

## **Biên Hòa AB** **To Shoot A Dog**

by **G. Ernest Govea**

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*Airman G. Ernest Govea*

### **Biên Hòa AB, 3rd Security Police Squadron, 1966-1967**

Biên Hòa AB had more than its share of stray dogs. Rabies was always a worry. Nevertheless, GIs like dogs and encourage them by petting and feeding. One day, one of our security policeman was bitten by a rabid dog and had to endure the painful belly shots that fight the disease. I remember him going out to post with his web belt over his shoulder. He had authorization to carry it rather than wear it.

Soon after he was bitten, our squadron commander, LTC Bernard H. Fowle, gave orders to Law Enforcement to shoot all dogs on the base that were not mascots. Mascots were cared for by our K-9 Veterinarians. Each squadron was allowed one mascot, yet dogs were in abundance, so it was certain that most were not mascots, and therefore potential health threats and fair game.

The mascot of the 3rd Security Police Squadron was one of two dogs, depending on who you talked to, and was either a medium sized, long haired, brown dog, or, my favorite, a large black, short haired dog, whose left hind leg was missing and who went by the name of "Tripod."

Like most security policemen, I worked nights the whole year I was in Vietnam, and my Flight was the first to receive the order to shoot stray dogs. We received it with disappointment---no one wanted to shoot a dog. Viet Cong---? We would have been glad to shoot, but dogs?

I was on vehicle patrol that first dog-night, and therefore one of the first expected to execute the order. My patrol partner was a career staff sergeant, a big, heavy, black man, whose name I do not remember. He was a gentle and easy going guy. After receiving the order at Guardmount, Sarge told me to go get a shotgun. I signed for the weapon and got a box of double 00 buckshot shells, and loaded the maximum number of rounds. I met Sarge at the jeep and climbed in on the passenger side---literally riding shotgun.

We drove off into the darkness to do our duty. We knew it wouldn't be long before we would see a dog or two, and after riding around all night, we could not go back in the morning and say we hadn't seen a single dog. I suspected Sarge dreaded the task even more than I. He was a softhearted guy and probably expected me to do all the shooting. After a while, I said, "Hey Sarge, there's no way we can go back and say we didn't see any dogs. Why don't I shoot a dog and you shoot a dog, and then we'll just call it quits?" "OK" said Sarge, and the pact was made.

A few minutes later, we were going down a long dirt road that curved off to the right. There were no huts or any other structures around. Far up ahead our headlights caught a large black mongrel dog trotting toward us on the left hand side of the road. I was no dog expert, but he looked like a black Labrador Retriever, and maybe he could even be related to Tripod. His massive head told me he was male. "There's one!" Sarge pointed.

"I see him," I said, and jacked a round into the chamber. As we got nearer and nearer, the dog maintained a steady pace even though we were slowing down. I don't want to do this.... He had to have known we were slowing down for him. There was nothing else around out there. As we pulled up to him I switched off the safety on the shotgun and stepped out of the jeep just before it came to a stop.

Dogs often wear expressions on their faces that seem to reflect their feelings---maybe that's why we love them---and this pooch, even though we had stopped, kept his gaze straight ahead seemingly ignoring us. His expression and gait seemed to say, "I'm just minding my own business and don't want any trouble from anyone."

I remembered the Guardmount instructions to try and not hit the dog in the head, as the veterinarians wanted to run tests



to get an idea of how many stray dogs were rabies carriers. I aimed the shotgun at his large chest and squeezed the trigger. The weapon recoiled sharply into my shoulder, but my focus remained on the dog. The blast knocked him on his right side and his left-front leg kicked frantically in the air. To minimize his suffering, I had wanted to finish him off as quickly as possible and proceeded to jack another round into the chamber. The shotgun jammed.

As I struggled with it, Sarge shouted "That shotgun's faulty, turn it upside down." I turned it upside down, which brought it almost level with my head, and pulled the pump handle back again. A smoking shell popped out and hit me in the mouth. I snapped the handle forward jacking a fresh round into the chamber, and aimed the weapon at the poor whimpering dog. By now, he had stopped kicking, his leg was slowly coming down and his whole body was beginning to relax. There would be no need for a second shot.

In fifteen seconds the whole thing was all over. But it was the longest fifteen seconds I can remember. I got back in the jeep, relieved that I had followed orders and not hit the dog's head, but I felt terrible. For me it was over. "That was a good shot" Sarge said. His fifteen seconds were fifteen seconds. I took his comment as an reluctant observation rather than flattery, and just replied, "Yeah."



Sarge got on the radio and called in our location to the Law Enforcement desk. Airman Whipple (photo), another Law Enforcement troop, had the unenviable task of collecting the dead dogs and putting them in large clear plastic bags. Ours was a dirty job, but I preferred it over his. I wondered how he would get this large dog into the bag by himself. It must have weighed a good seventy pounds. Sarge didn't seem concerned about that, and I did not volunteer to help. Satisfied the location of the dog was reported, we drove off in search of Sarge's dog.

Because of the abundance of dogs, it was not long before we found another pooch was spotted on the south perimeter road. This was a small, brown dog. It struck me as being female, for she looked like a small version of "Lady" from "Lady and the Tramp." Now it was Sarge's turn. He pulled the jeep off to the right side of the road, and without comment took the shotgun from me. Sarge was a kindhearted fellow, and I could see that it was with great dread that he slowly maneuvered his large frame out of the jeep. Unlike the first dog, this one did not ignore us, but instead, acknowledged Sarge as he approached. Perhaps anticipating food or affection that she must have received from other friendly GIs, she pranced up to Sarge and began to wag her tail vigorously and lick her upper lips.

I saw the weapon recoil in Sarge's arms and the blast hit the dog in the hind quarters. It was not a good shot. The dog went down, but immediately got its front end up and began yelping in pain, whirling in circles, her two hind legs kicking wildly and splattering blood in all directions. From the way she was kicking, I judged she had been hit in the spinal cord. Sarge fired a second shot at the spinning target. Unfortunately, it was no better than the first, as most of the blast didn't even hit the dog, which continued spinning and yelping in pain.

I heard Sarge say, "AAAAWWWW!" and he turned his head away. It was not a pretty sight. For the first time, I wished I had been the shooter. I was certain I would have killed it with the first shot. Maybe Sarge had thought that about my shot earlier.

At this point, an Army duce and a half came up the road, and the driver, seeing what was going on now that the gruesome scene was lit up by his headlights, stopped for a better look. I jumped out of SP jeep and to the driver's side of the truck and shouted at the driver. "HEY!--KEEP MOVING!" Transfixed by the ugly scene, the young soldier stared straight ahead as though he had not even heard me, his mouth open. I jumped up on the side step of the truck and banged on the door with the palm of my hand. "KEEP MOVING!" The spell was partially broken and the driver turned and looked at me through black horned rimmed glasses, his mouth and eyes wide open. I jumped back down and he put his truck in gear and slowly pulled away. I could tell he couldn't believe that we had just shot a dog.

I felt sorry for Sarge. He was the last guy who would want to do this, and now he was not only bungling the job badly, but was caught doing it in blazing flood lights. He must have felt the whole world was watching him in the commission of his grizzly crime. Sarge fired at least four or five rounds before he finally killed that dog. I felt sorry for the dog and Sarge. We knew all about rabies and the painful remedy, but still hated what we had just done. The dog was expecting a pat on the head, and maybe some food. Instead, she received an unexpected, violent, painful death.

Sarge got back in the jeep and handed me the shotgun. The barrel and chamber were hot. His hands were shaking and he looked like he had been through an ordeal. He took the radio in his hand, but had to wait a moment to calm himself before calling in the location.

Meanwhile, other patrols were shooting dogs across Biên Hòa AB. A half hour or so later, I saw another dog off in the distance. Wondering whether only two dogs would satisfy our Flight Commander, I said, "There's another one," and pointed. Sarge looked at the dog and turned his head away without making a comment. We had made a pact to shoot one dog each and he would not waver from it, especially after what he had just experienced. I was glad of that.

We saw other dogs throughout the night, but didn't shoot any. At around 0700 hours, our shift was over and we drove back to the Security Police Law Enforcement office. Whipple's truck was parked out in front. As I walked past to turn in the shotgun, I saw ten or twelve dogs lying in the back in clear plastic bags. When I saw the big black dog I had shot, his face pressed up against the clear plastic bag, I felt terrible. It looked so unnatural. Illogically, I wondered how he could breathe in there, even though I knew it was no longer an issue.

I saw "Lady," the small brown dog Sarge had shot, and she was a bloody mess. I walked into the small building where our offices were located and ran into Whipple at the Law Enforcement desk. He described with disgust how he had struggled getting those dead bloody dogs into plastic bags. I told him I had shot the big black one. That dog, he told me, was not only particularly difficult because of his size and weight, but that like Judas Iscariot, his "bowels had burst asunder." I was glad Whipple had that duty and not I.

Over the next three days, Law Enforcement troops from all three shifts killed 44 dogs. Most of us did not want to do it, but what choice did we have? And there was a valid safety reason for doing so. I only shot the one dog, for which I was grateful. In this place where men killed other men so frequently, so brutally, so systematically, and in such large numbers, it seemed a tragedy that we were now also killing our best friends. That's what war is, a place where violence and tragedy are heaped upon violence and tragedy.

I'll never forget the day I had to shoot a dog.



Tripod: Is there no privacy anywhere?



Tripod: That's it... I'm out'ta here!



Airman Myers (photo left) and I had been stationed at Langley AFB in Virginia prior to Vietnam. Airman Whipple (right) was assigned the unpleasant task of collecting the dead dogs.

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