

AMERICAN WARRIOR

Home at Last

by Don Poss.

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War Dogs Monument, March Field Museum, Riverside, California
February 14, 2000

I write to handlers of war dogs, past and present....

The War Dogs monument stands open to the sky, although it will soon be draped for President's Day dedication, at March Field Museum in Riverside, California. I drive by the museum twice daily, following the freeway herd of thousands, and have resisted the call to stop and visit the handler and war dog. I pledged that I would wait and see it for the first time with my brother handlers. But for the past two days, since the monument's dark, rain-brushed, silhouette was raised, my sworn pledge has weakened. I find myself passing the on-ramp and continuing straight through the perimeter fence shared with March Air Reserve Base, and in to the huge parking lot along I-215. The Valentine's Day roses I have just bought for my wife of 33 years will keep a few more minutes.

After-hours ... the museum is closed and the lot empty. Through windshield wipers sweeping left and right, I spot the lone handler and war dog. I walk the hundred yards toward the dedication grounds of a quarter acre or so, and admire its adobe color stone walls and manicured California green lawns. Along the way, I glance at war machines that once sailed the skies in anger... a B-52 bomber, P-38 lightning, Japanese Zero ... but only a glance. I am drawn toward the War Dog -- *compelled, really* -- as I was to The Wall in D.C., seeking what I must.

A vertical black beam juts upward sixteen feet, like a teflon steel girder, which literally dissects the handler's right side. The metal beam is black as night and dark as the stone of The Wall, yet dull of finish. First approach is from the handler's right side, and I can only identify his shoulder and right arm and hand, which grasps his M16. It is like on night patrol and coming suddenly upon a handler, not seeing his leashed K-9 that would kill you to protect him.

I entered the memorial plaza and circle the path around lawns and tiled plaques, bearing names of heroes remembered and others mostly forgotten, and suddenly look up at the team. I had seen the drawings of the monument, as no doubt have you, and easily recognized its form. I knew of its size, but not its power, until now--and am totally unprepared for the surge of emotions and recognition, being in the presence of the War Dog and his battle weary Handler -- predators of war, and without peers. I find that I am choked and breathing in gulps of air, as I remember. It is as if they were transported into my homeland, from thousands of miles and decades ago ... and they are here now. *I will not let go ... I will not shed more tears.* I pause to let the moment pass, and feel that once more I have won that distant-close battle. I wonder if the emotions will always lay just beneath the surface, awaiting that spark of memory to release again.

I draw a deep breath, determined to study the team for a meaning ... *the answer* ... or whatever it is that draws us to these honored places. The War Dog is at heel, sort of, just off the mark they so like to test, that we demand -- *usually demanded* -- of them. He is sitting, but has alerted and is fixed intently upon a distant threat, awaiting patiently the seconds until his partner and friend notices. As a handler, I cannot check myself from searching out what the K-9 has spotted--his gaze is so real!

A light rain is falling, spotting the K-9's black coat. I touch his paws (as will you) and remember the power and size of my German Shepherd, Blackie's paws. The handler has noticed the War Dog's alert, and his face mirrors that instant as he first recognizes the danger--a not-quite-grin, and pride his war dog has found the enemy. I can almost hear the handler's thoughts: *We have found you, before you have attacked, and have radioed the alert! You will not get pass us ... but if you do, others are waiting, and behind them the full weight of American might will fall upon and break you."*

I walk the courtyard, for a different perspective, and marvel anew at the *life-likeness* of the War Dog team. A steady rain falls, as it has off and on for two days now, but they do not seek shelter from the heavy drops--*nor did we*. They face west, overlooking Riverside National Cemetery and its 114,000 plus at final rest. Behind the team, perhaps half a mile, is the three-miles long runway and flight line of March Air Reserve Base, with taxiing and parked giants -- perimeter secured.

It is time to go ... my valentine is waiting.

I feel a strong pride that finally--*finally*--we are remembered, Blackie, as a team ... handler, and war dog. My eyes cloud

with mist and I am again choked with emotions thought long buried. I walk the warpath toward my car, and feel a presence as if Blackie is padding familiarly along side for one last farewell patrol -- and sense that we are home... *home at last.*

Thank you, sculptor A. Thomas Schomberg, for capturing the Handler and War Dog, as no one else has.

Don Poss
6252nd Air Police Squadron,
366th SPS, K-9
Đà Nẵng Air Base, 1965-1966

War Dogs Memorial

War Dogs Memorial is sculpted, by world-renown sculptor,
A. Thomas Schomberg.
The bronze and granite War Dogs Memorial stands
16 feet, and 10 feet at its base.

Read about the:

Vietnam Security Police Association, Inc. (USAF) **War Dogs Memorial**

American Warrior Series

by Don Poss.

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