



Soldiers' Keepers: Dogs of War

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by Jaime Netzer

For almost as long as man has been waging war, dogs have stood at soldiers' sides. Whether serving as sentries, messengers or search dogs, these loyal hounds share a unique ability: they can simultaneously save troops' lives and destroy enemies.

No one can be certain what exactly happened when Chips, a mixed-breed German shepherd, husky and collie, entered a small grass-covered hut on Sicily, July 10, 1943. At about 4:30 a.m., while working inland after the 30th Inf. Regt., 3rd Div., executed an amphibious landing near Licata on the southern coast of the Italian island, a machine gun opened fire from the hut—which was actually a camouflaged pillbox. Suddenly, Chips broke free of his handler, Pvt. John P. Rowell, and ran into the pillbox. Moments later, the machine-gun fire stopped, and an Italian soldier appeared, Chips attacking his arms and throat. Three other soldiers followed, arms raised in surrender. Chips suffered powder burns and a scalp wound, indicating the soldiers had attempted to shoot him with a revolver. But only the Italians taken prisoner (and Chips) know how he was able to bring about their immediate surrender all on his own.

Although Chips might be one of the most celebrated war dog heroes of U.S. military working dog history (he even has a Disney movie, *Chips the War Dog*, to maintain his legend), he is just one of countless canines that have served alongside GIs over the years.

War dogs have helped buttress our armed forces officially and effectively since WWII. Despite shifts in duties and breeds, dog-handler relationships—usually close, unyielding bonds—remain largely unchanged.

Patriotic Pups

Dogs have a long history as mascots—and morale boosters—in U.S. war efforts.

In WWI, a homeless dog dubbed "Stubby" was plucked from the Yale University campus in New Haven, Conn., and adopted by the 26th Infantry Division, which was training there. A white and brindle dog that looked like a pit bull and got his name from the nub of his tail, Stubby went everywhere with the men as they completed training. He was even snuck on the ship with them as they headed for France. Stubby went on to serve in 17 battles, meet three presidents, and was decorated after the war by Gen. of the Armies John J. Pershing. However, Stubby was not a trained war dog, but a mascot, and an unofficial one at that.

It was WWII that marked the first official use of military working dogs (MWDs) in the U.S. armed forces. The initial MWD training was limited to basic

obedience. Dogs served as sentries or messengers, especially early on in the war. When troops landed in the Solomon Islands, their radio batteries couldn't withstand the heat and humidity; dogs were often the only means of communication.

In May of 1942, the U.S. Army received its first nine sentry dogs from Dogs for Defense, Inc., an organization created to volunteer dogs for the war effort. From these donated dogs the U.S. Army Canine (K-9) Corps was established.

By December of that year, more than 125,000 dogs had been volunteered for the war effort, though only about 20,000 actually entered the military. About half of those dogs were used to guard beaches, factories and bases. The rest went abroad to fight.

Many breeds were accepted at the inception of the K-9 Corps, including Belgian and German shepherds, Dalmatians, rottweilers, standard poodles, bull mastiffs, huskies, and even mixed breeds.

As training developed, MWDs were taught to tolerate gunfire, not to bark at any time, and to improve their ability to hear and smell the enemy. Eventually, dogs also parachuted to aid wounded fliers, conducted search and rescue missions, laid telephone wire and searched for mines. MWDs also served in the Marine Corps in WWII, forming several war dog platoons. Most Dobermans that fought in the war served with the Marines in the Pacific.

Though the mine detection dogs (M-dogs) proved basically unreliable during WWII, later analysis revealed faulty training methods as the culprit. In subsequent conflicts, M-dogs affirmed their value. MWDs in WWII carried supplies, too—Siberian huskies could carry a tremendous amount of weight (for example, a .30-caliber machine gun).

As the war drew to a close, the Army took on an ambitious plan to return military dogs to civilian life. It recognized those war dogs that hadn't died in the line of duty by issuing a discharge certificate upon their return home. However, this process was riddled with problems and was eventually discontinued. Since 1945, canine recruitment has meant servitude for life, and dogs have been technically classified as "equipment."

'Yankee—Take Your Dog and Go Home!'

After the war, military dog programs disappeared and scout dog platoons were disbanded. By the time the Korean War began in 1950, only one active scout dog platoon (26th Infantry Platoon, Scout Dog) existed.

The first squad to ship to Korea, comprising seven handlers and six dogs, arrived in June of 1951 and was attached to the 2nd Infantry Division. In Korea, for the first time, dogs began participating in night patrols. Handlers were usually given 24 to 48 hours notice, allowing them time to prime the dog for the mission. Under cover of night, handlers and dogs relied on other GIs on patrol for gunfire cover. In return, the patrol was privy to the dog's keen senses and its handler's ability to read the MWD's body language.

Some 1,500 dogs served in Korea. The enemy was clearly intimidated by their presence. According to *War Dogs*, by Vietnam dog handler Michael G. Lemish, handlers found that in close-quarter fighting, the North Koreans or Chinese would try to kill the dogs immediately.

"Sometimes the Communists attempted to unnerve the American soldiers by setting up loudspeakers and making short propaganda broadcasts during the night," Lemish wrote. "On at least one occasion the loudspeakers blared forth, 'Yankee—take your dog and go home!' "

'I Got All of My Confidence from That Dog'

Indeed, communication between dog and handler has saved countless lives through the years. In Vietnam, veteran David Adams, who served with the 388th Security Police Squadron, K-9 Section, from October 1969-October 1970, knew his relationships with his dogs were vital to his own safety.

"Dogs' relationships with their handlers are so critical to them working well," Adams said. "That's common from WWII all the way to Iraq. The K-9 program has always been on a strict voluntary basis, so you had to really want to work with dogs." Adams, who was bitten by a German shepherd as a child, quickly swallowed his fear when faced with a choice: work with bombs, security police or dogs. For him, the choice was easy. The first dog Adams worked with in Vietnam was named Rex, and Adams says Rex was an "alpha dog."

"When I first picked him up, I could tell right away it would take a while for us to get used to each other," Adams said. "The most memorable night was my first night on post." "They called this one post the post from hell, and new guys always got stuck on it. We worked only at night, and the post was along a single track dirt road, 10 to 15 feet wide, that had a perimeter fence and jungle to one side and more jungle to the other. We had several varieties of cobras, pit vipers, centipedes, and scorpions there too, which were all very poisonous." Adams said he felt extremely nervous. "I reached down and petted the dog," he said. "He had been working for about a year before I got there, and he gave me this look like 'What are we waiting for?' I got all of my confidence that night from that dog."

American war dogs logged tens of thousands of missions in Vietnam. Some 325 died in the line of duty along with 261 handlers. The Vietnam Dog Handlers Association estimates that dogs saved 10,000 soldiers' lives during the war. Unfortunately, fewer than 200 of the 4,000 dogs that served in Vietnam ever came home. To the men who served, the dogs were like fellow comrades. But to the Pentagon, they were classified as equipment, and euthanized.

'They Trusted the Dog's Nose with Their Lives'

Adams says that though the bond between dog and handler has never really changed, training and support are radically different today in Afghanistan and Iraq than when he served.

Adams says the military now places much greater emphasis on the duration a handler is paired with a dog. "The longer you're with one dog, the better the bonding is," Adams said. "A handler and his dog will go to Iraq or Afghanistan, and then that same team comes back to the base they left from."

He also added that the training is much more extensive. "They're trained primarily for drug detection or explosive detection, depending on which the dog responds best to," he said. Lackland Air Force Base in Texas is home to the military's Specialized Search Dog (SSD) Program, created to help thwart IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan. At Lackland, dogs are exposed gradually to the

noise of gunfire and helicopters. They perform drills in simulated Iraqi villages, so the war zone isn't a complete shock.

"We take soldiers' lives out of danger, in a sense," says dog handler Charles Shepker, "because instead of sending them out there searching out IEDs, we can use the dogs to do it." Shepker, a sergeant first class who served with Combined Joint Task Force 76 in Afghanistan from November 2005 to November 2006, says SSDs are an asset. "Our dogs can do things a lot faster than it would take humans to do them, and their senses of smell, sight, and hearing are far better than those of humans," he explained. "Plus, I always trusted my dogs with my life," he said. "The other guys I was working with trusted the dogs' noses with their lives. Downrange or overseas, most people feel a lot safer when they have MWDs with them." Dogs offer such comfort that in December 2007, the military began placing therapy dogs in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The dogs will be able to serve as an icebreaker and a communication link," Mike Sargeant, chief training officer for the non-profit America's VetDogs, told USA Today. He says therapy dogs offer affection without regard to "gender, race, disability or injury." Since the start of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, more than 1,000 dogs have passed through the combat zones. To date, at least three have been killed.

- Many WWII Doberman pinschers, the breed of choice for Marines, saw their first action on Iwo Jima. More than 100 dogs died there in service to their country. *Webmaster's Note: The short hair dogs were more suited for the tropical heat.*
- Early on in WWII, dogs were especially valuable as messengers. The most famous of them, Caesar, was said to have once run 15 missions from command post to the front lines and back in just 48 hours—collapsing from exhaustion after the final run.
- Lex, a German shepherd, is the first active duty military working dog (MWD) to be retired so that members of his handler's family could adopt him. He was wounded March 21, 2007, during his second tour in Iraq, in a mortar attack that also killed his Marine handler, Cpl. Dustin J. Lee. With the help of an online petition and widespread media pressure, the Marine Corps relented. He was adopted on Dec. 21, 2007, setting a new precedent for MWD adoption in the event of a handler's death.

Adopting a Four-Legged Vet

In 2000, Congress passed a law allowing dogs declared "excess" by the Defense Department to be adopted by law-enforcement agencies, prior military handlers and the general public. But lots of people—vets and non-vets alike—are still unaware they can adopt retired military working dogs (MWDs).

Debbie Kandoll, the wife of an Air Force Reserve officer, adopted Benny, a 10-year-old German shepherd with degenerative bone disease, from Langley Air Force Base, Va., on Jan. 4, 2008.

Kandoll says her long-range plan is twofold. She wants to make the public aware of the possibility of adopting MWDs. She also hopes to facilitate the process. With this aim in mind, she created a Web site, www.militaryworkingdogadoptions.com. It includes phone numbers for 125 MWD facilities.

To adopt an MWD, prospective owners fill out a basic application answering questions about their experience with dogs, other pets in the household, yard size, fencing and children in the household.

Once a match for a prospective adoption is made, an agreement is signed for the transfer of ownership, releasing the Defense Department from liability.

The dogs are free, but the new owners must pay all costs, including transportation.

"MWD adoption is veterans helping veterans," Kandoll says. "Veterans know all about pushing through adversity, whether it's physical, mental or emotional. These dogs are the same way."

These days, Benny is thriving and his mobility is improved. Kandoll says she is grateful for the chance to care for him. "He's an incredible dog, and has so much to give," she says. "That's why I started the Web site."

'We Are Grateful': War Dog Memorials

There are dozens of memorials dedicated to four-legged heroes around the country and as far away as Guam. Here is a partial list:

West Coast Dog Memorial, March Field Air Museum
Riverside, Calif.

A bronze and granite monument 16 feet tall and 10 feet wide depicts a combat-attired GI with a dog at his side. The inscription reads: "They protected us on the field of battle. They watch over our eternal rest. We are grateful." An identical memorial resides at the National Infantry Museum, Ft. Benning, Columbus, Ga.

Military War Dog Monument, Eisenhower Park Long Island, N.Y.

On Memorial Day 2008, a monument paying homage to all American military dogs was erected in New York. The inscription reads: "Dedicated to all military K-9s, past, present, future—always loyal, always faithful, forever remembered."

War Dog Memorial, Bristol Township Municipal Building, Bristol Township, PA
This memorial is for dogs from all services and was dedicated in 2004 and sculpted by Joe Pavone.

Alabama War Dogs Memorial

USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park Mobile, Ala. Dedicated on Nov. 11, 2008, this four-ton granite slab supports statues depicting a war dog, his handler and other soldiers. The marble back side contains a listing of war dogs that served handlers from Alabama.

War Dog Memorial, Pettis County Courthouse, Sedalia, Mo.

Dedicated in 2003, this memorial reads: "My eyes are your eyes to watch and protect you and yours. My ears are your ears to hear and detect evil minds in the dark. My nose is your nose to scent the invader of your domain and so you may live my life is also yours."

Doberman War Dog Memorial Guam

In the battle for Guam (July 21-August 10, 1944) a Doberman named Kurt saved the lives of 250 Marines when he warned them of Japanese troops ahead. He is honored by a life-sized bronze and granite memorial.

Have your ears been perked to military working dog history? Sniff out more information from the following sources:

Web sites:

The United States War Dogs Association
www.uswardogs.org
(609) 747-9340

Vietnam Dog Handler Association
www.vdha.us
Mike Lemish, Historian
(508) 366-4692

Books:

Lemish, Michael G. War Dogs: Canines in Combat. Brassey's, Inc., 1996.
White, Joseph. Ebony & White: The Story of the K-9 Corps. Wilsonville, Oregon: Doral Publishing, 1996.



<http://www.vspa.com/index.htm>

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