



## Ubon, RTAFB Story

I was 18 years old when I arrived in Southeast Asia. Just a kid, full of pride, fearlessness and daring all wrapped up in a U.S. Air Force Security Police K-9 officer's uniform. Having been at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base for one week, my in processing to the base complete, it was time to go to work. Duty required me to be at the base armory at 10:00 p.m., time enough to draw my G.A.U., a cut down version of the M-16 rifle, ammunition, flack vest, helmet and slap flares. From there we boarded a deuce-and-a-half truck for the ride to the off-base kennel where my dog awaits me.

My first night jitters had a hold on my stomach and was not letting go. I knew it was going to be different but now, reality was setting in. My stateside duties were nothing like this, I had just left base patrol in a cruiser, walking a beat rattling doors and breaking up fistfights at the NCO Club. That had been my norm, but this was different, way different. As we travel the five miles to the kennels I am looking at 30 guys with their "game day" faces on, dressed in camouflage and armed like soldiers. The berets have been put away, no more badges or handcuffs, no more blue ascots or spit-shinned boots. We were no longer security policeman; we were American fighting men, the Air Force's infantry.

On arrival at the kennel the crescendo of dog barking was at its peak. The dogs heard us coming and they knew it was time to go to work. I had met Hunce, an 85 pound, black and tan German Shepherd just the day before and our introduction went fairly well. It only took 45 minutes of sitting on the concrete kennel floor, outside of his cage, "sweet talking" to the raised fur and pearly whites of my new companion. His ferociousness impressed me, scared me and comforted me all at the same time. I thought, that if and when he accepts me, we would bond and become a great K-9 team. Being new, I has no idea of the routine but this seasoned veteran did. With muzzle on and dog on-leash ( I sometimes thought of it as human on-leash ) Hunce led me to the training pad where Guardmount, an Air Force term for pre-post inspection, was conducted. It amazed me how this animal knew the drill better than I did and as the night progressed, his experience would prove itself invaluable to me.

Inspection complete, I was assigned my first post, it was called Kilo 2-7 and was located at the southern end of the base runway. An audible sigh of relief was heard as my name was read for this assignment, which confused me at the time, but became perfectly clear once we arrived on post. This godforsaken piece of real estate was in the middle of nowhere. Measuring 100 yards across by 50 yards deep, measured from the fence line to the perimeter road. Behind me were the 30 foot observation/gun towers and below them, the M-60 machine gun bunkers. I

quickly realized that I was in front of everyone's guns and that thought frightened me. As the K-9 truck pulled away I was left standing in total darkness, just me and my new partner and an eerie silence. This indestructible 18 year old felt very vulnerable and scared.

Once on post the K-9's responsibility is to "clear and sweep" his assigned area. That means you check for the wind direction, move to the downwind area of your post and begin the sweep allowing the dogs super sense of smell to work for you. The German Shepherd is a very intelligent and loyal breed, their sense of smell and hearing far exceeds those of a human. By utilizing these attributes, a handler can detect an intruder, long before the intruder knows he has been discovered. An analogy would be that the K-9 team operates like a smoke detector. Always alert, ready to detect a fire, as quickly as possible, by sniffing the air for smoke. Air Force K-9 teams were known as the "first line of defense" for base security.

As we stepped off the perimeter road, heading for the fence line, the knee high grass hid the quagmire that lay below. The recent monsoons had taken its toll leaving the area swamp like. That sigh of relief heard earlier, made all the sense in the world to me now. Hunce, a seasoned veteran of Ubon and having worked this post many times prior to me, led the way. His experience in working under these conditions proved itself almost immediately. As he pulled me toward the fence, he suddenly stopped, perked his ears, lifted his nose and abruptly changed our direction of travel. Me, not wanting to leave the relatively dry patch of land we were walking on tried to pull Hunce back onto the original path. He refused to budge and began to growl the harder I tugged on the leash. Having just met this dog I was unaware how he would react to an intruder, but I knew he was trying to tell me something, I just didn't know what that was.

Standing my ground, I turned on my flashlight and searched the path ahead. Not 15 feet away laid coiled the biggest king cobra snake this young airman ever saw. Hunce made every effort to keep us away from this thing and I learned my first lesson from this dog. He's the veteran, I'm the rookie----Pay attention to the dog!

Completing the sweep of the post I decided it was time to sit down and take a break. I was not yet accustomed to the tropical heat and humidity, I was soaked in sweat and a rest was called for. Finding a dry spot, I laid my rain poncho on the ground and prepared to "park it" when Hunce began pulling on the leash. Now what I thought? Remembering lesson # 1, I got up to look around when I felt the first bite. Ants, red fire breathing ants were all over my legs. While frantically brushing them off I gathered my gear and moved out of the area. Lesson # 2, never forget lesson # 1, the dog knows!

This being my first night on duty, Hunce and Kilo 2-7 were making quite an impression on me. Two things became perfectly clear 1. I love this dog and 2. I hate this place! As the night wore on, Hunce and I got to know each other a little better. I realized that it was going to be this dog's skill that was going to get me through the next 364 nights. As I said earlier, it wasn't the dog on-leash it was more like the human on-leash.

These dogs work as well as they do because of repetitive training exercises and conditioning. Throw in a little TLC by the handler and you end up with a powerful force to be reckoned with. However, the TLC shown by previous handlers of Hunce, conditioned him to react in a way that I was not prepared for. It was getting close to 4:00 a.m. when I received the radio call telling me to get out on the perimeter road to pick up my box lunch. By this point I was hungry, very hungry!

Tonight's meal consisted of cold fried chicken, a couple of hard-boiled eggs, a can of peaches and a dinner roll. Without giving a thought to sharing anything with Hunce, I dug in. Hunce laid quietly at my feet as I ate. Feeling a wee bit guilty, I reasoned that the vets had always told us to keep our dogs on their prescribed meals and besides, his breakfast would be waiting for him as soon as we got off post. Cracking and peeling the first egg I noticed that Hunce rose to the sitting position and was watching me...intensely. Paying no attention to him, I ate the egg and started on the second. Hunce started to growl, something was wrong! Remembering again the lesson's learned, I put down the egg and got up to scan my surrounds. Without hesitation Hunce dove for the box and inhaled the egg, shell and all. I later learned from other handlers that Hunce had been conditioned to get a hard-boiled egg every night. On nights when the box lunch did not include them, he became a mean, angry dog with a history of biting his handlers. Lesson # 3, ALWAYS come to work with a hard-boiled egg!

As the sun came up and my shift drew to a close, I reflected back on the fear of the unknown that had such a grip on me at the start. Having previously been informed that a Vietnamese sapper team had infiltrated the base 2 months prior to my arrival, I knew my fears were justified. I came to the conclusion that I could survive this place as long as I put my faith in my partner and allowed him to do what he has been trained to do.

If the lessons he taught me this first night were an indication as to how the rest of my tour of duty would go, I knew I was in good hands..... aah paws. Since his discharge, Peter has been a professional Fire Officer and Emergency Medical Technician with a Massachusetts Fire Department. As exciting as his professional career has been, he'll never forget his tour of duty in Southeast Asia.



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