



Alabama War Dogs Memorial Foundation

War Dogs: A Short History

(from War Dogs by Micheal Lemish)

World War I...

The United States had not established an official K9 Program during World War I. American Troops had to barter with the French, Belgian and English troops for trained sentry and courier dogs. The most famous American War Dog in World War I was a dog named Stubby. Stubby was a stray pit bull who was picked up on the streets of Hartford Connecticut by Robert Conroy and smuggled on board his troop ship headed for France. On February 5th 1918, Stubby became the mascot of the 102d Infantry, part of the Army's 26th "Yankee Division". Stubby became a hero when he distinguished himself in the battles of Chateau-Thierry, the Marne, Saint-Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne. Rin Tin Tin was a German mascot puppy found alone in a trench after an attack by American forces. The dog would grow up to be a matinee idol and added to the folk lore and popularity of the German Shepherd breed.

World War II...

In 1942 the Quartermaster Corps became responsible for running the Army's K-9 Corps and established its first Reception and Training facility at Front Royal Virginia. Additional Reception and Training Centers were established at Camp Rimini Montana, Fort Robinson Nebraska, San Carlos California, and Cat Island off the coast of Mississippi. There was also a center at Fort Armstrong Oahu HI, and a small sub center on the island of Maui. The Marines operated their own center at Camp Lejeune North Carolina. The Coast Guard had their own facility on the East Coast. A temporary facility was established at Beltsville Maryland to research canine nutrition and develop Army Dog rations. Another temporary facility was established at Fort Belvoir Virginia. The dog teams were identified with the War Dog Detachment although they were used as Scouts and Sentry's. In 1943 one hundred dog teams were sent to the China, Burma and India theaters. These handlers are known as CBI handlers and were still holding reunions as late as June 2000. Some dog teams were sent to support Merrill's Marauders during the last month of operations and were successful in locating snipers. Fort Robinson was the largest K9 Training Center during World War II. By mid 1944 all the centers were closed except for Fort Robinson.

Korean War...

After World War II, due to lack of interest and budget issues the War Dog Programs were mostly cancelled and closed. The 26th Scout Dog Platoon however stayed intact to some degree and moved from Front Royal Virginia to Fort Riley Kansas in 1948. On December 7th, 1951 the responsibility for dog training was transferred to the Military Police Corps and the 26th Scout Dog Platoon moved again to Fort Carson Colorado. The 26th Scout Dog Platoon was the only active War Dog Platoon to serve in the Korean War. The 26th Scout Dog Platoon served with honor and distinction in Korea from June 12th 1951 to June 26th 1953. Platoon members were awarded a total of three Silver Stars, six Bronze Stars for Valor, and thirty five Bronze Stars for meritorious service. On February 27th 1953 the Department of the Army recognized the accomplishments of the platoon in General Order No. 21. One Dog who proved an outstanding success with the 26th Infantry Scout Dog Platoon in Korea was Scout Dog York (011X). York completed 148 combat patrols; the last one coming the day before the Armistice was signed officially ending the war. On July 1, 1957 the War Dog Training Center was moved from Fort Carson Colorado to Fort Benning Georgia.

Vietnam War:

During the late fifty's and early sixty's as very expensive jet aircraft and sophisticated weapons systems were developed, the Air Force had a permanent and on-going need for the use of Sentry Dogs to ensure the security of these installations. Due to lack of interest and dependability of the Army, in meeting the need of the Air Force for Sentry Dogs, the Air Force established its own Sentry Dog Training Facility in October 1958 at Lackland Air Force Base near San Antonio Texas. Fort Benning Georgia served as the only Training Center for all Army and Marine Scout Dogs during the Vietnam War. The dogs were procured and inducted into the service by the Air Force and sold to the Army for training as Scout Dogs. In July 1965 the first Air Force Sentry Dogs began arriving in Vietnam from Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, the Pacific Air Force Sentry Dog Center in Showa, Japan and Kadena Air Base, on Okinawa. These dogs maintained perimeter watches at Bien Hoa, Binh Thuy, Can Ranh Bay, Da Nang, Nha Trang, Tuy Hoa, Phu Cat, Phan Rang, Tan Son Nhut and Pleiku.

In September 1965 the Army began deploying Sentry Dogs to Vietnam under the command of the 18th Military Police Brigade. Most of the Sentry Dogs and handlers for the Army and the Marines were trained at the U.S. Army Pacific Sentry Dog School in Okinawa. Sentry Dogs proved a very successful deterrent to the Viet Cong attempts to infiltrate air bases and other installations. On December 4, 1966 a major Viet Cong penetration of the Tan Son Nhut Air Base was attempted. One Sentry Dog Handler was killed and three Sentry Dogs were killed repelling the attack. Another Sentry Dog named Nemo was shot in the face and lost an eye from the incident. Nemo's handler had also been wounded in the attack and Nemo though wounded himself, crawled across his handler's body to protect him. Nemo returned to Lackland in July 1967 as a part of an Air Force dog recruitment team.

Due to the nature and escalation of the war, in 1965 the Army decided to reactivate its scout dog program. During the winter of 1965 the Marines entered into an inter-service agreement with the Army to train scout dogs. This would be the first time since World War II that the Marines had used scout dogs. Two Marine scout dog platoons were deployed to Vietnam in February 1966. The Marines kenneled their dogs near Da Nang at Camp Kaiser, named after the first Marine scout dog to be killed in action in Vietnam. The first Army scout dog platoon was deployed to Vietnam when the 25th IPSD arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in June 1966. Between late 1965 and January 1969 twenty-two Army Scout Dog Platoons (including the 47th IPSD) and Four Marine Scout Dog Platoons were deployed to Vietnam.

In October 1966 the Army began training the first two (63rd IPCT and 65th IPCT) of 14 Tracker Teams at the British Jungle Warfare School (JWS) in Johore Bahru Malaysia. A tracker platoon consisted of three teams comprised of five men and a single tracker dog. A team leader managed the dog and handler, two cover men and a visual tracker. Based on the experiences of the British, Black or yellow Labrador Retrievers were favored as trackers dogs, in contrast to the German shepherd that filled the ranks of the scout dogs platoons. By far the biggest difference between tracker and scouting dogs is that of scenting. Scout dogs alert to any unfamiliar orders, mostly in the air but also on the ground, as in the case of trip wires, enemy personnel, and booby traps. Tracker dogs are trained to follow only one scent on the ground. This scent needs to be given to the dog, usually by having him sniff an enemy footprint or a blood trail. This is called the "Scent Picture" that the dog frames in his mind, and he then follows it amid hundreds of other odors on the trail. But this scent is as unique as a person's fingerprint or a written signature. In all, eleven U.S. Tracker teams and two Australian combat tracker teams supported our troops in Vietnam. In 1967 the United States began to develop its own Combat Tracking Team Center at the U.S. Army Military Police School at Fort Gordon, Georgia.

It is believed that over 9,000 handlers and 4,000 dogs served in Vietnam. Of the 294 dog handlers who were killed in Vietnam, one handler, Staff Sergeant Robert W. Hartsock from the 44th IPSD received the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously for extraordinary heroism and bravery in defending against a sapper attack on the Dau Tieng Base Camp, Hau Nghia Province, Republic of Vietnam. The scout and tracker teams used in Vietnam earned a good amount of respect for their work. Of course, as in previous wars, they still remained a small element and could provide only a limited impact. Viewed on the grand scale of the war at large their accomplishments remained minor. When analysis is made based on their numbers in the field, their impact was significant.

After training and development at Fort Gordon Georgia, the 60th Infantry Platoon (first Mine/Tunnel Detector Dog Platoon) was deployed to Vietnam at Cu Chi on April 22, 1969 in support of the 25th Infantry Division and the 23rd Infantry Division (Americal Division). After a successful test experience in Vietnam, in July 1970 the mine/tunnel dog program shifted to Fort Benning, Georgia. In 1970, after the Army's success, the Marines instituted their own mine/tunnel dog program.

The final disposition of the dogs who served in Vietnam was a shameful and despicable ending to these beautiful animals who served us so well. The Military considered the dogs to be equipment and disposed of them in the most cost efficient way. In 1970 and 1971 when most of the dog units were being deactivated, the dogs were given to the reluctant ARVN Troops (Army of South Vietnam) to an uncertain fate or euthanized. Despite some very real concerns about possible contagious diseases, the final disposition of the dogs at the end of their Vietnam service was both immoral and disgraceful.

Conclusion:

From its early inception, the K-9 Corp has been an on again, off again experience. With the exception of the Air Force Sentry Dog Program which has remained on-going and stable, the other K-9 programs have started and then been abandoned time and again as the needs of the military have changed, expanded or contracted. This failure to maintain an ongoing program means that the lessons and experience gained are lost to future generations as those with this specialized knowledge and experience pass on or move on to different fields. An example of this is the Visual Tracker, an important part of the Tracker Dog Teams, now on the verge of becoming a lost art.

The effectiveness of the dogs in Vietnam and other wars will always be subjective and open to debate. Many may find the use of military dogs insignificant or even trite. When compared to the big picture, the thousands of bombs dropped, large engagements with hundreds or thousands of infantrymen killed or wounded, the response would be yes. Yet for the dog handlers, whether they came home in one piece, wounded, or at all was often decided by the dog they worked with in the field. Despite their successes, dogs did not always work up to expectations depending on many factors including health factors, terrain and weather conditions to mention a few. Dog handlers worked on a rotation basis and appreciated the amount of time they were allowed in rear base camps between missions. Dog handlers had the highest respect for straight line soldiers who endured much longer periods in combat conditions with only occasional relief.

