggressive. During the early phases of the cold war, Nike missile (anti-aircraft) sites had been built around many major cities. The Army was closing down these missile batteries and turning in excess sentry dogs. Only a student forecasted to ship with a dog was assigned a young new dog. Sentry Dog classes were taught by a few Air Force instructors and Army instructors shipped in from the closed Army dog school at Fort Gordon.

I was fortunate to be one of the AF instructors that taught the Sentry Dog Course (1970-1972) to Army, Marine and a few Navy handlers. Some of the sentry dogs were legendary for their aggressiveness. Handlers at the training center and DOD Dog Center were in awe of dogs such as Satan, Samson, Sebastian, or King (M000) in the early 70s. Some dogs were noted for their aggressiveness to their own assigned handler. Most were known for their aggressiveness to anyone other than their assigned handler. Satan, one of the most aggressive, was never one to attack his handler. He was a scrawny, black & silver shepherd with a lot of gray in his muzzle. He would even release his bite on command. When entered in patrol dog classes, and standoff was introduced he would just refuse to bite anyone. Standoff was the biggest difference between sentry and patrol dogs. A command could be given to a patrol dog to stop the attack, after being released. The sentry dog was like a bullet, after being released. Being told not to bite, just plain confused him. He would fail the patrol dog class and be returned to a sentry dog classes. As soon as he was shown that it was okay to be aggressive, the old very aggressive Satan returned. When the dog school was running at full capacity, there were not enough permanent kennel runs for all of the dogs at the Medina Annex. The junior classes dogs were kept in a temporary kennel area until space became available. Dogs were chained to a fence and had a shipping crate for shelter. A wood frame covered on canvas gave them protection from the Texas sun. All dog students would come to the temporary kennels to look at the famous Satan.

Satan would always put on a great show. He would sit with his back to the onlookers, his chain stretched taught. He would growl softly, his lips trembling. Some foolish soul would squat down to rub the back of the famous Satan. Unnoticed, as he was being petted, he would scoot forward, an inch at a time. He would not rush, he would be patient. Soon the handler was reaching out at arms length, and Satan had some slack in his chain. At this point, Satan would whirl around and attempt to bite the handler. Instructors would stop this game, if observed. But every now and then a student would be nailed by Satan.

The emergency room at Lackland AFB was very experienced at treating dog bites. We had to look at dog bites with humor, for there was always a chance of permanent injury. One handler was "nailed" on the hand and suffered some loss of finger movement. His salutes had a slight droop. The "funniest" was a handler who received a clean puncture on his earlobe. The handler had picked up dog, who responded by snapping once at him. The handler ended up with a hole in his ear. Seeing that you would have thought that he had a huge ear ring that he wore off duty. It closed but long after he graduated and left Lackland. After WWII, dogs were returned to the families that had donated them or they were given to their handler. At the end of the American cavalry era, the Army disposed of its horses by machine gunning them to death. In Vietnam, the dogs were treated the same way. Only it was done in a more "humane" manner. Some excess dogs were reassigned to other bases but most were killed. Liability concerns caused the Department of Defense to order the deaths of all dogs unable to work. Also, DOD used the excuse of tropical diseases to explain their no dog return policy.

But in several cases dogs were returned to the US in the early years of the war. At the end of the war, there was two large dog shipments from Vietnam. to the DOD Dog Center located at Lackland AFB, Texas. These dogs were treated with great reverence.

*" With the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the dogs were abandoned, along with helicopters, tanks, and other articles of war. Officially, no one really knows what happened to them-the only question that really remain are how many were killed, eaten, or just simply starved to death. " <sup>1</sup>*

In recent years, a public outcry resulted in a change of policy. First, the US Military pledged never to dispose of military working dogs in such a manner again. Then a change in the law occurred. Now military dogs can be adopted after their service is completed. Please read [Death of a Warrior](#)

Sentry dogs were still trained at Lackland in the early 70's for use by the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. The sentry dog course was 8 weeks long, with small classes starting weekly. The majority were only used by the Army to protect nuclear storage sites and anti-aircraft missile batteries. By the mid-70s, most Army sentry dogs were used in Korea to guard Hawk missile batteries. Sentry dogs were completely phased out in the late 70s. By 1980, the last Army Sentry Dogs in Korea were turned over to the Korean military, or transferred to the PACAF dog school for retraining, or euthanized.

In the mid-70s at the Lackland dog school, a major change developed in military working dog training methodology. Previously, the school trained and graduated journeyman level skilled handlers with the dogs fully trained. Dogs entering classes were a mixture of untrained ("green dogs") and older trained dogs. All students were taught the same training techniques used for the untrained dogs. Handlers with older trained dogs were allowed to drop the techniques as soon as the handlers mastered these methods. This allowed all handlers to become familiar with basic training techniques.

The dog school started a program that pre-trained dogs with the elementary basics. This was a cost saving order from a General Officer. Under the new concept, courses were shortened and all students were assigned trained dogs. Students were not exposed to training methods used to solve "green dog" training problems. As defense cutbacks were made, the manpower levels for dog handlers dropped also. The AF went from a high of over 1800 dogs to just over 500 dogs.

The military cutbacks has reduced the size of the dog school at Lackland as well as the dog program throughout DOD. The Air Force has approximately 550 dogs worldwide now from a high of over 1,800 in the mid 1970's. Numerous bases with large dog sections have been closed or have faced huge reductions. Clark Air Base, Republic of the Philippines had 140 dogs. The base was closed after Mt. Pinatubo erupted in 1991. Osan Air Base, Korea (for example) had the number of dogs reduced to approximately one third of it's former strength. Only time will determine if these changes have been for the best.

One result now is that handlers are facing multiple deployments to the middle east. This has resulted in severe morale problems and reduced reenlistments. Handlers on their second or third deployments to the sand box (as they call it) are deciding to return to civilian life. This is one specialty that can not normally be filled by calling up a reserve unit.

These constant deployments of dog handlers to the "sandbox" have placed a major hardship on the dog teams. This is causing morale problems and forcing many handlers to leave the Air Force. We (VSPA K-9 Handlers) started an adoption program to support handlers deployed to the gulf. Several of our adopted handlers have decided not to reenlist after being on their second deployment. In many case returning handlers have not reenlisted due to the continuous periods spent in the middle east. The military counts these as temporary deployments so they receive no credit for an overseas tour.

1 War Dogs: A History of Loyalty and Heroism  
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