



Steadfast Sentinels

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From World War II through today's war against terrorism, military dogs have served the armed forces with bravery and loyalty.

Some of the U.S. military's most selfless heroes never held official rank. During World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War and still today, they have provided aid and comfort to our fighting forces, performed all manner of hazardous duty, and even given their lives to protect others. Yet very few have received medals for their heroism, and most remain forgotten except by those who served with them.

These remarkable soldiers are military working dogs, and they're still an essential part of this nation's armed forces with 1,355 dogs currently serving at 184 American bases worldwide.

The use of military dogs is as old as warfare itself. The ancient Greeks and Romans kept dogs chained up outside their cities to warn of advancing enemy troops, sent them forward to attack the enemy during battle, and used them in close-quarters fighting. During the Middle Ages, dogs often were equipped with armor and used to defend caravans.

By the early 20th century, most European armies relied heavily on dogs. During World War I, Germany, France, and Belgium employed dogs as sentries, scouts, couriers, and even transportation. The United States tentatively explored the use of military working dogs toward the end of World War I, but it wasn't until World War II that the animals' value truly was realized.

At the beginning of that war, dogs were limited to Coast Guard submarine patrol and guard duty at military installations and defense plants. But things changed quickly in the summer of 1942 when Secretary of War Henry Stimson ordered all branches of the military to investigate the use of military working dogs. Within months, dogs of all types were enlisted as guards, messengers, mine sniffers, and even medics.

These canine soldiers faced many of the same battlefield dangers as their fellow uniformed service members and often acted with remarkable bravery. In 1943, for example, an Army German shepherd named Chips attacked an enemy pillbox in Sicily and took four startled prisoners. Chips was awarded a Silver Star and Purple

Heart for his valor. The medals later were revoked because of complaints that awarding service medals to a dog diminished their prestige.

Military working dogs also have been credited with saving countless American lives during the Vietnam War, where every clump of shrubs or turn in the road meant possible danger. Indeed, these military working dogs' sensing abilities remain legendary. Handlers came home with remarkable stories of their dogs having heard the nearly imperceptible whoosh of a breeze passing over a hair-thin trip wire of a booby trap or having smelled enemy guerillas hidden deep in underground tunnels. The dogs were so effective at protecting American service members that the Vietcong offered handsome rewards to any soldier who killed an American military working dog and its handler.

The making of a soldier

Today's military working dogs are no longer trained to sense trip wires and hunt for "tunnel rats" — their jobs have evolved, just as the military has. They still perform such basic functions as guard duty, but their responsibilities today also include base security, individual and crowd control, tracking, and explosive and narcotic detection, says Lt. Col. John Probst, USAF, Commander, 341st Training Squadron, Lackland Air Force Base (AFB) in San Antonio. "Probably 90 percent of the dogs trained here are considered dual-purpose dogs," he notes. "That means they're police dogs first, and then they have a specialty skill."

And though the Department of Defense (DOD) is understandably reluctant to discuss specifics, it would be no surprise to find military working dogs on the battlefields in Afghanistan. What better tool than a highly trained dog to search caves and bunkers for individuals, explosives, or other materials? "I don't know that they're there, but they certainly would be valuable because of their skills at detecting and finding people," observes Probst.

While DOD is hesitant to reveal the details of how military working dogs have become an instrumental part of America's war on terrorism, Probst says the importance of military dogs has become even more evident.

"I will tell you that I think the war on terrorism has caused more people to become aware of the military working dogs' capabilities," says Probst. "Probably the dogs' No. 1 role before and after Sept. 11 has been pure psychological deterrence. People pay less attention to two cops standing side by side than when they drive up to a gate and instead see a cop and a dog, which has that alert stance. You're more likely to be concerned about the capabilities of that dog, and it's fair to assume that a dog can do a lot ... and do it very well."

Like all good soldiers, military dogs must be trained. The Military Working Dog School at Lackland AFB is DOD's sole training facility, and every dog used by the four branches of the military is trained there — as are the service members who volunteer to be canine handlers.

Almost all military working dogs are German shepherds or Belgian Malinois. "These breeds are very adaptable to various environments. They can change locations without a big transition," notes Robert Dameworth, DOD Canine Program manager. "They're also athletic breeds, with good size and stamina — very well-suited for police service-dog work."

But there are some exceptions. "We will sometimes train specialty dogs for certain services," Probst explains. "For example, the Navy often wants the capability to use dogs, and a couple of times they've asked us to train Jack Russell terriers because they're much easier to use on a ship. Jack Russell terriers can get into all the tight places and require less living space, and their by-product is smaller, too." During World War II, a program called "Dogs For Defense" encouraged civilians to donate their pets to the military. Today, however, dogs are acquired only from approved vendors and breeders in the United States and Europe. But not every dog selected for service gets its metaphorical stripes. Canine recruits are put through two weeks of rigorous testing that includes a thorough medical examination and temperament evaluation. Fewer than 40 percent make the cut.

"Military working dogs must be a little bit courageous and not too shy," says Probst. "We'll test [their reaction to] gunfire to see if they run; that's the last kind of dog you want to work with. But a dog that's inquisitive [and] willing to go into new places, who's not shy in new environments and has a strong retrieving instinct — that's a great military working dog."

Canine training at DOD's Military Working Dog School takes between 100 and 120 training days. "Dogs are trained using the simple principles of timely praise and correction," notes Dameworth. "We introduce the dog to whatever task we want it to perform and show it how to do it again and again. When the dog does well, we praise or reward it, and when it doesn't do well, we withhold that praise or reward. Pretty soon the dog learns that by doing the task correctly it gets a reward, and by doing it wrong it just gets glared at by its handler."

A dog's best friend

Handler training is equally intense and requires an 11-week course. Participants are all volunteers and typically are chosen by field commanders, who often rely on the judgment of local kennel masters in making their selections.

"Most good dog handlers are a little bit independent," says Probst. "You're not going to be with 50 of your best buddies because dogs work best when it's just you and that dog in the middle of nowhere. So you have to be a person who's confident, mature, and willing to get excited. Sometimes you've got to talk to that dog like you're talking to a person. It sounds kind of funny when you hear a dog handler getting all excited for his dog; everyone looks at him like he's a pretty strange person."

Not surprisingly, the relationship between dog and handler can become extremely close. Each is dependent on the other, particularly during wartime when survival often hinges on mutual trust, understanding, and instinct.

"Most dog handlers, when you talk with them, will say they'd rather have [their] dog back than their friends," notes Probst. "Dogs are attentive, and they don't get distracted. If something is going to happen, particularly a life-threatening response, the dog's loyalty is guaranteed."

A good example is an Air Force German shepherd named Nemo, who worked as a sentry in Vietnam. During an enemy offensive in 1966, Nemo didn't hesitate to throw himself on four Vietcong to protect his handler. Nemo lost an eye to enemy fire, but miraculously both he and his handler survived the attack.

Military dogs work an average of almost 11 years, though some last much longer. Older dogs that may be moving more slowly but are otherwise in good health often return to the Military Working Dog School to be used as training-aid dogs. "One of the easiest ways to train a new handler is to give him an already trained dog," explains Probst. "In essence, we've got dogs training people."

Shortly before the end of his second term, President Clinton signed a law that opened the door for the retirement of military working dogs. Prior to the passage of that law (known as the Robby Law after a military working dog at Quantico Combat Development Command, Va.), DOD was not allowed to give military working dogs to civilians, primarily because of liability issues. "But now, on a case-by-case basis, dogs that are too old to work or be used in training become available for adoption through the unit that last commanded the dog," explains Probst. "Dogs become available to other law-enforcement agencies first, then [to] previous handlers in DOD, and lastly to civilians deemed capable of humanely caring [for] the dog."

Handle with care

Because so much is invested in their training and service, military working dogs receive top-notch veterinary care. The veterinary service facilities at Lackland AFB are staffed by Army staff from Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and are equipped with state-of-the-art veterinary equipment. There is even med-evac capability for dogs that are seriously injured, explains Probst, recalling a particular case of a dog that experienced multiple compound fractures after chasing a ball off the second floor of a building. The animal was quickly flown to Lackland, where military veterinarians were able to repair its injuries. That dog is now a training-aid dog.

Though the majority of their work is strictly within the military arena, military working dogs often are called upon to support the Secret Service in its protection of the president, the vice president, and other political dignitaries and foreign heads of state. They also provide periodic protective support at well-known national events that may require special security, such as the Super Bowl and, most recently, the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City.

Availability is a key factor, notes Dameworth, explaining, "There are not nearly as many dogs in the private security sector that can be cut loose from their normal roles to do this as there are in the military. And, in fact, there are various directives and guidelines that authorize DOD to provide this kind of support."

What does the future hold for military working dogs? Though our armed forces strive for technological superiority, most agree that military dogs will continue to play an integral role in national defense.

"Dogs give us a portability, a level of loyalty and trust, plus a known capability that we can't find today in the average piece of equipment," concludes Probst. "Plus, it's difficult to put a piece of equipment out there that looks like it's alert and ready to respond and has the same level of psychological deterrence that a dog has. As a result, I believe that dogs will play an active role in both police work and the military for many years to come."

Dog Central

The 341st Training Squadron provides basic working dog handler instruction for the Department of Defense (DOD) and trains all working dogs for DOD and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). The squadron's primary components include:

Dog Training Section: Trains and certifies all explosive-detector dogs assigned to DOD. This section also is responsible for training working dogs in patrol techniques. Once trained, dogs are shipped worldwide to support DOD missions.

Handlers' Course: Trains all working dog handlers assigned to the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. Additionally, it trains patrol and drug-detector dogs for DOD.

Supervisor's Course: Gives advanced working dog training and management skills to handlers assigned to the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps.

Logistics Flight: Responsible for shipping and tracking all military working dogs worldwide.

The TSA Support Branch: Responsible for training TSA students and explosive-detector working dogs.

DOD Military Working Dog Veterinary Services: Provides comprehensive medical care for all working dogs assigned to the Military Working Dog School.

It's a Dog's Life

One of Hollywood's first — and best-known — canine movie stars was a German shepherd named Rin-Tin-Tin or "Rinty." Born to a pair of German military working dogs, Rent was adopted as a puppy by U.S. Army Cpl. Lee Duncan, who found him in an abandoned German war dog station in the French countryside in 1918.

Rinty made his movie debut in the 1922 silent film *The Man From Hell's River* (Western Pictures Exploitation Co.). The movie was a huge box office success, and Rin-Tin-Tin was quickly signed by Warner Brothers, which cast him in 24 subsequent films. Within the fledgling movie studio he was commonly referred to as "the mortgage lifter" because his movies always turned a profit. During his heyday, Rin-Tin-Tin earned \$1,000 a week and sported a diamond-studded collar. However, Rin-Tin-Tin was no prima donna. He performed most of his own stunts and even served as his own stand-in while scenes were staged and lighted. When asked how he coaxed Rinty to perform, Duncan explained, "He has never been trained. He is just an educated dog. We simply understand each other, and until you understand your dog you can never hope to teach him anything." Rin-Tin-Tin died Aug. 8, 1932.



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