

## Waiting For The Dogs 1967-1968

635th SPS, K-9, U-Tapao RTAFB

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U.S.A.F. Sentry Dog Nav (M828)  
U-Tapao RTAB, Thailand

**Waiting for the Dogs** - I was 19 years old when I arrived at U-Tapao AB, Thailand, and only 4 days later I turned 20. It was a long tour, which was strung out even longer by the waiting and the anticipation of the day I would eventually be united with my K9 Group.

Unlike many of the other dog handlers, who arrived in teams, I arrived by myself. I expected to be met on the tarmac by the Kennel Master, holding my newly assigned four-legged companion by the leash in the left hand and pointing the direction to the kennels with his right.

Instead, I arrived at U-Tapao and was told that there was no K-9 Facility, handlers, or dogs, because construction on the K-9 facility had *not even begun*. My orders stated that I was to report, immediately, to the K-9 section at U-Tapao and be assigned a Sentry Dog. I had my heart set on quickly adapting to a new four-legged friend and I was ready, willing, and able! But this was not to be... yet!

The nine months to follow, were pure Hell, waiting, and waiting, and waiting, for the inevitable to happen. I got sick of writing in my daily diary "K-9 teams and dogs have still not arrived". Meanwhile, I would have to be content to bide my time. But I wasn't content! I hated the whole stinkin' idea of being sent over to 'God Knows Where', and then having to wait for 'God Knows How Long', to connect up with the K-9 Unit that I was so excited to be a part of.

I was assigned flight line duties for the first few months and eventually progressed to work Central Security Control (CSC), Alternate Central Security Control, and a few other pretty decent posts while waiting for the dogs to arrive.

One of my very best friends, that I could confide in, was TSgt Benjamin Cox. Ben always treated me with such respect and always coaxed me to better myself and made me feel proud of my accomplishments no matter how small they were. I always felt comfortable working with him and spending off duty time with him. Ben knew my circumstances and that I had also been a dog handler at Westover AFB, Massachusetts. I found out that he was also waiting for the dogs to arrive and that he was supposed to set up the kennels in preparation for their arrival. I think there was some politics going on because he was also getting tired of waiting for permission to get started.

Ultimately, Ben received orders to start building the kennels and he drafted me immediately to assist. I was thankful not to have to pull any more flight line or CSC duties. From that point on, we worked as a team, and I was more than happy to be the gopher and scrounger. After all, I had been there for six months or so already, and knew the base like the back of my hand. I had a lot of friends on base and many were almost as excited as I was to have a new K-9 area on base.

Immediately, Ben got us assigned a deuce-and-a-half and a jeep, so each of us had mobile transportation. Since the new kennel was located on the far east side of the runway, it was too far to walk back and forth to main base. It's amazing what you can get in trade for a few rides, here and there! Oh happy day, when the first heavy equipment arrived to start clearing the area of brush and trees. Thai operators arrived with bulldozers and other

heavy duty equipment. Ben and I both enjoyed riding the bulldozers while they cleared the area. We became close friends with the Thai operators and spent some of our off time with them and their families.

In very little time the land was cleared, a chain link fence surrounded the area, and K-9 kennels were being built by hand in rows lined up like soldiers. Each kennel was raised off the ground and each kennel had a palm tree to give it shade. The area was very sandy but some grass did grow and we even had our own water tower that had to be hand filled weekly, since we were so far from "plumbing." A hootch to house the records and equipment was built immediately, and also a dog training area. We knew this was just a temporary kennel to tide us over until a permanent kennel could be built down by "Red Horse."

So much work to be useful for such a short time, until the old kennels were abandoned and everything was moved to the new K-9 facility which boasted cement floors for the kennels, actual plumbing with running water, electricity that did not come from a generator, and stainless steel equipment for the Veterinarian to use for the dogs. All this new stuff was never seen by me, as I left Thailand before it was built.

Finally, on March 24th, 1968, 'our unit' arrived, as they touched down on Thai soil at 2300 hours. I finally was able to make the diary entry that I had been waiting to enter. March 25th: *"Today we processed in 15 troops and their Dogs who had arrived at 2300 hours on March 24th."*

On March 26th, it all came together for me. TSgt Tom Swartz, the Kennel Master who had arrived with the 'First Wave' of dog handlers, assigned K-9 ARA (9M72) to me... and I felt complete again. Ara was one of the five additional female German Shepherds that had been sent over to U-Tapao AB for the U.S. Government to eventually give to the King of Thailand. She was a playful dog and quick to obey hand and verbal signals. She knew the difference between training and playtime and it was always a pleasure to play with her because this was a time when I could actually forget about the stress and the tremendous heat and the loneliness for my family.

I knew that Ara was not completely trained as a 'sentry dog' because she was breeding stock that the United States Air Force would eventually give to Thailand to start their K-9 units. I also knew I was getting 'short' with less than 90 days to complete my tour in Thailand. I was more than content to work with Ara and assist with all the other handlers and their dogs and be the Kennel Clerk, because I could be where I wanted to work, finally.

Ara made me feel whole because she became the other half of our "team." I think she was born with a "hollow leg" because she was always hungry and wanted to eat almost anything that sensitive nose of her's could detect.



One of the funniest incidences was when she tried to eat one of the Mang Dahs, giant flying water bugs [looks a lot like big Palmetto bugs] and it grasped on to her lower lip. She fought that bug, which wasn't going to be eaten without a fight, until I could pry it loose from her mouth. Her actions were almost like when a dog tries to get peanut butter off the roof of their mouths. It was hilarious! Thinking back, I miss her so.

Later, on May 5th, 1968, A1C Jim Dorris and A1C Robert Recenes joined me at the Kennels to help out. We became quite a team because we worked so well together. The 15 dogs and handlers were now being posted full time and were no longer available to help out with kennel duties. Keeping the kennel, area, and equipment, clean and secure was a full time task for all three of us. Jim and Robert took over when I left for the states and I heard they made the transition to the new Kennels very successful.

TSgt Tom Swartz, the Kennel Master, made my K-9 tour at U-Tapao very easy and enjoyable. He trusted me and complimented me on work well done which only made me work harder for him. Both, TSgt Swartz and TSgt Cox, played major parts in getting me through a rough time in my life.

I helped many of the newly arriving K-9 Airmen to learn a lot of the "Basic" words, money exchange (Baht),

and customs. Unlike the English alphabet of 26 characters, the Thai alphabet has 44 characters.

I'm probably always going to be remembered for the time I *lost* the deuce and a half, and I swear that some "camoy" (thief) relocated it from where I parked it. Fortunately, we recovered it or I'd probably still be paying for it today!

Another dog handler, Harold L. Horn, and I were both from Iowa. In fact, we were from towns within 20 miles of each other. I remember writing to my Congressman and asking for an Iowa State flag. I passed that flag on to Harold and always felt good that he would be there to represent Iowa after I had left to go back to the states. A few years later, he showed up working at the same business I worked at. He came walking down the aisle one day and I was amazed to see him there. He had been discharged and was working 3rd shift in the fabrication area. I worked day shift and lost track of him. I've tried repeatedly to locate him, for years, and was completely unsuccessful until I received a call, one day in 2003 from Ben Cox. He had found Harold in Ft. Madison, Iowa and he "hooked" us up. We had a great time, catching up!

I had no idea at that time that nearly 40 years later, in 2002, that Ben Cox and I would re-unite in a friendship that we would cherish the rest of our lives. Since 1990, my wife and I had been traveling from Peoria, Illinois to Orlando, Florida several times a year, to see our kids. Practically every visit, we passed Polk City and talked about a strange looking aircraft that was perched by the roadside, appearing as if it had just landed there in the weeds, that advertised an aircraft museum. We had no idea that the tiny city of Polk City was the home where Ben and his wife had lived for almost 40 years, and here we were driving past his home, having no idea he lived there. When Ben found me and called my home, we spoke of where he lived and were amazed that so many times we were within one mile of each other and had no idea. Our very next visit to Orlando included a visit to Polk City and my old friend, Ben!

The K-9 group was tightly knit and we took care of most problems internally. We tried hard to support and cover for each other during times of stress, divorce, or loneliness. All in all, U-Tapao was a learning experience that taught most of us how to handle stress and gave us the ability to learn how to make new friends that would last a lifetime. I met a lot of friends and grew up an awful lot in that year and it was a time well spent that I wouldn't give up for anything.

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