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Little Joe's likeness to be included on state's War Dog Memorial

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By **MARY ANNE ZOLLAR**

Times Staff Writer, maryanne.zollar@htimes.com

MERIDIANVILLE - The thick vegetation transformed the jagged trail into a fortress for the North Vietnamese snipers. But the order had come, and Charles Wade Franks was leading a five-man point patrol up the steep jungle mountainside.

As they approached a clearing, Franks' canine comrade, Little Joe, gave a silent signal - the enemy was near.

Franks whispered "Hold it" and then yelled "Get down!" diving for the cover of underbrush as bullets from a hidden enemy rained on the patrol. Little Joe, an 80-pound German shepherd, stormed forward into the maelstrom of gunfire.

When dusk came and calm settled on the mountain on that February day in 1970, Little Joe did not return.

Franks credits Little Joe with saving his life, the lives of his five-man patrol and the lives of the more than 100 men in the infantry unit behind them.

"I believe he sacrificed his life for mine," said Franks, a 57-year-old decorated Vietnam veteran with three Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts to his credit. "So many times, he alerted on the enemy and saved us.

"Little Joe never lied to me.. He was right every time."

Little Joe earned a medal that day, but there was none awarded. Two Silver Star applications for Franks and Little Joe were denied because the commanding officer refused to sign them, Franks says.

But Little Joe was recently honored as the Alabama Dog of the Year by the Birmingham Humane Society and is about to receive a much greater honor. His likeness will grace the Alabama War Dog Memorial that will be dedicated on Memorial Day in Mobile.

Seven dog handlers from Alabama died in the Vietnam War, and their names will be included on a plaque on the marble and bronze monument to be placed at the USS Alabama.

The tribute will also be another step in the healing of Wade Franks, who documented his story in the 2006 book "Never Forgotten."

"We would sleep together. We would eat together. We had a bond," Franks, a New Hope native, said. "Wherever Wade was, Joe was there."

'Ready to go'

Franks was drafted as an 18-year-old in 1968, was sent into the infantry of the 101st Airborne Bravo Company as a "ground-pounder" and shipped off to the boonies of the A Shau Valley, near the Laotian border in South Vietnam.

"I was ready to go. I was taught it was our duty when our country called," Franks said.

Franks was dropped into Landing Zone "Sally" in the midst of stifling jungle heat and unbearable humidity. It rained every day at 4 p.m.

"The fear affected me more than anything," he said. "A lot of guys wouldn't see any combat, and I thought I might not, either."

"But it wasn't that way for me," he added, trailing off.

In May 1969, Franks found himself in the thick of the 11-day battle known as Hamburger Hill, so named for its bloody aftermath. Franks took shrapnel in his leg and abdomen, but the heartbreak of losing his closest friends was more crippling than his injuries.

Another soldier from Huntsville, Ronnie McCrary, felt sorry for Franks and spoke to Capt. James Bradshaw of the 47th Infantry Scout Dog Platoon about a position for him. It would cost Franks an extra six months in Vietnam. McCrary extended with him.

"I thought that being paired with a scout dog, I would not have to get close to another human being," Franks said. But Little Joe would become as much a friend as the men he had served with.

Little Joe was a well-trained soldier. His previous handler had completed his tour of duty and gone home.

"He was so disciplined, but once he found out that I was his new master, it was a love relationship after that," Franks said. "He was my partner."

The team began to walk point for infantry companies, one of the most dangerous jobs in the jungle. They would be the first to find the enemy and the first to take enemy fire.

Little Joe worked off-leash and would lead the patrol by about 15 feet. When he detected the enemy, he would "alert," not making a sound, but stopping in his tracks and slowly lifting his head. Joe's ears would perk up and he would cock his head to the side a bit and sniff the air.

"I would quickly get down as soon as he alerted and begin to whisper to him, 'What is it, what is it,' " Franks said. "I'd lay on the ground, and Little Joe would look at me. When he made eye contact with me, that meant, 'Wade, they're here.' When he looked at me, that was it; it was a done deal."

For six months, they walked point and preserved the lives of the men in their unit many times over.

They were once called upon to help find and rescue a U.S. Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol trapped behind enemy lines and being closed in on.

"We had to find them before the North Vietnamese did," Franks said. Joe found them in 20 minutes.

'This dog does not lie'

The morning of Feb. 22, 1970, Little Joe alerted strongly on the Viet Cong twice, their presence confirmed by the broken brush where soldiers had slid downhill.

But the commanding officer, just three weeks in the field, saw no need to call in support from Cobra gunships.

"He did not think Little Joe had actually detected anything, so his only precaution was to tell us to shoot up the hill," Franks said.

Since no enemy fire was drawn from their shots, the officer assumed it was safe to resume patrol in the area, Franks said.

Little Joe alerted on the enemy again.

The officer gave the order for Franks and Joe to go further.

"I said, 'They're here. Tell him again that this dog does not lie,' " Franks said.

The officer responded with a direct order.

Little Joe got to the clearing first, alerted, but then attacked the enemy in a hail of fire. He made it all

the way to the center of the North Vietnamese position before he was taken down.

"They shot him all to pieces, and I wanted to take him in my arms, but I couldn't touch him because he may have been booby trapped," Franks said.

The soldiers tied a rope to Little Joe's legs and gently turned his body. Thankfully, there were no explosives underneath.

The men insisted on taking Little Joe's body with them to protests by the commanding officer.

They tied Joe's feet together and cut down a small sapling to carry him by. Franks accompanied his friend on the Chinook helicopter back to LZ Sally, where he was buried.

Despair and recovery

Franks returned from the war to Huntsville in 1970 a lost child. For four years, he wandered the country as a drug and alcohol addicted transient.

He heard a woman was looking for him, a classmate from New Hope High School. Gail Powers took him in, cleaned him up and introduced him to Jesus Christ.

Since then, Franks has made 12 trips to Vietnam with Dave Roeveer and his REAP International program. REAP provides clean water, free medical care, educational opportunity and basic needs to the poorest Vietnamese. He doesn't see in them the face of the enemy any more.

"God has given back the things that the enemy stole from me," Franks said. "I won't let my life go to waste. My life is going to count."

Franks says that it means something to him when he goes to a football game or occasion where the national anthem is played.

"I watch people, to see if they're going to stop what they're doing, put their hand on their chest," Franks said. "It makes me feel good to see it. See, I know soldiers that sacrificed for that."

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