



Sugar Comes Home

by John Boyle

CULBERSON, NC - When Dano Miller volunteered for the Marines as a gung-ho teen-ager, he never expected his closest buddy would turn out to be a 65-pound female German shepherd named "Sugar."

"You've got to visualize yourself when you're 19 years old, with a German shepherd walking point on patrols and special operations," said Miller, a fit 52-year-old who still looks combat ready. "You're five to 100 meters in front of the patrol, knowing that everybody behind you is depending on how good your dog is working and how well you can read the signs of her alert."

Miller and Sugar became one piece of war machinery, clearing enemy tunnels, discovering booby traps and alerting fellow soldiers to hidden Viet Cong soldiers. They lived so close together that they often drank out of the same canteen and sometimes ate out of the same can of dog food. "Sometimes, when she had complete heat exhaustion, I would pick her up and away we'd go," Miller said, explaining that Sugar, like him, dropped 20 pounds in the intense Southeast Asian heat. "Marines don't leave other Marines behind."

But at the end of his tour, that's exactly what Miller had to do, even though he and Sugar had made a pact while flying to Vietnam in 1969 to bring each other home alive. The Marine Corps brass denied Miller's request to bring Sugar home. A few weeks after Miller returned home, Sugar died from a mosquito-borne blood disease. Leaving her behind left a void Miller couldn't fill for 33 years - until July 1. That's the date he left his home in Cherokee County and picked up another German shepherd - one from Sugar's very same bloodline - from a kennel in Indiana.

"I've seen him more at ease," Miller's wife, Mary, said of her husband's disposition since then. "I think it solved about 33 years of anguish."

Dano Miller grew up on the edge of the Seminole Indian Reservation near Hollywood, Fla., living with an Indian family that practically adopted him. "I learned more about how to walk point through hunting and fishing than any military could teach me," Miller said. "It's all about having the ability to stalk animals."

In 1969, Miller joined the Marines Corps and went through boot camp at Parris Island, S.C., then infantry training at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Then he put in for the Marine Corps Scout Dog Platoon and with 24 other Marines headed to Fort Benning in Georgia, an Army base that handled dog training.

Sugar was assigned to him and learned the basics of lifesaving in the bush - sniffing out trip wires, booby traps, how to search tunnels, obeying hand signals, learning how to alert. They also learned each other. "Scout dogs alert silently," Miller said. "You can't afford to be making any noise when you're primarily walking point."

Most Marines picked up a dog once they got to Vietnam, but Miller and Sugar finished in the top three in their 12-week class, ensuring that they would stay together. Once in Vietnam, Miller and Sugar were stationed at Da Nang AB, but like the other 23 members of their scout dog class, they shipped out frequently via helicopter to walk point with Army and Marine units. Typically, they worked 30-day missions that took them through jungle, villages and a variety of combat zones.

Miller recalls carrying as many as 10 canteens of water for the two of them, and he had to carry canned food because Sugar wouldn't eat packaged food. Sugar was fine with small arms fire, but artillery "drove her nuts," Miller said. Despite the chaos - and dropping from 65 to 45 pounds during her tour of duty - she always did

her job. "There's no doubt in my mind that she saved my life on more than one occasion," Miller said. "So many times she alerted and we took evasive action, and we ambushed the enemy or sent out a reconnaissance patrol to determine exactly where the scent was coming from."

On one occasion, Miller, who was supposed to be following in Sugar's footsteps for safety's sake, fell in a pungee pit - a booby-trapped hole filled with barbed sticks often dipped in feces to cause infection. Luckily, it was an old trap and the sticks just crumbled under his weight. "I was into this pit up to my armpits, and Sugar gave me a look like, 'You dumb (expletive). You know you're supposed to follow behind me,'" Miller recalled with a laugh.

John Burnam is the president of the Vietnam Dog Handler Association and served in Vietnam from 1966-68 in the U.S. Army's 44th Scout Dog Platoon. The author of "Dog Tags of Courage," about his dog handling days in combat, he says it's impossible to know how many lives military dogs saved in Vietnam.

"There's been estimates of 10,000 lives, 20,000 lives, but no one can be sure," he said. "I can say this: The enemy realized these animals were so valuable as scouts, they put a price on their heads." The patch of a K-9 handler - or the tattooed ear of a scout dog - were highly prized by the Vietcong. About 4,000 dogs served in the various branches of the American armed services in Vietnam, some as sentries or guard dogs, others as scouts. Even the Navy used dogs - to sniff out explosives from potential saboteurs.

During 12 months of combat in Vietnam, Miller saw plenty of carnage.

"Every time you came back in from the bush, someone had gotten wounded or killed," Miller said, noting that he and Sugar were lucky. "But God was smiling on us. We never lost the first Marine when we were walking point. It's not that I was that good of a dog handler, I just had a really good dog."

Only about 200 dogs made it out of the country, Burnam said. Most were euthanized at the end of America's involvement because of concerns about bringing diseases back into the states or about the dogs being unsuitable for contact with people. "Not one Marine dog came home," Miller said. "The Marines put theirs to sleep." Not even a month after Miller left Vietnam, Sugar became ill and died of an incurable mosquito-borne blood disease. The loss became a wound Miller would carry forever, not unlike the wounds left by other friends who didn't make it home.

"I had a great deal of trouble leaving that dog over there," Miller said. "I was very frustrated, to say the least, when I came back from Vietnam." The unappreciative attitude of the country toward veterans at the time, coupled with the loss of Sugar and other fellow soldiers, sent Miller into a downward spiral. "I tried drinking all the Jack Daniel's in the state of Florida," Miller admits.

He straightened himself out and built a successful 25-year career as a cop in Florida, picking up the nickname "Dano" (think "Hawaii 5-0") early on. He retired in 1997 as a special agent from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and now trains law enforcement agencies in manhunt techniques and anti-terrorism. He's always dreamed of acquiring a dog from Sugar's bloodline. In Vietnam, he had seen papers with Sugar's registered American Kennel Club name, but for years afterward he blanked on the information.

But in February, Miller woke up one night and the name just appeared in his mind: "Sugarbabe of Cauldwell." A friend enlisted the help of Barbara Van Ryn, who owns Canine Family Tree in Pottstown, Pa. Jack Sommars, a free-lance writer in Denver who's working on a movie script based on Miller's military service, also played a key role in tracking Sugar's bloodline. They tracked Sugar to Indiana and found one of Sugar's relatives, Valor Jack, a descendent of Sugar's uncle, Valor.

"It's very possible the bloodline could have died out," said Maureen Harold, who works at Forsthaus Kennel in Greenfield, Ind., where Valor Jack came from. "We're talking records from 1965, when Sugar was born. I think (Miller) was really

overwhelmed at having that bloodline after such a long time and being able to find it."

On July 1, Miller picked up Valor Jack in Indiana. In honor of two close friends who didn't make it back from Vietnam - Bob Rhodes and Mike Vancosky - Miller named the dog Valor Jack Van-Rhodes. Although Valor Jack is a male, that doesn't bother Miller, who says he's not trying to replace Sugar with a clone. It's hard for Miller to explain what Valor Jack means to him. "I don't expect anybody, unless they were a fellow dog handler, to understand that," Miller said. "Some people make comments that, 'It's just a dog, why make such a stink about it?' But if you've ever experienced a dog saving your life, you'd understand."

Valor Jack is now five months old and as frisky as any overgrown puppy. Miller spends his days running a police training business, Semper Fi International, and carving chain-saw bears, which he claims look like "rats on steroids." He and Mary own 27 acres about 10 miles west of Murphy, plenty of room for a man to work his dog. "I only wish I was 30 years younger and could take him over to Afghanistan to clear some tunnels," Miller said, smiling.

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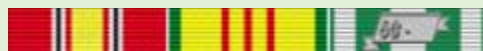
I read this and was struck with two emotions. I was both envious and proud. I was happy to hear of a handler that had a physical link to his dog, but wished with all my heart that it was me. One of the best K-9 parties I ever went to was one at Da Nang AB Air Base, in 1969. The off base bomb dump had been blown up (again). We were recalled to the kennels in the early afternoon, after the dump had started burning. The massive explosions and shock waves were scaring the dogs.

When we arrived at the kennels, we found Marine handlers removing dogs from shipping crates. The US Marine dog kennels (located close to the huge off base bomb dumps) had been badly damaged. They evacuated their dogs to the AF kennels at Da Nang AB Air Base. Their dogs were temporarily chained to our fence. The Marine handlers were happy to have a place for their dogs. Some dogs did not have their handlers with them. A Marine handler (with his leg in a cast) was grabbing those dogs from shipping crates and staking them out to our fence. The next day, they were gone, but not back to their old kennels. They were moved to the US Navy kennels, located at China Beach. They stayed there while the Marine kennels were rebuilt.

A few days later, the Navy handlers hosted a party for all the dog handlers in I Corp. We loaded up one morning and was driven to the Navy kennels. They had dogs chained to anything that would not move. We ate, drink, and talked about our dogs. The hospitality shown us, that day, was special. We were from three different branches of the military, but we were all dog handlers.

We were brothers!

So Dan, enjoy Valor Jack Von Rhodes,
and tell him that we love him also.



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