



Welcome Home, King # 326F



The words on the screen were now invisible, obscured by the ocean of tears in my eyes. After 32 years the E-mail had just revealed what had happened to King.

King, serial number 326F, was an eighty-five-pound German Shepherd, trained as a United States Air Force Sentry Dog, who along with his handler, Sgt. Chris Raper, was sent to South Vietnam in December of 1966.

The recent airing of the documentary, "War Dogs," on television's Discovery Channel had again opened wounds caused by my experiences in Vietnam, America's most unpopular war. The scenes of handlers with their dogs on patrol, and the abandonment of these dogs by the military, after the war was over, caused long suppressed emotions to surface. Immediately after the show I posted a short story and message on the War Dogs Web Site, (war-dogs.com). I requested information from anyone who might have been assigned to my old unit, the 31st Security Police Squadron, at Tuy Hoa Air Base, Republic of Vietnam in 1966-1967. It was a desperate search for information that might, just might be able to allow allow me to know what had happened to King. I spent many hours, unsuccessfully, searching web sites for information about King until I found the web site for the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association, There I met Tom Mitchell, one of the Association's officers. Not only was Tom instrumental in starting VDHA, he was also a K-9 handler at Tuy Hoa Air Base the same time I was there! I sent Tom an E-mail and waited .

Over the next few days I thought of the two and one-half year's King and I had worked together. We first became a team in July of 1965 at Glasgow Air Force Base in northeastern Montana. King's handler had been recently discharged from the Air Force and I had been selected to be King's new handler. After eight weeks of intensive training, we were a working K-9 Sentry Dog Team. King was trained to detect intruders, alert his handler and attack the intruder if necessary. I reflected on our time spent together at Glasgow AFB and the almost unbearable weather conditions - extremes of cold and heat that would test the endurance of the best. Patrols were from sundown until sunup but the dogs never complained, just their handlers. I learned to rely upon and trust King's acute senses and at the same time, King learned to trust and protect me. Neither of us knew at the time that our ultimate challenge lay ahead, in a far away country called Vietnam.

The war in Southeast Asia was intensifying daily and more K-9 teams were being sent to Vietnam. Just two weeks before Christmas of 1966, King and I boarded a C-130 for the long flight to Vietnam. I still remember being cold on the flight over and a flight crew-member passing out blankets. It was the last time I would be cold for a long time.

Arriving at the sprawling Tan Son Nhut AB Air Base in Saigon in sweltering heat and humidity, King and I were quick to be introduced to the dangers of war. Just a few nights before our arrival, a sentry dog and his handler were wounded, during an attack by Viet Cong guerrillas. The handler, seriously wounded, was evacuated to a hospital in Japan. His dog, Nemo, had lost an eye in the attack and was later sent to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, home of the Air Force Sentry Dog School. Nemo, was just one of less than two hundred war dogs of the more than four thousand that served in Vietnam to return to the states. For hundreds of other K-9's, like King, it was a one-way trip. I was both saddened and frightened from the day's events. The life of this twenty-year-old airman, ten thousand miles from home, was changed forever. That day, before leaving King at the kennels, I hugged him tightly. I think that was when I realized just how attached to one another King and I had become.

King and I were sent to Tuy Hoa Air Base, which was located near the coastal town of Tuy Hoa, 285 miles northeast of Saigon. The base was being hastily prepared for the arrival of F-100 jets and for the next year it would be our home.

Our time there was spent looking for infiltrators, saboteurs and protecting the outer perimeters of the base from penetration by Viet Cong guerrilla units. It was best described as a sort of "no mans land," where anything that moved was probably the enemy, and where King and I became a vital part of the base's first line of defense.

I remembered our nights on patrol in the inky darkness of the monsoon nights, when the moon would not appear for weeks. This was a time that was valued by the enemy because they could operate more

easily undetected. I remembered the torrential rains and the times I would allow King to seek shelter under my poncho. I remembered the C-ration meals we shared together, while others were able to sleep or go to the "mess area" for hot meals. I remembered the long, hot and humid summer nights, that would cause rust to form on my CAR-15 rifle, but cleaning it became secondary to King's needs. I remembered the two canteens of water I carried, one for King and one for me. When King's was empty I would share mine with him. I remembered the dry season when I would spend hours removing ticks from King's coat and using a torch to burn them from the kennels cement block walls. I remembered the sounds of war we shared, the constant flights of helicopters and the medical, "dust-offs," that brought in the dead and wounded from the battlefields. We witnessed the thundering explosions and the illuminating skyline of the distant mountains of the Central Highlands, caused by the B-52 bombers President Johnson committed to the war effort in the summer of 1967. I remembered the sounds and sights of "Puff the Dragon," an AC-47 gun ship. Equipped with mini-guns, "Puff" would fly in a circle above the target area, firing six thousand bullets per minute, to help drive away the attacking Viet Cong. I remembered how King's eyes followed the red tracer bullets as they formed unintelligible characters on their downward spiral. I remembered the hastily dug fox holes we shared and how I would pray that the bullets missed us and I believe that if dogs could pray King would have said a prayer for me too! I remembered the rising sun that signaled the end of another night on patrol and King's excitement when he saw the truck coming that would take us to the kennels. I remembered the trip back to the kennels, riding in silence, as we were too tired to talk, and how King would seem to know that danger, at least for a while, was absent. In minutes he would be sleeping soundly with his head on my lap.

I remembered the night I visited King at the kennels for the last time and how I tried so desperately to explain why I was going home and he could not go with me. Somehow, I knew he did not understand, even as he licked the tears from my cheeks. The walk from the kennels to the living quarters was only a few hundred yards, but in many ways it was longer than the trip home to America the next day. In my heart I knew King would not survive the stress of the war much longer as he was almost eight years old, and for a "war dog" that was old.

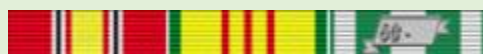
The tears now were as real as they were then. Wiping them away, I reread the E-mail - "King 326-F died of a heat stroke in August of 1968. He was eight years old." King lived only eight months after I left him.

The guilt of leaving King and not knowing what happened to him had lived with me all these years. My only consolation is in knowing that because of King there are fewer names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. King, one of America's forgotten heroes, will live forever in my heart. Welcome home King 326-F. The war is now over for me too!

Foot Note

Official records indicate the lives of as many as ten thousand soldiers were saved in Vietnam due to the actions of K-9 Teams. A drive is now underway to erect a memorial in honor of these heroes. The military has never officially recognized the actions of any of the K-9s in Southeast Asia. They were classified as property and either euthanized or turned over to the South Vietnamese Army.

On President's Day, February 21, 2000, a memorial dedication service was held at March Field Air Museum at Riverside, CA. A statue of a K-9 Handler and his dog was unveiled. The statue stands 16 feet tall and is ten feet wide at the base.



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