



Story from Phan Rang Airbase, RVN



By Steve Williams

I always liked dogs. When I was a youngster, we had a mixed breed collie we called "flub-a-dub" named after a TV clown. He was a good dog but because we lived off a busy highway, he fell victim to a fast car one day and had to be put down. There's something about the smile of a friendly dog. It's like you can see clear down into it's soul. Sure dogs have souls; for the soul is the seat of the emotions. A dog can tell you so much by his (her?) eyes and mannerisms and with a little time they can train you to obey them pretty good!

I remember sitting in the big classroom at Lackland Air Force Base in 1970. Our security police class was just finishing it's training and I had orders to be shipped to the Azores Islands. Now the only thing I knew about the Azores is that they were a group of nine Islands somewhere out in the Atlantic Ocean. I had joined the Air Force during the Vietnam war in order to save myself a trip to the big "V". with the army.

I had been "volunteered" for security police duty by the brain sturgeons at the Air Force personnel office. Since there was no one to complain to; I finished the training and was looking forward to the stint on the Azores.

So it was a shock when the squadron leader called the group of about 200 to order and asked for volunteers for a new dog handler school. Seems like they were not getting the volunteers from the regular ranks like they once were. Small wonder since most all volunteers ended up in Southeast Asia; Vietnam or Thailand or wherever.

I remember they even got one guy, maybe two to volunteer but not many.. I saw the look among the cadre that something was up. They announced that since they didn't get the volunteers that were needed they were going to "draft" airmen for the next class. Since I already had my orders I felt a little safe that I would miss out on this opportunity of a 'life time" to tour southeast Asia.

So the real shock came when they started calling off names from the back of the alphabet. Now, one thing I know is that most people who sit in the back of the classroom can sometimes get a raw deal. When stuff is handed out you get what's left over and usually the pretty girls want to set up front so there's no fraternizing with the enemy (uh..us guys I guess)

I remember them saying "will the following airman report to room---." Man talk about a bunch of upset people; me amongst them. So after they all let us cool down they stated we would be the next K-9 class for the Air Force. This was to be the first class known as the *Patrol Dog Handlers Class* officially part of the Military Working Dog Handlers group of the Air Force. Usually dog handlers were volunteers but they needed a bunch of guys to make up the class so here I sat among about 25 or so 'volunteers" for this new endeavor.

I remember the first day of class where they explained the "rules" to us. I can remember looking at the guy next to me and rolling my eyes as if to say "what have we got ourselves into now"? Patrol dogs were to be a new type of Military Dog. One that could work right along side of a security police officer and not chew up the general public, unless the situation called for it. All the regular dogs, called sentry dogs, usually did was to detect the enemy and bite and chew. They did a

good job of it but they couldn't be trusted to work around people and not take a bite out of them. That's why the class lasted for three months. You had to train the patrol dogs well so they could work around people.

I remember when I met my first dog. He was an all-white German shepherd who weighed in somewhere at about 70lbs. or more. Yeah, I was scared of him. I remember he jumped up and put his paws somewhere about my shoulders and I said something like "nice doggy..." but we got along. He was no great shakes at learning stuff, but we got along. One day I found a rash on him and the sergeant in charge said we had to take him to the vet. The vet found the rash all over him and they had to shave him... completely. So I was out of a dog. The sergeant told me to go pick out a new dog. I had no experience at this so I picked out a dog that I thought I could control and the Sergeant was kind in telling me in a roundabout way that I had a mutt and encouraged me to pick out one he chose; which I did.

That's when I met Alex. Alex was a pro. Word had it that Alex was purchased in Germany for the Air force and he even would obey some German commands. We had a little rough patch deciding who was boss but I finally gave in and let him lead. No; all kidding aside he got upset the first time I corrected him and came at me. He scared me so much I automatically did the "airplane", a technique that pulls the dog off the ground. I remember the drill sergeant yelling "put him down" "put him down!"

I let him down and when Alex got his breath there was no more discussion about who was the leader and he let me lead him. Alex was by far a better soldier than I was. He was fearless and would attack on command and release when he was supposed to. He could track you wherever you went and had a smile that always made you laugh. The day I graduated from the *Patrol Dog Handlers Class* and I had to say goodbye to Alex. It was difficult locking him in his kennel and walking away.

I salute you Alex; long turned to ashes; you surely will be well remembered by every handler who knew you.

Then came the orders. We had all filled in our dream sheets; that's were you chose where you wanted to be stationed. My choices were upper New York state , Phan Rang AB Vietnam and some other place. We all knew where we were going and I was not surprised to see my name on the list for Vietnam. That's why they called them *dream sheets* because you could only dream of where you really wanted to go. So after some more combat training it was off to the air base *they called "Happy Valley" with one breath and "Rocket Alley" in the next.(sic)*

After getting settled in-country and undergoing orientation training I met my dog Rex.

Rex was a short haired, steel gray German Shepherd. Rex was smart. He knew where all the "rest" spots were. We were supposed to patrol a section of a fence line during the night hours and we were technically supposed to be on our feet all the time. But Rex was

an old dog and he couldn't stay awake all the time. I would see him try to fight off sleep and shake his head to keep awake. I asked what to do about it and was told to give Rex a break every once in a while so he could pace himself. I did this and it worked pretty well.

One day we got orders to send some dogs to the ARVN, or the Vietnamese Army, for them to use and Rex was one of them. We all were concerned for the fate of the dogs but we had to send them away. I had the opportunity to make the trip with Rex and to say goodbye. It wasn't much of a trip. Most of the places we went had little water and the toilets weren't flushable so I was glad to get back "home" where I could at least take a shower and get clean clothes. We had been in the same clothes for several days so it was not really fun.

I salute you Rex; long turned to ashes; you surely will be well remembered by every handler who knew you.

I worked some other dogs for a while then I got Rooney. Rooney was a champ. He was a trained patrol dog and since I was Patrol Dog qualified I got to handle him. Rooney could do any thing. When we ate our box lunches out on the "wire" (fence line) Rooney was always hungry and usually got one of my sandwiches or an egg. Sometimes I would bring him something special from the barracks. He was so well trained by the previous handler there wasn't much for me to do to train him.

Then there was the night Rooney got sick. I didn't know what happened to him but the vet thought he had been bitten by a snake. I left for R&R in Hong Kong for a week and when I got back he was still undergoing treatment. I had to handle another dog till Rooney got on his feet. I credit Rooney for saving my life because if I had been bitten by the snake they call the "two step"... two steps was all I would have gotten in this life.

Rooney got me out of so many scrapes. I remember one night when the towers that over looked the perimeter of the base were firing their guns, the shots seemed to come pretty close to us. I got on my hands and knees and started crawling out of harms way. When I looked back at Rooney, there he was crawling on his hands (paws) and knees also!

When it was my time to go home I was happy to go but sad to leave Rooney.

I salute you Rooney; long turned to ashes; you surely will be well remembered by every handler who knew you.

I still love dogs and when I meet one I feel a bond when I look into its eyes. The eyes and the tail tell it all. I seldom wonder why I came back in one piece from Vietnam and others didn't. I appreciate it too much. I was no decorated war hero, no person of special skills or special merit. I know I had a praying mom and dad and that got me through. Many who served there still don't have a lot of peace about their experience.

I salute you; All. You are all good sons of America; you surely will be well remembered.



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