

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY
WORKING DOG IN VIETNAM

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by

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ABSTRACT

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY WORKING DOG IN VIETNAM by LCDR Mary Kathleen Murray, USN 110 pages.

This study investigates the contributions of the military working dogs in Vietnam to determine their significance to the United States' war effort.

There is limited written history concerning the use of the military working dogs in Vietnam. The methods and procedures employed in this study data relied extensively on personal military after action reports and histories (written and oral) to compile a historical account of the military working dog in Vietnam.

The study found that when correctly employed, these animals made significant contributions to the United States' war effort in terms of the saving of lives and in the protection of military resources. However, these contributions could not be quantified; therefore, assumptions were made as to the effectiveness of the animals.

Despite their effectiveness, the scout, tracker, and mine/tunnel dog programs were disbanded at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. This practice of disbanding military working dog programs at the conclusion of conflict is one that has been practiced since World War II. Each subsequent war has necessitated the rebuilding of military working dog programs. Today, only the sentry dogs are still active, having been joined by the relatively new narcotic detection dogs. Future conflicts may necessitate rebuilding the scout, tracker, and mine/tunnel dog programs.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	After Action Report
AIT	Advanced Individual Training
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BSI	Behavior Systems Incorporated
CAG	Combined Action Group
CO	Commanding Officer
CONUS	Continental United States
CTT	Combat Tracker Teams
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DoD	Department of Defense
IPCT	Infantry Platoon, Combat Tracker
IPSD	Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog)
IP (SD) (M/T)	Infantry Platoon, Scout Dog, Mine/Tunnel
JWS	Jungle Warfare School
LZ	Landing Zone
MAAGV	Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam
MOS	Military Occupation Specialty
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
M-Dog	Mine/Tunnel Dog
MP	Military Police
MWD	Military Working Dog
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer

NCOIC	Non-commissioned Officer-in-Charge
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OIC	Officer in Charge
OJT	On the Job Training
POL	Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants
QMC	Quartermaster Corps
RTO	Radio Transmitter Operator
TACAN	Tactical Air Navigation
USAEUR	United States Army, Europe
USALWL	United States Army Limited Warfare Laboratory
USAMPS	United States Army Military Police School
USARPAC	United States Army, Pacific
USARV	United States Army, Republic of Vietnam
USCONARC	United States Continental Army Command
USMC	United States Marine Corps
VC	Vietcong

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of the Study

More than eleven hundred dogs served in Vietnam as part of the United States Armed Forces. Working alongside members of all branches of service, these canine soldiers filled vital roles in the campaign in Southeast Asia. Despite their numbers and heroics, the history of the dogs and the servicemen who worked with them is relatively unknown, even among the dog handlers themselves.

Even before American troops were formally committed in Vietnam, military advisors to the region recognized the usefulness and importance of military working dogs (MWDs). As early as 1960 American scout and sentry dogs were introduced in South Vietnam to assist the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in protecting their military installations as well as in searching for the Vietcong (VC) and soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Utilizing dogs that had been left behind by the French, U. S. Air Force personnel established the ARVN dog program.

The ARVN program was plagued with problems from the beginning. The Vietnamese viewed dogs as a source of food and deliberately assigned soldiers of poor performance to the handler program. Due to limited resources, the ARVN forces could not and would not provide a nutritious diet to the dogs and many suffered and even died of malnutrition. This problem was compounded by the fact that the ARVN did not have a single veterinarian in the ranks and the U. S. forces sent to assist with the establishment of the program were seriously undermanned. Many of the dogs that did survive the initial training phase suffered a high casualty rate due to the abbreviated training and a lack of ARVN understanding as to the correct employment of the animals. Ultimately the program would prove a failure but the usefulness of the dogs, as part of the American forces, would see them used until the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam.

The military tactics of the NVA and Vietcong dictated that dogs be trained in a variety of special duties. Canines served as sentries, scouts, trackers, mine/tunnel dogs, and, as drug use made its way into the ranks, narcotic detection dogs as well. The ability of the dogs to detect mines and booby traps was especially noteworthy and greatly appreciated by the patrols to which they were assigned. At the height of the conflict, the United States had approximately six thousand MWDs in their inventory and over eleven hundred stationed in Vietnam.

In the twenty-five years since the last American soldier left Hanoi, the United States has engaged in several conflicts not too unlike those engaged in during Vietnam. The history of the working dog teams in Vietnam merits study for the numerous lessons learned and their applicability on today's battlefields.

The Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the history of the MWD teams in Vietnam to determine the significance of their contributions to the conflict. It is hypothesized that environmental and human-driven factors detracted from the effectiveness of the MWD teams. In support of this the following subproblems will be examined:

What were the contributions of the sentry dog teams between 1962 and 1972 and the environmental and human-driven factors that influenced the sentry dogs' effectiveness?

What were the contributions of the scout dogs between 1965 and 1972 and the environmental and human-driven factors that influenced the dogs' effectiveness?

What were the contributions of the tracker dog teams between 1968 and 1972 and the environmental and human-driven factors that influenced the dogs' effectiveness?

What were the contributions of the mine/tunnel dog teams between 1969 and 1972 and the environmental and human-driven factors that influenced the dogs' effectiveness?

The Significance of the Problem

The increased numbers of Vietcong attacks and sabotage against U. S. military installations led to the American use of working dogs in Vietnam. Despite the problems experienced with the ARVN program, proponents believed that properly trained dogs and handlers could be useful with proper training. Critics, not familiar with the success of dogs in the Southeast Asian theater during World War II argued that the tropical climate was too harsh and would prevent proper utilization of the animals. A successful Vietcong raid against a Da Nang air base in 1965 caused military security experts to rethink the program and Project Top Dog 145 was born. In the first year of the sentry dog program Vietcong guerilla forces were not successful in penetrating the American military installations at Phan Rang, Qui Nhon, or Ban Me Thot.¹

By 1967 there were more than 600 dogs assigned to sentry duty in Vietnam. The animals and their handlers served on twenty-seven military installations with great success. The importance of the dogs in the war effort cannot be overstated. In an interview with historian Michael Lemish, Captain Stephen A. Canavera, Security Police Operations officer at Binh Thuy Air Base, stated, “of all the equipment and methods used to detect an attacking enemy force, the sentry dog has provided the most sure, all inclusive means.”²

As hostilities escalated in Vietnam, guerrilla attacks on American patrols increased, driving the rebirth of the American scout dog program. After what can best be described as a sluggish recruiting effort, the first scout dog teams arrived in Vietnam in 1965. Both Army and Marine Corps scout dog teams enjoyed great success almost from the beginning. By one account, in the first year alone, scout dogs were credited with saving over two thousand Marines. There are hundreds of other stories whereby scout dogs saved the lives of handlers and patrols alike. Responding to these successes, the Army brought in additional scout dogs and by 1969 there were twenty-two Army and four Marine Corps scout dog platoons. The importance of the scout dogs cannot be overlooked. Writes Lemish,

When analysis is made based on their numbers in the field, their impact was significant. Deploying more scout dog teams would have made absolutely no difference in the final outcome of the war, but additional teams would have meant a lot more boys returning home.³

The dense jungle of Vietnam posed a significant problem for American troops. The Vietcong could conduct an attack on American forces and virtually disappear into the jungle without a trace. After a miserable attempt to employ the olfactory superior but far too noisy bloodhound, the Army turned to the British who had been successfully employing tracker dogs since World War II. Drawing on the lessons learned from the British in Malaysia, the Labrador retriever was selected for the new program. In 1968 the

first tracker teams arrived in Vietnam, and by the following year there were eleven teams operating in country.

Despite the technological superiority of the American forces, the Army and Marine Corps continued to take a large number of casualties from booby traps. The M-dog or mine dog program that was begun in the 1950s and subsequently disbanded was reactivated in 1968 in response to these casualties. The theory was that a properly trained dog could detect mines, tunnels, and even the crudest booby trap. After considerable training and expense, the first mine/tunnel dog platoon arrived in the spring of 1969. The platoon received mixed reviews but overall was seen as such a success that the program was expanded.

The contributions of the military working dog teams in Vietnam were important to the American war effort. The lessons learned in Vietnam with respect to training and employment suggests the MWD team may have applicability in today's environment of military operations other than war (MTOOW). By drawing upon the experiences of the sentry, scout, mine, and tracker dog teams, the Army could avoid costly errors in training but more importantly, could avoid errors that might result in the loss of human lives.

The Limitations

Pertinent data may not be available due to the destruction of records following the Vietnam war.

Contacting all potential sources of information is not possible due to the large number of dog handlers who served in Vietnam and their current inaccessibility.

Personal accounts from veterans may not be entirely accurate due to the length of time that has transpired since the conclusion of the Vietnamese war.

The Definitions of Terms

After Action Report. A formatted report submitted by an Army unit documenting the previous month's operational activities.

Charlie. The nickname given to the Vietcong by the American forces.

Explosive Detector Dog. A dog specifically trained to discriminate the scent of explosives.

Military Working Dog. A dog specifically trained to perform law enforcement or physical security operations.

Military Working Dog (MWD) Team. A military working dog and its handler, trained to work together in performing law enforcement and/or physical security duties.

Mine and Tunnel Dogs. Dogs specifically trained to detect mines and locate tunnels and bunkers.

North Vietnamese Army. The official, trained army of the North Vietnamese government.

Project Top Dog. A four-month Air Force experimental sentry dog program in Vietnam.

Sapper. A Vietcong combat engineer.

Scout Dog. A Military Working Dog trained to work silently either on or off leash, to detect an airborne scent, and to “signal” the handler when it has picked up the presence of nearby dangerous objects or personnel. It is also used to support maneuvering infantry elements in a wide range of tactical missions, day or night, under all weather and terrain conditions. (FM 7-40)

Sentry Dog. A dog specifically trained to provide tactical or nontactical security for fixed military installations. (FM-19-35)

Tracker Dog. A dog utilized in reconnaissance roles to track an individual or group of people.

Vietcong. A communist-led army and guerilla force, supported largely by the North Vietnamese, that operated in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

The Assumptions

The first assumption is that the historical successes of dogs in combat can be applied to today’s military missions.

The second assumption is that future American military operations will include Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW).

Methodology

The data for this study is derived from various sources. These sources include published books, periodicals, military archives, military studies, private collections, and oral histories.

The analysis of the study will be broken down as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Overview

Chapter 3: Sentry Dogs

Chapter 4: Scout Dogs

Chapter 5: Tracker Dogs

Chapter 6: Mine/Tunnel Dogs

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Chapter 2 will contain an overview of the data available for the study. Chapters 3 through 6 will discuss the training and deployment of the working dogs in Vietnam with each chapter concentrating on a specific aspect of the dogs' employment. The emphasis in these chapters will be on the factors that influenced the effectiveness of the dogs' performance. The study will conclude with chapter 7 and a summary of the effectiveness of the military working dogs in Vietnam with a discussion of the lessons learned from their use.

¹ Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs: Canines in Combat* (Washington: Brassey's, 1997), 176.

² *Ibid.*, 179.

³ *Ibid.*, 197.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW

This chapter discusses the sources and material available for the study of military working dogs in Vietnam. The sources are not limited to literature but include oral accounts from Vietnam Veterans. As such, the material available will be reviewed in three general categories: official histories, unofficial histories, and oral histories.

Written Histories and Reports

There are a limited number of official histories concerning the use of military working dogs in Vietnam. This is due in part to poor record keeping by the U.S. Army as well as the destruction of records following the evacuation from Vietnam. Veterans of the conflict also cite the unpopularity of American involvement in Vietnam as one of the reasons why there has been so little written concerning the use of dogs in the war. Still another reason why there is a shortage of official histories is because information concerning the use of dogs in Vietnam was often times classified. While many documents and reports from the era have since been declassified, there are still a large number of reports still unavailable to the public.

There are, however, a number of official reports and documents concerning the use of military working dogs in Vietnam. Reports include U.S. Marine Corps project reports, Army Concept Team reports, Combat Operations Research Group Reports, and U.S. Special Warfare School Reports. Documents include a CLIC (Center for Low Intensity Conflict) paper and a Combat Lessons Bulletin.

The Army required monthly after action reports (AARs) by American platoon commanders in Vietnam. If the platoon had a dog team assigned, the dog handler was responsible for ensuring that the role of the dog team was recorded in the monthly report. These AARs are on file with the National Archives in Suitland, Maryland. Former Vietnam dog trainer, Sergeant First Class (Retired) Jesse Mendez, has personally read over 1,000 after action reports involving scout, tracker, and mine/tunnel dogs. He has compiled detailed statistics on the results of the operations conducted between 1969 and 1972. However, statistics have not been compiled for units that did not employ military working dogs.

War Dogs: Canines in Combat by historian Michael Lemish is the most comprehensive book on the American use of dogs in combat. Lemish, historian for the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association, discusses first, the origins of the modern military working dog and then devotes successive chapters to the roles canines have played in each war beginning with World War I. He concludes with a chapter on lessons learned, with a focus on the Vietnam experience. Although only one chapter is devoted to the dogs of Vietnam, Lemish's work is widely regarded among members of the Vietnam Dog Handler's Association as the most accurate and comprehensive book written on the subject. Of note, Lemish is not a Vietnam Veteran or a former dog handler.

Mary Elizabeth Thurston's book *The Lost History of the Canine Race* traces the history of dogs beginning with pre-Columbian North America and ending with the status of dogs today. The role of dogs in combat is woven through the 15,000-year history with one chapter devoted to the use of dogs in war, beginning with the American Revolution.

The military working dogs of Vietnam are discussed in terms of their valor and with emphasis placed on the disposition of the animals at the war's end.

Retired Army Veterinarian Colonel William H. H. Clark published a detailed account of the role of his Army branch in Vietnam. His book *The History of the United States Army Veterinary Corps in Vietnam, 1962-1973*, is a comprehensive account of the veterinarians and their role in the military working dog program in Southeast Asia. The book provides an excellent history of the ARVN dog program and of the first American dogs in Vietnam.

Unofficial Histories

The unofficial histories concerning this study are further subdivided into two areas. These areas are professional magazine articles and information extracted from the Vietnam Dog Handler's Association's newsletters.

During the Vietnam war, professional magazines, such as Army Digest, The Airman' and Infantry, published several articles on the role of military working dogs in Vietnam. Most of the articles included accounts of the methods of employment as well as the heroics of the dogs. Few articles contain statistics concerning the effectiveness of the dogs.

The Vietnam Dog Handler Association publishes a newsletter that includes statistical information and personal accounts from the handlers. Publisher and association president, Thomas Mitchell, verifies all personal accounts prior to publication. The association is less than five years old and new members are continually being located and recruited.

Oral Histories

These personal accounts of the employment of the dogs used in Vietnam provide valuable insight as to the effectiveness of the animals. While reports and documents contain valuable statistics, these statistics were affected by factors not covered in the AARs. These factors include environmental conditions as well as the physical condition

of the dog. Oral histories by the handlers and the men who worked with the dogs serve to tell a more complete story.

Conclusion

A comprehensive written history of the military working dog in Vietnam does not exist. Poor record keeping and the destruction of important documents have left large holes in the official written story. Limited unofficial histories and sometimes conflicting oral histories further shadow an otherwise bright spot in the Vietnam war. This study will attempt to compile the official and unofficial histories with oral accounts to tell a more complete story of the sentry, scout, tracker, and mine/tunnel dog teams in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 3

SENTRY DOGS

The first dogs to serve in Vietnam were the sentry dogs. This chapter will discuss the early history of American canine sentries, their acquisition, training, employment, and lessons learned from the conflict.

Background

The concept of employing dogs as sentries was hardly new or revolutionary when hostilities broke out in Vietnam. In the United States, the Air Force had been successfully using dogs to guard the Minuteman missile silos for over ten years. In Vietnam, however, the sentry dog program was launched with less than impressive results. In March of 1961, in response to Vietcong attacks on ARVN facilities, the United States Air Force sent ten sentry dogs, accompanied by two instructors, to assist in the security of the ARVN air bases. The ARVN program failed for lack of supervision and support. Lemish notes that veterinary care was virtually nonexistent and there appeared to be no interest in establishing a training program for the dogs and handlers.¹ It would be another four years before the sentry dog program would be revisited.

The American sentry dog program in Vietnam was born in response to a successful sapper (Vietcong combat engineer) attack on the ARVN base at Da Nang on 1 July 1965. At the time of the attack, sentry dogs were not a part of a single American security plan in Vietnam.² Just days after the attack, the American sentry dog program was born in the form of Air Force Project Top Dog.

Project Top Dog called for the assignment of forty U.S. Air Force handlers and forty dogs to Vietnam for a trial period of four months. Within two weeks, the sentry dog teams arrived in Vietnam. Upon arrival the dogs and their handlers were assigned to the Tan Don Nhut and Bien Hoa air bases near Saigon and the Da Nang air base near the demilitarized zone (DMZ).³ Despite a lack of understanding of the sentry dog employment, the program proved a success and was responsible for the establishment of the Army sentry dog program in September 1965 and the Navy program in February 1967.

Acquisition

As demand for the dogs increased, the Department of Defense (DoD) was faced with the challenge of acquiring a sufficient number of qualified dogs for the sentry dog program. The responsibility for acquisition for all the services belonged to the Air Force. DoD Instruction 4115.1 of June 1964 and amended by Change 1, dated 12 October 1964, “transferred the responsibility for procurement of ‘live animals not raised for food’ from the Army Quartermaster Corps to the Air Force Air Training Command at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas.”⁴ This centralization of acquisition would prove to be an effective means to meet the demand for sentry dogs over the next three years.

Creativity in acquisition was necessary in order to find a sufficient number of qualified dogs for the sentry dog program. Civilian competition for the animals rose due to the increase in use of dogs by local law enforcement agencies and private security companies.⁵ In response to this competition, “recruiting teams” were established to screen and buy dogs. The teams consisted of “a team leader, procurement officer, veterinarian and assistants, dog trainers and handlers, and a transportation officer--altogether around 12 men.”⁶ The team moved into a recruiting area, when possible, using a local military installation as its base, and advertised through the local media.

The recruiting program proved an expensive operation. Previously, the Air Force had relied on donated space for advertising but the increase in demand called for more aggressive measures. The U.S. Air Force Recruiting Service found itself coordinating the procurement of paid advertisements for the recruiting of both two- and four-legged soldiers. Advertisements for dogs were placed in the designated recruiting areas and local recruiters were given packages with the forms and instructions for prospective donors or sellers. The same recruiters who helped young men and women enlist in the Air Force were responsible for assisting dog owners in the preparation of the forms and answering inquiries. The objective of the program was to reach as many potential donors and sellers as well as to simplify the screening and recruiting process for the Air Force.⁷

Despite the initial screening process, just over half of the dogs purchased by the recruiting teams actually completed their basic training. Much like their human counterparts, the animals were rejected for physical and temperamental problems. Of the 40 percent rejected by Lackland Air Force Base, 20 percent were for physical rejections such as hip dysplasia and heartworm disease, and the remaining 20 percent were temperament rejections.⁸ The most common causes for the latter being gunshyness and underaggressiveness. In many cases, the former owners had requested that the dogs be returned to them should the dogs fail to complete training. This became an additional financial burden to the Air Force as well as a logistical concern.

The Air Force received numerous offers from private breeders of German Shepherd Dogs (GSDs) to contract the procurement of the dogs. The Air Force rejected because the qualities desired in a show winning German shepherd were not necessarily those that the Air Force was seeking. Moreover, while the majority of the dogs trained by Lackland were purebred, the Air Force did solicit and procure a number of mixed breed German and Belgian shepherd mixes.

The average price that the Air Force paid for a sentry dog was \$150.00.⁹ This was by no means the maximum paid as the recruiting team would pay more for a

particularly good prospect. In general, there was little contention over the asking price. When coupled with the cost of recruiting, the fee paid to the seller was only a fraction of the cost of canine procurement.

However, not all sellers were motivated by money. Like the dogs donated in World War II, many people were motivated by simple patriotism. Some dog owners were frustrated by overly energetic and aggressive pets and saw the offer by the Air Force as a good solution. Although “he was ‘the biggest and cutest’ of his litter,” Heindrich, a German and Belgian shepherd mix, “‘grew and grew and grew’ until something had to be done.”¹⁰ With seven children in their growing family, Blair and Mattie Reed saw the military’s offer to train dogs for sentry duty as the answer to their problem.

Heindrich completed his basic training and was sent to Vietnam where he served with handler Larry Sharp as part of the first group of the 212th MP Sentry Dog unit. During the year that the two guarded the ammunition depot at Long Bien, Sharp often wondered if his dog had a family in the United States. After a number of inquiries, Sharp established contact with the Reed family and began a correspondence. Like many families who sent their dogs to Vietnam, the Reed’s were delighted to receive letters and photos of Heindrich. In 1970, at the age of six, Heindrich was euthanized after contracting a disease called Red Tongue.

Training

The Air Force conducted training for all handlers going to Vietnam. In most cases the handlers were volunteers who had an interest and love for working with dogs. These individuals developed the strongest bonds with their dogs.

For the Army, most of the sentry dog handlers came from the military police fields. The program solicited volunteers who appreciated dogs, possessed “reasonable intelligence, dependability, resourcefulness, and patience.”¹¹ After completion of the military police Advanced Individual Training (AIT) course at Fort Gordon, Georgia, the

prospective handler attended a one-week orientation course prior to being sent to Okinawa for final training at the USARPAC Sentry Dog School. Upon arrival the soldier was teamed with a dog that had either returned from Vietnam for retraining or one that had received no training at all.¹² The handler and dog would remain together for the duration of the handler's tour of duty in Vietnam, at which point, the handler would most often return to the continental United States (CONUS) and the dog would be reassigned to a new handler.

All Air Force training took place at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. For the prospective handlers, most being new graduates of basic training, the first course of instruction consisted of four weeks of training at the Air Force Security Police school. Upon completion of this phase of training, candidates were paired with their dogs for Sentry Dog School. Most of the dogs used at this school had not received even the basics of obedience. By graduation, however, the handler and dog were a finely tuned team and ready for the final phase of training at Camp Medina, just across the highway from the Lackland kennels. Here the handler and his dog received aggression and scent training. From Camp Medina, the handler and his dog were sent to Vietnam for the real test of their training.

While most of the sentry dogs sent to Vietnam were assigned to either the Air Force or the Army, the Navy did employ sentry dog teams on a limited basis. The first all-Navy class of sentry dog handlers was solicited from boot camp--basic training--in late October 1966. After graduation from boot camp, these twenty-nine sailors were sent to Lackland for training. Like their Air Force counterparts, these prospective sentry handlers were required to complete the Air Force Security Police training prior to beginning Sentry Dog School.

By many accounts the handlers particularly enjoyed this phase of their training where they were finally paired up with their canine companion. Former Navy Vietnam dog handler, David Massey recalls,

We spent the first couple of weeks getting to know our dogs and learning how to teach them the fine art of obedience. It was kind of comical to watch an inexperienced handler try to teach an inexperienced dog.¹³

After completion of aggression and scent training at Camp Medina, Navy Sentry Dog Class 14126 graduated on 8 February 1967. Although the new graduates were promised a month of leave prior to leaving for Vietnam, events in Da Nang necessitated the quick

replacement of the Marine sentries already assigned in theater. On 9 February 1967, the twenty-nine handlers and their dogs boarded a C-130 cargo plane for Vietnam.

Training for the Marine Corps handlers was conducted both at Lackland as well as in Vietnam. The first Marine sentry dog unit began training by Air Force instructors at Lackland in the fall of 1965 and graduated a platoon of twenty-eight in January 1966. In February 1966 the platoon and their dogs boarded a C-130 cargo plane, and after brief stops in Hawaii, Guam, and Wake Island, arrived in Da Nang for duty. One group of Marine handlers was recruited from newly arrived Marines in Vietnam. Marine Corps sentry handler Rick Schuette describes his experience:

My MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] when I arrived [in Vietnam] was 0311 (Infantry). . . . When we arrived we got our orders. Most of the guys were assigned to infantry companies. Myself and a bunch of others were assigned to the 1st MP Bn [Military Police battalion]. They loaded us on the trucks and took us to battalion base camp. When we got there they asked for about eight volunteers for dog handlers. . . . We were trained by two Air Force sergeants right there at the base of Hill 327.¹⁴

The process of training sentry dogs was not without its share of hazards. “In the early years, the dogs were trained as ‘attack’ dogs and were known to attack almost anything, including their handler.”¹⁵ It was considered a rite of passage for a sentry dog handler to suffer his first bite from his own dog. As the program developed, however, so did the methods of training dogs. By 1969, “the dogs were beginning to be trained as ‘patrol dogs’, much like the dogs in today’s police departments. They were trained to not attack until commanded to do so, or if the handler was in duress.”¹⁶ It was because of this aggressiveness training that dogs were not permitted to return to CONUS with their handlers upon completion of their tour of duty. The military did not believe that a sentry dog could be untrained and was not willing to risk releasing the dog into civilian life.

Employment

One of the biggest problems facing the sentry dog program was ignorance on the part of base and installation commanders as to how to best employ their new security

system. The standardization of training by the Air Force probably offset potential problems stemming from this ignorance. Despite the difficulties and challenges facing the handlers, the program was considered a great success and enjoyed considerable growth. “Between 1965 and 1972, three Army Sentry Dog companies, two USMC sentry dog platoons and ten Air Force Security Police Sentry Dog squadrons patrolled the many United States military compounds and bases throughout Vietnam.”¹⁷ Records indicate that there were approximately 1,600 sentry dogs serving in Vietnam at any one time during the war.¹⁸

The success of the program was recognized on both sides of the war. Army veterinarian and Vietnam historian Colonel William Henry Harrison Clark writes, In the early stages of the war, the Viet Cong considered the dog program to be a major threat. They ranked it number two right behind helicopters, as a target for destruction.¹⁹

The sentry dog was considered a great security asset and enjoyed considerable popularity wherever assigned. His most favorable traits, those of being able to guard a fixed

installation and attack intruders, were not considered competition to the Infantry advisors.²⁰

The sentry dog team's popularity came with a price. Their mission was often lonely and hazardous. A popular saying, coined by the American troops was "Charlie owns the night," "Charlie" being the nickname for the Vietcong. For the sentry dog handler, this reference to the Vietcong's ability to strike and then disappear into darkness, was especially unnerving. The sentry dog team patrolled only at night and was generally assigned a designated area to secure. As an installation's first line of defense, once an alert was radioed in, the handler and his dog were left to defend themselves against enemy attacks until the arrival of friendly reinforcements.²¹

Sometimes the "enemy" wore a friendly face and operated inside the handler's security zone. As the war progressed the armed forces experienced a surge of recreational drug use by the troops both on and off duty. Army sentry dog handler Tony Montoya describes the problems he and his dog, Patches, faced in this permissive environment.

The heavy use of drugs in Cam Ranh in 1971 was getting to me. I didn't indulge myself, but many others did and it made it dangerous on the perimeter. The guards in the bunkers and towers behind me would get so freaked out on drugs they would shoot at anything that moved . . . including me and Patches.²²

The mission and employment of the sentry dog team in Vietnam was radically different from those of their counterparts assigned to American bases worldwide. Unlike the sentry dog teams providing physical security against thieves, saboteurs, and espionage agents in CONUS and Europe, the teams in Vietnam faced threats of a more tactical nature. The handler and his dog faced highly trained and well-armed guerrillas, often members of suicide squads, determined to meet their objective.²³ This change in employment to a tactical environment necessitated security operations that reflected this change. These changes in operational employment often came in the form of trial and error.

The Air Force, prior to the July 1965 attack on the air base at Phan Rang, had become aware that American base security was inadequate. For political reasons the Air Force Security Police did not patrol the base perimeter at Bien Hoa. The Vietnamese Air Force had this responsibility and failed. On 1 November 1964, the Vietcong attacked Bien Hoa leaving four Americans dead and another thirty injured. The AAR found that while the internal security provided by the American Air Force police was very good, the perimeter security was questionable and “inadequate.”²⁴ Perimeter security at the time did not include the employment of sentry dog teams. It would be another eight months before the attack on Phan Rang and the resulting Project Top Dog, would rush the sentry dog program to the forefront of American base security.

The early employment of the sentry dogs was hampered and delayed due to inadequate knowledge and poor preparation for the arrival of the sentry dog team. For the forty dogs and their handlers who landed at Tan Son Nhut on 17 July 1965 as part of Project Top Dog, the experience was quite literally a shock. After three days of island hopping across the Pacific enroute to Vietnam, the teams were hot and tired. Top Dog handler Dick Bachmann describes their arrival.

When we landed at Tan Son Nhut the heat was stifling,unbearable. One of the dogs had to be packed in ice to cool. Unfortunately, he did not make it and he died of heat stroke before he got to the kennel. He was the first American dog to die in Vietnam.²⁵

The handlers were separated into groups and assigned to posts at Bien Hoa, Da Nang, as well as Tan Son Nhut. Bachmann and his dog, Toby, remained at Tan Son Nhut where it became clear that that the base was not prepared for their arrival.

The handlers assigned to Tan Son Nhut spent the first week of their tour preparing the area for the dogs. There were no kennels save a tent for the handlers and the dog’s shipping crates. The lack of shade and kennel facilities for the dogs compounded by the fact that water had to be trucked in every day, made for additional stress on dogs and

handlers alike. The results were unleashed dogs running loose and many dog fights. Eventually the teams adjusted to their new surroundings and began their daily patrols.

The Air Force sentry teams that arrived in Vietnam later that year did not fare much better. Air Force handler John Risse describes his experience arriving at Tan Son Nhut 17 October 1965.

Once we got off the plane we began unloading the dogs and our gear. Funny thing is, we were told they had no idea what to do with us . . . no one was expecting us! I came to learn that was SOP [Standing Operating Procedure] in Vietnam.²⁶

Although it was autumn in Vietnam, the heat was oppressive none the less. After the handlers walked the dogs and provided them with water, it was evident that the climate was still taking its toll on the animals. Two of the fifty dogs died of heat stroke their first day in Vietnam.²⁷

Twenty-five of the fifty Air Force handlers who arrived at Tan Son Nhut were subsequently ordered to the air base at Pleiku. Risse recounts that again, upon arrival, “we were unexpected.” This lack of preparation at Pleiku resulted in the same problems experienced by the Top Dog handlers at Tan Son Nhut. Once again there were no kennels for the dogs. The handlers built temporary kennels for the dogs and shared quarters with an infantry division prior to beginning their guard duty. This lack of preparation for the sentry dog teams, hampered and delayed the employment of the dogs.

As more dogs arrived in Vietnam, and as hostilities increased, so did the number of American troops and construction crews. Eventually kennels were constructed at the bases and the sentry dogs and their handlers could concentrate on their mission.

The mission of the Air Force sentry dog handler was to detect, detain, and destroy, if necessary, in order to protect the air base from hostile penetration on the ground so that United States aircraft could launch for tactical effect in support of the Marines and Army in the field. In some cases, the mission was to maintain strategic capabilities such as the Australian 2nd Squadron at Phan Rang.²⁸

One of the challenges that arose from the mission of the sentry dog team was that their postings or the areas they were assigned to guard were fixed due to the boundaries of the base. Walking the same post night after night for eight hours led to complacency and a reduction in alertness. In an effort to combat these effects, the handlers at Phang Rang developed a system of rotations by “flight”(A or B) based on start times and changing of post (change of scenery).²⁹ One of the hazards of this plan was that the Vietcong also knew the guard posts. Former Vietnam Dog Handler, Craig Lord explains: Because we alternated the postings every week, and the post would always be manned by 21:30 (two weeks of observation made it easy to figure). Because the posts were “fixed” we learned which ones we liked and which ones we thought sucked. We all had a “Scare-Post”.³⁰

The employment environment for many of the Air Force handlers was less than ideal. For Lord and his dog, Winston, the Scare-Post was at the south end of the air base, near the approach of the two main runways. Because the post was small there were no perimeter towers in the vicinity to offer support. The noise from the nearby diesel powered TACAN (Tactical Navigation Station) made it difficult for the dog and handler to hear and although the animals worked best at night, the area was often illuminated by the nearby loading of cargo planes. To compound this situation, the wind was usually from behind the post making it difficult for the dogs to detect a suspicious scent and a “Human Alert.” It is to Winston’s credit that the one “Human Alert” he responded to while assigned this post was behind him. The alert turned out to be unauthorized American soldiers attempting to steal fuel from the TACAN for use in their jeep. This type of response was not unusual for a sentry dog. It is only one of many examples of a sentry dog overcoming the limitations of his employment.

By November 1965 the Air Force Project Top Dog had proven a success and the Army began increasing the number of its sentry dogs in Vietnam. There were 180 dogs scattered among the locations in II, III, and IV Corps with the largest concentration in Saigon.³¹ By 1972 there were three Army sentry dog companies: the 212th

headquartered at Long Binh, the 981st at Cam Ranh, and the 595th at Da Nang. Each company had about one hundred fifty sentry dog teams. In addition to these bases, the sentry dog teams were responsible for the security of several compounds such as Soctrang, Vinh Long, Da Lat, Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Ban Me Thout, An Khe, and Chu Lai.³² Much like their Air Force counterparts, the Army sentry teams were generally assigned to a particular base or compound and remained there for the duration of the handler's tour, typically one

year. There are reports, however, of teams being assigned to two or three bases during their tour in Vietnam.³³

The Army's sentry dog program was designed so that handler and dog would be together from the beginning of their training program through deployment to their first duty station. The close team relationship that was established through the training program was "necessary for effective operations."³⁴ The two were never to be deployed separately. The reality was that while a dog might be trained and complete a tour with one handler, the team would be permanently separated when the handler transferred upon completion of his one-year tour in Vietnam. Consequently, the sentry dog could possibly see as many as four or five handlers during the animal's service in Vietnam. That is, if the dog was lucky enough to live that long. Moreover, while there was always a face-to-face turnover between the old and the new handler, the relationship between dog and handler was not quickly established. The sentry dog, by training, was a one-man dog and it could take weeks before the new handler could even work with the animal.

The Navy's employment of sentry dogs in Vietnam was limited to providing security at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang. By 1970, available records indicate that there were only thirty sentry dogs operating with sailors.³⁵ It is not surprising then, that outside of these bases, few Army and Air Force handlers even had knowledge of the Navy's participation in the sentry dog program.

The first all Navy sentry dog unit arrived at the air base in Da Nang on 11 February 1967. The teams were assigned to the 5th Marine Communication Battalion Compound located just south of Da Nang in the vicinity of what was known as Marble Mountain. Unlike the early Air Force sentry teams, the Navy dog unit was expected and facilities were already in place. Navy handler David Massey recalls, "We had great kennels that the Seabees had built for us. In fact, they were better than the kennels at Lackland."³⁶ Because of the extreme climate change, the veterinarians quarantined the

dogs for two weeks of observation to ensure that they adjusted to their new environment. At the end of this period the dogs and their handlers were ready to get to work.

The twenty-nine sentry teams were assigned twelve primary posts. Eight posts were located at a communications transmitter site about ten miles south of Marble Mountain and the remainder at a POL (Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants) site near Hill 327. The transmitter site had been the target of an enemy attack and the defending Marines had taken “quite a few casualties.”³⁷ The Navy handlers were told that they were replacing the Marine infantry unit.

The daily routine was similar to that used by the Air Force and Army. Two shifts were used at each post. The first shift began at dusk and ended at 0200. The second shift started about 0100 and ended just after dawn.³⁸

The work proved hazardous from the beginning. The Vietcong conducted almost weekly probes of the post in an attempt to determine the weaknesses of the compound security. The sentry teams were evidently successful for after approximately five months of ineffective probes, the Vietcong began sniper attacks on the sentry teams. Massey remembers, “Once in a while they would throw some mortars our way.”³⁹

In spite of the inherent dangers, the Navy handlers actually enjoyed their work and were not dissuaded by the Vietcong attacks. According to Massey, “Except for the 1968 Tet Offensive, most of our watches were exercises in boredom and routine.”⁴⁰ It is not surprising then, that of the original twenty-nine handlers nearly one-third extended their tours in Vietnam. Massey extended twice describing the experience as “great duty.”⁴¹ In the two and one-half years that Massey was assigned to the Navy unit, there was only one combat fatality to a handler. FN Merle Keith Carter was killed while returning to the kennels, the truck in which he was riding, hit an antitank mine.⁴²

The first Marine sentry dog unit arrived in Da Nang in February 1966. Anticipating the sentry dogs’ arrival, the Seabees had prepared kennels while the dog unit was being temporarily quartered in the vicinity of Hill 327. Within a month the unit was

moved to the west side of Hill 327 where the teams found concrete and chain link kennels waiting for the dogs. It was from this base that the Marine handlers were sent to various locations to perform their duties, to include the security of Hawk missile sites located in the mountains.⁴³

It was at one of these missile sites that Marine sentry dog Spade alerted to a Vietcong intruder, saving the life of his handler and preserving the security of the post.

Spade's handler, Anthony Giorgi, recalls the incident,

It was just after midnight, and we were in the Chu Lai area, on a little island. It was a small Hawk missile battery on a hill at the end of the island. It was my second time to patrol this post on the perimeter I put Spade on the leather collar put him on alert by whispering in his ear, "Watch 'em boy. Let's get 'em." I let out my leash from my left hand and after walking no more than ten yards Spade alerted like never before. He jumped to my left, almost knocking me over with his thrust. He pulled me another 10-15 feet right into a VC who had been hiding in the bushes He stood up and tried to turn away as Spade grabbed his leg, growling and barking in anger and excitement. I lifted up my shotgun . . . leveled it toward him and fired point blank. The VC flew back into the bushes . . . dying instantly.⁴⁴

Although the experience frightened Girogi, he nonetheless extended his tour by six months, confident that his dog would protect him.

Marine sentry dog teams continued to arrive and by 1970 there were two sentry dog platoons with a total of sixty teams, headquartered in Da Nang providing security for the air base and port facilities. Employment was not limited to these facilities; however, and teams were sent to various Marine compounds in I Corps to include Quang Tri, the Rock Pile, Chu Lai and Phu Bai.⁴⁵

Duties for the Marine sentry teams were varied. Security posts included the air base at Da Nang, the Post Exchange area, missile sites on Hill 327, and the Hai Pass. The most desirable duty, by one account, was that of providing security to the home of Major General Nickerson, Deputy Commander III MAF. Marine sentry dog handler Rick Schuette described it as "The best duty I had the whole time I was in the Corps. . . .

⁴⁶

This was due in part to the low level of risk involved with such a post. There were two Marine sentry dog teams in addition to approximately twenty guards all providing security to the General's house.

Summary

There is no doubt that the use of sentry dog teams in Vietnam was beneficial to the physical security programs of all the bases in which they were utilized. By alerting to enemy intruders and preventing their penetration of American bases, the lives of countless Americans were saved. Additionally, the dollars saved, in terms of equipment and aircraft that might have been lost to enemy attacks, is immeasurable. Finally, although it would be impossible to quantify, the greatest benefit to be derived from the sentry dog program was the psychological effect that the teams had on the enemy and the resulting effect of deterrence.

¹ Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs: Canines in Combat* (Washington: Brassey's, 1997), 172.

² *Ibid.*, 173.

³ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴ A. K. McIntosh and C. L. Westbrook, *A Reveiw of the Military Working Dog Program*, (Fort Belvoir, VA: Technical Operations, Incorporated, Combat Operations Research Group for Headquarters, United States Army Combat Developments Command, 1968), 3, CORG-M-353.DAAG-05-67-C-0547.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ Bill Easterling, Memorial Day Column, *Dog Man*, July-August 1997, 4, originally published in the *Huntsville Times*, Huntsville, AL..

¹¹ McIntosh and Westbrook, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ David Massey, "Vietnam Navy Dog Handlers," *Dog Man*, May-June 1997, 1.

¹⁴ Rick Schuette, "Hill 327," *Dog Man*, November-December 1995, 3.

¹⁵ "Sentry Dog Deployment," *Dog Man*, July 1994, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

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- 17 Ibid., 3.
- 18 Ibid., 3.
- 19 William Henry Harrison Clark, *The History of the United States Veterinary Corps in Vietnam 1962-1973* (Roswell, VA: W. H. Wolfe Associates), 11.
- 20 Ibid., 16.
- 21 "Sentry Dog Deployment," 3.
- 22 Tony Montoya, "Handler Brought Dogs Back Home," *Dog Man*, September-October 1994, 1.
- 23 McIntosh and Westbrook, 12.
- 24 Tom Mitchell, "The Hard Way," *Dog Man*, July-August 1996, 2.
- 25 Dick Bachmann, "Toby--The Best 'Top Dog,'" *Dog Man*, May-June 1995, 6.
- 26 John Risse, "Pleiku Air Base--1965," *Dog Man*, November-December 1994, 1.
- 27 Ibid., 1.
- 28 Craig Lord, "Scare Post. All Sentry Dog Handler Had One," *Dog Man*, July-August 1995, 5.
- 29 Ibid., 5.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 William Henry Harrison Clark, *The History of the United States Veterinary Corps in Vietnam 1962-1973* (Roswell, VA: W. H. Wolfe Associates), 117.
- 32 "Sentry Dog Deployment," 3.
- 33 Ibid., 3.
- 34 McIntosh, 15.
- 35 "Sentry Dog Deployment," 3.
- 36 Massey, 1.
- 37 Ibid., 1.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., 1 and 8.
- 40 Ibid., 8.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Anthony Giorgi, "Marine Senty--1966," *Dog Man*, May-June 1996, 8.
- 44 Ibid., 8.
- 45 "Sentry Dog Deployment," 3.
- 46 Schuette, 3.

CHAPTER 4

SCOUT DOGS

Chapter 4 will discuss the early history of the scout dog program, the acquisition process, training, employment, and lessons learned from the dogs' employment. This program began in Vietnam in 1965.

Background

The U.S. military first began using scout dogs in World War II. In 1944 the first Army scout dog platoon, the 25th QMC (Quartermaster Corps) War Dog Platoon, deployed to the south Pacific. This platoon enjoyed great success in the battle for Bougainville, with one handler receiving a recommendation for the Bronze Star for his actions (and those of his dog) on an important patrol.¹ Requests for additional dogs were received as word of the scout dogs' accomplishments spread throughout the Pacific theater. Soon the Marine Corps began successfully employing dogs as scouts. "In spite of post-war recommendations to maintain a limited number of scout dog platoons for training and support purposes, all scout dog platoons were gradually deactivated and Army expertise in dog training and utilization was practically lost."² When the Korean War began, the 26th Scout Dog Platoon was reactivated and while the dogs were highly successful in this conflict, the Army Scout Dog Program was deactivated at war's end.

The scout dog program reemerged in 1961, when American Army advisers, as members of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, (MAAGV) recommended that the U.S. DoD send 468 sentry dogs and 538 scout dogs to the Republic of Vietnam.³ These advisers familiar with the success of the British scout dogs in Malaysia in putting down communist insurrection, believed that scout dogs could be employed in Vietnam in a similar fashion.

The first scout dogs that arrived in Vietnam faced the same problems as their sentry counterparts. The Vietnamese had little to no respect for the animals, the handlers

considered their duty degrading, and the dogs were less than anxious to work with these soldiers. Perhaps the most serious problem encountered was ignorance as to the employment of dogs and the resulting difficulties when the Vietnamese went out on patrol. American scout dog adviser, Sergeant Jesse Mendez, describes the situation when he arrived in Vietnam to assist with the ARVN dog program,

When we first got there we had a heck of a mess. The Air Force had trained many sentry/attack dogs and some were being used by ARVN infantry units out in the field. These dogs would bark on patrol missions posing a serious problem. On top of that, they wanted to attack and chew up the friendly patrol members. The only type of dog that would work out on patrol was a silent scout dog. It took a while to get these dogs exchanged out. Eventually we got trained dogs to each of the five ARVN infantry scout dog platoons spread out across each Corps area.⁴

Unfortunately, ignorance as to the dogs' capabilities and their subsequent employment, would continue to be a problem for both Vietnamese and American forces for the remainder of the war and would, in some cases, result in needless casualties.

Throughout the Vietnam War the U.S. would continue to support the ARVN dog program. Due to inadequate diet and medical care the dogs suffered a high mortality rate. The dogs that did survive, however, proved themselves in the field and would subsequently be the impetus for the reactivation of the American scout dog program.

By 1965 American involvement in Vietnam had escalated beyond the advisory level of the MAAGV and American troops were taking significant losses in the field. The guerrilla tactics of the Vietcong were taking their toll on the American forces and it became apparent that additional measures had to be taken to slow the casualty rates within the infantry. The answer would be the reactivation of the scout dog program.

Originally conceived in 1965 as a one-time training expansion for the 26th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog (IPSD), under the 197th Infantry Brigade, the program at Fort Benning, Georgia grew by that year to include fourteen Army infantry scout dog platoons and three Marine Corps platoons. Anticipating the needs of the escalated conflict, DoD established an annual recruitment quota of 1,000 dogs for 1965 but the Army was hard pressed to acquire the 761 dogs that it did.⁵ Acquisition problems would continue to plague the military through the height of hostilities.

Acquisition

Acquisition was not a new problem for the military working dog program. The first sentry and scout dog program faced similar difficulties in 1961. It was late that year that the USAEUR Dog Training School at Lenggries, Germany, received a requisition for 300 dogs for shipment to Vietnam.⁶ The challenge of procurement was one that would last the duration of the Vietnam War.

The process of procurement involved a great deal of time and money. Germany's German Shepherd Club was notified of the requirement for dogs and arrangements were made with the U.S. Army to observe demonstrations of the animals at various sites around the country. Traveling in a semi-trailer loaded with dog crates, an Army veterinarian, dog handling instructors, and the detachment commander, would meet members of the local German Shepherd Club for a field demonstration. The dogs would be observed and then a small number would be selected for further evaluation. While still at the field, the veterinarian tested for aggression (a certain level being a desirable trait) and examined the animal for physical deformities. The owner was paid

approximately \$40 and the dog was loaded on to the truck for Lenggries.⁷ Upon arrival, the dogs were quarantined for approximately one week and then evaluated by dog trainers for obedience and gun shyness. After passing these tests the dogs were assigned to another kennel awaiting transportation for Vietnam.

Sergeant Jesse Mendez, a dog trainer at the detachment in Lenggries, recalls that after the second shipment of dogs to Vietnam, the German Shepherd Club announced that it would discontinue the practice of selling dogs to the U.S. Army. A rumor had circulated that when the second shipment of dogs arrived in Vietnam there was no representative to receive the animals. Anxious to unload their cargo, the plane crew erroneously turned the animals over to a passing Special Forces sergeant who subsequently sold the dogs as food.⁸ Mendez acknowledges that while this story was never confirmed, it illustrates some of the difficulties that the Army faced in procuring dogs for the program.

Faced with difficulties in procuring dogs both in the U.S. and abroad, the DoD relieved the Army of acquisition duties, assigning all responsibility to the Air Force in 1964.⁹ While this consolidation of responsibility in no way made the task of canine

procurement easier, it did relieve the Army of an additional burden and allowed the service to concentrate on the training of scout dogs.

Training

While the Air Force dealt with the challenge of acquisition, the Army faced its own challenge of finding a sufficient number of dog handlers and instructors for the reactivated scout dog program at Fort Benning. Historian Michael Lemish notes that one of the major difficulties was the lack of Vietnam experience among the instructors. This was critical to the program as the battlefield environment in Vietnam with its guerrilla-like warfare, was unlike any the Army had dealt with before. Additionally, while the program called for handlers that were “volunteers or selected individuals,”¹⁰ there were simply not enough volunteer handlers to meet the startup requirements for the program. This was an unfortunate deficiency because of the nature of the work involved in dog handling. The man and dog had to work as a team and it was imperative that there be a genuine affection and appreciation by the handler for his charge if the two were to work at their maximum effectiveness.¹¹

The Marine Corps reactivated its scout dog program in 1965. Unlike the Army who had used scout dogs in Korea, the Marine Corps’ program had been inactive since World War II. An interservice training pact with the Army’s 26th IPSP provided for the training of the new handlers and their dogs. Thirty-six Marines and twenty-eight German Shepherds participated in the first class at Fort Benning beginning in December 1965. Twelve weeks later, in February 1966, two Marine scout dog platoons deployed to Vietnam.¹²

Project Safe Side was the Air Force’s first experiment with scout dogs. The success of the first Army and Marine Corps scout dog teams combined with the escalation of attacks on the perimeters of Air Force bases in Vietnam, resulted in the decision to create a scout dog program within the Air Force. By 1966 it became apparent that the security provided outside the Air Force base perimeters was inadequate and that

additional security measures were required. The success of the sentry dog program was further evidence that dogs could provide that additional measure of security.

Faced with its own shortages of space and kennel facilities at Fort Benning, the Army was in no position to offer short-notice training support to the Air Force. Therefore, the Air Force with a dog training school already established at Lackland Air Force Base, selected this site for the training phase of Project Safe Side. Despite its own need for experienced instructors, the Army in spite of its own need did provide three instructors with scout dog experience. The handlers selected for training were honor graduates from the Air Force's sentry dog course and the dogs selected were German Shepherds diverted from sentry dog training.¹³ Twelve weeks later this first class of Air Force scout dogs deployed to Vietnam.

Officially, the U.S. Navy did not have a scout dog program. As an instructor at Fort Benning from February 1966 to June 1969, Mendez recalls that the Navy did send two SEALs through the scout dog program. The SEALs trained alongside their Army counterparts and then deployed with their dogs to Vietnam where they operated in IV Corps. The fact that the SEALs had completed the scout dog training school and subsequently were assigned to the swamps and waterways of IV Corps was classified. Their mission was to patrol their assigned area and set up ambushes for the Vietcong. Unfortunately, only one SEAL handler returned alive.

The Navy's official report of the SEAL's death was due to the mishandling of explosives. When the surviving SEAL returned his comrade's dog to Fort Benning, a much different account was relayed. The SEAL told Mendez that both handlers and their dogs had been very successful in IV Corps. Operating covertly with ARVN forces, the SEAL dog teams had alerted to numerous Vietcong resulting in a high casualty rate for the enemy in the area. According to Mendez, some of the ARVN troops who patrolled with the SEALs refused to accompany the dog teams on missions complaining that the dogs were too aggressive and the ARVN troops were afraid. Although neither SEAL

believed the dogs to be dangerous to the ARVN troops, one of the SEALs, whose name was Eugene T. Farley, left his dog behind for a night patrol. Mendez reports that Farley was killed in action (KIA).¹⁴

Mendez, with three tours as a handler and adviser in Vietnam, had no reason to doubt the SEAL's story. Referring to Farley, Mendez says, "I believe he was set up."¹⁵ According to Mendez there were Vietcong infiltrators "all over." These infiltrators operated within the ARVN ranks as well as on American bases and posts where they were hired as part of a good will program with the South Vietnamese government. Mendez believes that infiltrators, operating with ARVN troops in IV Corps, were responsible for Farley's death.

Mendez, who faithfully recorded the history of the scout dog training program at Fort Benning, but is not aware of any other naval personnel who may have attended the school. He does acknowledge, however, that the school was in operation until 1972, and with his Army retirement in 1969, it is possible that additional SEALs completed the training in the interim years.¹⁶

The scout dog program grew commensurate with the escalation of hostilities in Vietnam. In 1967, in order to meet the increased demand for dogs in the field, the Army activated the 51st Infantry Platoon, Scout Dog.¹⁷ The unit's first class completed its twelve-week training program on 24 March 1967 at Fort Benning.¹⁸ It soon became clear that additional scout dog platoons would be need to be established and trained in order to meet the growing demand for dog teams. By 1971 there were twenty-two Army scout dog platoons and two Marine scout dog platoons operating in Vietnam.¹⁹ All of these platoons had been trained at Fort Benning.

The scout dog program in Vietnam was successful due in great part to the outstanding training received by handlers and dogs alike at Fort Benning. Many of the instructors, like Mendez, were handlers with previous experience in Vietnam. Although they had completed their requisite one-year tour in Vietnam, many still had time

remaining on their enlistments or contracts. Mendez recalls that a large number of these combat veterans volunteered to finish their Army tours as instructors at Fort Benning. Many of the instructors reenlisted due to their love of dog handling.²⁰ The experience they brought to the school was invaluable.

The training program's success can also be attributed to the realism imposed in the training environment. Mendez, who developed the scout dog curriculum and authored the program of instruction, is credited with instilling realism in the scout dog training program. Upon assuming responsibility for the establishment of the school's curriculum in February 1966, he insisted that among other things, that the dogs be trained under simulated combat conditions and that the school build a replica of a Vietnamese village.²¹ This was based on his experience walking patrols in Vietnam as well as on reports received from other handlers. According to Mendez, every attempt was made to recreate the environment in which the dogs would soon be operating, to include populating the mock village with live farm animals.

The official training plan for the school required twelve weeks of instruction at Fort Benning beginning with basic obedience followed by intensive instruction and practice, and ending with a long-range patrol and written exam.²² Basic obedience, which included an introduction to scouting techniques, comprised the first six weeks of training. During this time dog and handler were instructed in the basics of detection and alerts, reconnaissance, booby traps, and trip wires. The exercises became progressively more difficult and by the end of the ninth week, the dog teams were conducting long-range patrols which included ambushes, counterambushes, perimeter defense, river crossings, waterborne patrols, and helicopter techniques. The following week the student teams demonstrated their newly acquired skills at night, in the simulated Vietnamese village. By graduation, the dogs and their handlers were finely tuned teams ready for the challenges of Vietnam.

Employment

The demand for Army scout dog teams far exceeded the number available from the training facility at Fort Benning. Consequently, when the dogs and their handlers arrived in Vietnam, they were assigned to a brigade level scout dog platoon headquarters element. From there, a scout dog and handler were assigned to maneuvering elements within the brigade on an “as needed” basis in support of tactical operations ranging from search and destroy missions to night outpost defenses.²³ Scout dog handler Charlie

Cargo describes the experience with his dog, Wolf.

Wolf and I were a team and that was the only [way, sic], we could be successful in the bush. Scout dog teams were sent from one unit to another within the Brigade. There wasn't much sense in assigning us to a certain platoon, or company, that was not in trouble. They would put us with a “hot” unit so we could help them out. We saved many lives, including mine, over and over again.²⁴

Cargo's experience is typical of other Army scout dog handlers and exemplifies the importance the handlers attached to their jobs.

The brigades depended on the scout dog teams to provide a wide variety of support. The lesson plan for the 1969 Combat Leader's Course, conducted at Camp Ray, Bien Hoa, described the versatility expected of the scout dog.

The mission of a scout dog is to support tactical units by detecting and giving early silent warning of any foreign presence outside the main body by:

1. Warning against ambushes.
2. Warning against snipers.
3. Detecting enemy hideouts or stay behind groups.
4. Detecting enemy caches of food, ammunition, and weapons.
5. Detecting mines and booby traps.
6. Warning of enemy approach to ambush patrols and listening posts.²⁵

In later years, the missions of detecting enemy caches and of detecting mines and booby traps were incorporated into a new type of working dog, the mine/tunnel dog, but that program was still in its infancy.

The most common type of mission for a scout dog team was that of “walking point.” These three to five day missions involved silently walking ahead of a unit and providing warnings to the men of possible ambushes and booby traps.²⁶ The shortage of scout dog teams and their “as needed” assignment did not allow time for the handler and his dog to train with the unit they were supporting. Often times there was little warning given to the handler as to the mission on which he was to embark, making a dangerous task that more psychologically demanding.

The 37th IPSD, reactivated in January 1969, was well acquainted with the dangers of “walking point.” The unit had served as a specialized combat team both in World War II as well as Korea. Nonetheless, the dog handlers of Vietnam were facing a different kind of enemy and its mission in support of the 3rd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division was fraught with unknown dangers. Jim Black, dog handler and veteran of the 37th IPSD, recalls the pressures associated with the environment:

It was a nerve-wracking and dangerous assignment some have equated with defusing unexploded bombs. Dog teams combat-assaulted by helicopter into enemy-infested jungles and immediately began leading the way down well used enemy trails with fresh tracks in front of them.²⁷

In most cases the handler did not even know the members of the unit he was leading.

This factor only led to the added feeling of isolation that all handlers “walking point” felt.

Black explains,

Often a handler jumped off a chopper and reported to the CO, then went directly to the point. Moving quietly through enemy-held territory when the “pucker factor” is high is not the best place to strike up a friendly conversation. Only after a few days in the field did the regulars actually get to know the handler and dog by name. Mostly handlers had only a nodding acquaintance with the men of the host unit.²⁸

This situation becomes more understandable when considered from the infantryman’s perspective. The handler and his dog were unknown entities and only time would tell whether the dog team was going to help the unit or get it killed.

If the psychological demands did not take their toll on the scout dog teams then the physical demands of the environment in which they were working certainly did. The sweltering tropical environment combined with the mission task itself, challenged man and dog alike. Scout dog handler Tom Sykes describes the conditions in a humorous vein:

Dense vegetation, criss-crossing paddy dykes, rivers and streams coupled with constant changes in elevation made even the shortest patrols a grueling physical experience. Add heavy packs, equipment, extreme climatic conditions and the knowledge people were trying to kill you; it all added up to a rough day at the office.²⁹

Both man and dog had to be physically fit to meet the rigors of scout dog duty in Vietnam.

There were additional burdens placed on the scout dog handlers that accompanied infantry units on patrol. While every man on the mission carried his own pack and supplies, the dog handler carried additional logistic supplies to support his dog. The supplies included enough food, water, and medical supplies for himself and his dog. In areas where there were sources of water this burden was eased slightly by carrying iodine to add to the local water. In dry areas, the handler was required to carry extra water for his dog. Scout dog handler Charlie Cargo likened the importance of the water he carried to the importance of his ammunition. But far from resenting the dogs' additional logistic burdens, Cargo notes that, "It was all part of doing our job."³⁰

Detecting or "alerting" to possible dangers was the primary "job" of the scout dog. Many dogs did not have an easily recognizable pattern of behavior that signified detection of danger.³¹ It was up to the handler then to interpret his dogs' behavior and ascertain in what direction the object of the alert was and even approximate the distance to the alerted object. This ability was one that was first developed in school and was further refined by training and experience.

The alerts varied depending on what the dog had detected. Describing the behavior of his dog, Wolf, Cargo writes, Sometimes he would jerk his eyes to one side, if it was a trip wire, or put his nose in the air, pointing toward the area that had VC voices, food, or something else he felt was not normal, or he would stop, listen and then look in the direction of his alert.³²

Because the signal of alert varied, the importance of knowing how to interpret a dog's actions cannot be overstated. It required vigilance on the part of the handler in noting every nuance of his dog's behavior. If the dog alerted and the handler did not see or recognize the signal, it could be fatal for the dog team and the other members of the unit who were following.

The skill of detecting hidden dangers was one that came naturally to the scout dog. The auditory and olfactory senses of the average canine are far superior to that of humans. The German Shepherd in particular was well suited for the job of the scout dog. When properly trained, the breed is capable of detecting the presence of hidden personnel anywhere from 30 to 300 meters distant. Official Army reports noted that in ideal conditions of wind and terrain, the scout dog in Vietnam was easily able to detect

personnel 500 meters away.³³ There is no question that this capability, when properly employed, was of benefit to the troops following behind such a dog.

Entries in monthly AARs filed by platoon commanders illustrate the life-saving benefits of the scout dog teams that accompanied units on patrol. In one such routine report, First Lieutenant Richard D. Bruce, Commanding Officer of the 37th IPSD, wrote in his June 1970 report, "During the past month this platoon has been making heavy contact with the enemy. Thirteen teams were involved in heavy firefights, with one handler being slightly wounded. Three handlers have been recommended for awards of valor during this past month."³⁴ There was nothing unusual about this report. The 37th IPSD participated in heavy fighting in various locations such as the Hoc Mon District and An Son Valley, subsequently earning the Combat Infantry streamer. The scout dog handlers that served with this unit were awarded numerous citations including the Bronze Star for valor.³⁵

Personal accounts from Vietnam scout dog handlers further detail the heroic exploits of the dogs they accompanied on patrol. The significance of what the dogs accomplished while on patrol did not go unrecognized by the infantrymen following behind. In a letter to a Vietnam handler of the 49th IPSD, infantryman Peter Joannides writes, "We can never be sure how many lives and serious wounds were spared as a direct result of the 49th Scout Dog Platoon."³⁶ Joannides believes that he is alive today due to the actions of a scout dog team who accompanied his unit on patrol near Ben Luc in May 1969.

Joannides and his rifle platoon were walking point as they led their company out of a village that had been the site of a number of Vietcong booby traps that had resulted in American casualties earlier in the day. As the platoon made its way through thick vegetation, a scout dog handler tapped Joannides on the back and asked to take the point.

The men reversed positions and Joannides describes what followed,

We had only moved a few meters forward when I saw the dog's nose move quickly to the right followed by a tremendous flash. We didn't even hear the explosion that knocked all of us to the ground. When I finally propped myself up, I saw that the dog had given his life, his handler was seriously wounded, and my RTO and I were hit. Needless to say, that booby trap would have killed me and quite possibly a number of others in my platoon.³⁷

Throughout the summer and fall of that year Joannides and his platoon worked with scout dog teams and he credits these men and their dogs with alerting to several NVA units.

Joannides' account is not unique. Vietnam veteran Tim Anderson recalls his final days in Vietnam while walking point with a scout dog team assigned to the 1st Cavalry. Anderson and the scout dog team were conducting a sweep of a logging road that ran through the jungle when the dog inexplicably stepped in front of Anderson and sat down. The handler could not explain the strange behavior for the dog merely sat in the road blocking the path of the two men. There were no other signs of an alert. Impatient to conduct the mission, Anderson stepped around the dog and then noticed that the ground appeared to be disturbed. Further investigation revealed that the indentation in the ground was due to the settling of a large land mine in the middle of the road. Anderson asked the handler whether the dog had been trained to identify mines but the handler said, "No." Anderson credits the dog with preventing certain casualties.³⁸

One of the biggest problems that the Army scout dog program encountered was ignorance by unit commanders as to the true capabilities of the scout dog teams. It was fairly accepted that the doctrinal information concerning the employment of the dogs was adequate but that the information was not being adequately disseminated or followed by the unit commanders.³⁹ The result of this type of ignorance was often fatal for the dog teams and the men whom they were leading. The tragic story of scout dog handler Jacky Bayne and his dog Bruno illustrates the consequences of such ignorance.

For two days Baynes and Bruno had been working without rest with “C” Company, of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. By the time the team boarded a helicopter for their next assignment with “F” Company, both man and dog were exhausted. Nonetheless, upon landing, Baynes was told that he was to momentarily lead a patrol. Baynes acknowledged the order of the Commanding Officer but protested, “Yes sir, but Captain, my dog has not rested in over 48 hours. I don’t believe he is fit to lead a patrol. I don’t care about me, but my dog--well, he is about bushed.”⁴⁰ The Captain argued that there was not time to get another dog and that Bruno could possibly alert enough so as to save a few lives. After being ordered to lead the patrol, Baynes pulled Bruno, who by now was shaking and panting from fatigue, in the direction of the trail. As the two approached the tree line, Bruno began to slow and stagger. Neither man nor beast detected the booby trap mine that killed Bruno and blew the leg off of his handler.

While it is impossible to prove that fatigue alone was responsible for the incident, there is little doubt that it was a contributing factor. The practice of treating the dogs as

machines, with little regard to their basic needs for rest, water and food was common and a challenge faced by dog handlers on a routine basis.

The experiences of the Marine Corps scout dog teams closely resemble those of their Army counterparts. Both services saw heavy combat and both served with distinction earning numerous awards. Unfortunately, the same ignorance by unit commanders as to the capabilities of the scout dog teams, plagued the Marine Corps teams as well. Nonetheless, the contributions by the Marine Corps handlers and their dogs were significant to the war effort.

In addition to “walking point” for units on patrol, Marine Corps scout dog teams were also assigned to Force Reconnaissance, performing duties that would eventually be assigned to the combat tracker dog teams. These duties included special operations, ambushes, and clearing tunnel complexes from which VC would hide and strike. While not quantifiable in terms of lives saved, the success of these multi-mission teams is indisputable.

Marine scout dog handler John Denecke’s experience with the Third Combined Action Group (CAG), USMC, illustrates the effectiveness of the Marine Corps dog teams. A CAG was comprised of several small platoons of ten to twelve Marines each. These platoons were spread out among several Vietnamese villages where the Marines instructed the village men as to how to best protect themselves from the Vietcong and NVA. The very presence of the scout dogs appeared to have had a deterrent effect.

Denecke writes of his dog, Rex,

The most important effect Rex had when working in the villages was the psychological one. The VC usually worked in small numbers when trying to

penetrate a village, they would purposefully stay away from an area where they knew a dog team was working. They knew a dog's capabilities for detection, and also the dog's eagerness to attack once he has picked up someone's scent.⁴¹

In addition to the protective services offered to the villages, Marine Corps scout dog teams assigned to CAGs performed other duties including the conduct of daylight search and destroy missions and night ambushes. Denecke and Rex often "walked point" on these missions, staying twenty meters ahead of the column so that if Rex did alert, his handler could take action. Denecke recalls that because of Rex's alerts, his unit often ambushed the enemy's ambush. While assigned together, Rex never allowed his handler to be ambushed and Denecke credits the dog with his very survival in Vietnam.⁴²

The Marine Corps scout dog teams assigned to conduct reconnaissance enjoyed similar success and were as effective as their CAG counterparts. Accounts of the teams' exploits were numerous and attracted the attention of military writers of the time. As early as 1967, a reporter for *Sea Tiger* recorded the story of one Marine handler, who, upon learning that he couldn't take his dog back to the states, extended his Vietnam tour so as to continue working with his dog. As veterans of fifty-four reconnaissance patrols, Corporal John C. Keith and his dog, Anzo, were responsible for thirteen Vietcong kills. Referring to his dog, Keith reported, "There is no way of telling how many lives he has saved. . . . His keen sense of smell, sight and hearing has alerted us to large groups of enemy forces on several occasions."⁴³ Keith's tour was voluntarily extended six months as a member of the 2nd Marine Scout Dog Platoon, 3rd Military Police Battalion, 1st Marine Division.

The 2nd Marine Scout Dog Platoon continued to earn recognition for its accomplishments in support of the war effort. In 1970 Sea Tiger again reported on the exploits of this unit noting that between July 1968 and October 1969, the 2nd Marine Scout Dog Platoon was responsible for 509 enemy killed and 137 taken prisoners. Additionally, the dogs detected 23 tons of rice, 71 NVA base camps, 15 Vietcong base camps, 34 enemy hospitals and two prisoner of war camps.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, this unit was one of the most decorated in Vietnam.

The Marine Corps unit commanders, like their Army counterparts, did not always employ the scout dog teams to the best of the teams' abilities. This problem was especially evident with the first Marine Corps teams assigned to Vietnam. Referring to his experience with a CAG, scout dog handler, Dano Miller noted, "If the CO of the unit was not educated about the dog's capabilities and limitations, then you were rolling the dice each time you went out."⁴⁵ This uncertainty only added to the stress already associated with "walking point" and in these cases, very likely hampered the effectiveness of the scout dog teams.

In spite of the challenges faced by all scout dog teams, there is little doubt as to their overall effectiveness. Their usefulness was proven time and again in a variety of combat situations. In the dense, jungle vegetation of Da Yeu, a scout dog is credited with a significant victory of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry against elements of the 271st Vietcong Regiment on 11 October 1967. The mission of this Army unit was to search for and destroy the enemy base camp. Immediately after moving out of the perimeter of the position the company had occupied during the night, the dog alerted. No enemy was sighted but the point squad reported hearing movement forward. The dog continued to alert and after covering another 1,800 meters, contact was made with the enemy. The official report read that the enemy position "had been compromised by an airborne scent picked up by a scout dog."⁴⁶ The engagement resulted in 21 enemy killed, one U.S. soldier killed and another four wounded in action.

A year later, an official Army review of the scout dog program acknowledged the contributions of the scout dog platoons. The report noted the vast experience gained in the program's first year and with twenty platoons in Vietnam asserted that "... it is reasonable to say that these platoons are making a significant contribution to the war effort."⁴⁷ The scout dog platoons continued to make significant contributions for the remainder of the war but despite their effectiveness, the dogs themselves were left in Vietnam when the U.S. evacuated the country. The scout dog program was then deactivated.

Summary

Despite the problems with acquisition, training, and employment, the scout dog program in Vietnam proved to be highly effective. While it would be impossible to quantify the number of American lives saved due to the employment of scout dog teams, accounts from handlers and the infantrymen who accompanied them, testify to the effectiveness of the scout dog program. The lessons learned from the experience should be recorded by the DoD so as to minimize similar problems should the scout dog program be reactivated in the future.

¹ Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs: Canines in Combat* (Washington: Brassey's, 1997), 20.

² A. K. McIntosh and C. L. Westbrook, *A Review of the Military Working Dog Program* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Technical Operations, Inc., Combat Operations Research Group for Headquarters, United States Army Combat Development Command, 1968); and 3, CORG-M-353.DAAG-05-67-C-0547, 22.

³ Lemish, 168.

⁴ Jesse S. Mendez, "Scout Dog Advisor," *Dog Man*, July 1994, 1.

⁵ Lemish, 184

⁶ Pat Patterson, 'First Dogs to 'Nam,'" *Dog Man*, May 1994, 2.

⁷ Lemish, 168.

⁸ Jesse Mendez, interview by author, telephonic, Leavenworth, KS., 14 January 1998.

⁹ McIntosh, 3.

¹⁰ Lemish, 184,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

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- 12 Ibid., 185.
- 13 Ibid., 188.
- 14 Jesse Mendez, interview by author, telephonic, Leavenworth, KS., 1 February 1998.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 McIntosh, 24.
- 18 "History of the Scout Dog Detachment," U.S. Army Infantry Center Headquarters Detachment Scout Dog, 1967, 2.
- 19 "Order of Battle," Infantry Scout Dog & Combat Tracker Platoons in Vietnam. Source unknown. From the private collection of Jesse Mendez.
- 20 Jesse Mendez, interview by author, telephonic, Leavenworth, KS., 1 February 1998.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 "Standardization of Training," Scout Dog Training Plan, from the private collection of Jesse Mendez, 01 November 1966.
- 23 McIntosh, 28.
- 24 Charlie Cargo, "Wolf was my Dog and Friend," *Dog Man*, September-October 1995, 3.
- 25 Robert Kollar, "Employment of Scout Dogs" Lesson Plan, Combat Leader's Course, given at Camp Ray, Bien Hoa, Republic of South Vietnam, May 1969, 1.
- 26 "Scout & Tracker Dog Deployment--1968/69," *Dog Man*, May 1994, 3.
- 27 Jim Black, "Unit Histories Important," *Dog Man*, September-October 1996, 1.
- 28 Ibid., 1.
- 29 Tom Sykes, "Give Me a Break."
- 30 Cargo, 3.
- 31 McIntosh, 26.
- 32 Cargo, 3.
- 33 McIntosh, 26.
- 34 Black, 1 and 5.
- 35 Black, 5.
- 36 Peter Joannides, "Letter to editor," of *Dog Man*, January-February 1995, 3.
- 37 Ibid., 3.
- 38 Tim Anderson, "Letter to editor." of *Dog Man*, September-October 1994, 4.
- 39 McIntosh, 26.
- 40 "I Gave My Life For My Country," *Dog Man*, September-October 1997, 5.
- 41 John Denecke, "Rex 5A31," *Dog Man*, March-April 1997, 6.
- 42 Ibid., 6.
- 43 "Marine Extends Tour to Stay With His Dog," *Dog Man*, January-February 1996, 1.

44 “Decorated Marine Handlers Help ROK Marines,” *Dog Man*, September-October 1995, 1.

45 Dano Miller, “Scout Class I-70,” *Dog Man*, January-February 1997, 4.

46 “Vietnam Monograph,” *Tactical and Materiel Innovations in Vietnam*, Chapter 4.

47

McIntosh, 26.

CHAPTER 5

TRACKER DOGS

The Army's tracker dog program was officially established on February 15, 1968 when ten platoons were designated Infantry Platoon, Combat Tracker (IPCT).¹ This chapter will discuss the history of the program, the acquisition process, the training and employment of the tracker teams and conclude with lessons learned from the program.

Background

The concept of using dogs to track fleeing enemy troops was a new one for the U.S. military in Vietnam. The British had successfully used tracker dogs in World War II to search for Japanese soldiers hiding in caves and the program was still active more than twenty years later. The British trained Labrador Retrievers to track and eliminate communist insurgents in the jungles of Malaysia. Word of the British success reached Vietnam and the U.S. Army attempted to duplicate this success with the use of the American Bloodhound.

The olfactory capabilities and the tracking abilities of the bloodhound were legendary in the U.S. and the initial concept of using the dogs to track the fleeing enemy in Vietnam appeared sound. What the program proponents had not accounted for, however, was the radically different environment in which the dogs would be employed. In the U.S., the dogs were the pursuers and the environment in which they worked searching for escaped prisoners or missing children, was relatively safe. Vietnam represented entirely new challenges that would be impossible for the dogs to overcome. As historian Mike Lemish notes, "the dogs bayed on the trail and made so much noise that they were a danger to themselves as well as their patrol."² The bloodhound program was short lived, but Army leadership was convinced that the tracking program was still viable and so once again it looked to the British for guidance.

Frustrated with the ability of the enemy to strike and then disappear into the jungle, General William Westmoreland and his staff met with Robert L. Hughes, a British representative, to discuss the British program. Noting the success of the British trackers in Kenya, Cyprus, Malaysia, and Borneo, Westmoreland ordered several senior officers to visit the British school in Malaysia. A week later the Army officers left for the Jungle Warfare School in Johore Bahru, Malaysia.

The Jungle Warfare School in Malaysia was established in the wake of the British success in World War II. Using small groups of highly trained men and dogs, these teams, called “wreckes,” successfully tracked Japanese soldiers to hidden caves and tunnels during their mopping up operations in the Pacific. These patrols pioneered the program that was perfected at the Jungle Warfare School. Applying the lessons learned from follow on counter-guerilla and counter-insurgency operations, the British were teaming the dogs with crack British troops and civilians familiar with the territory.³

The American officers were impressed with the British school and wanted to tap into their success with the tracker dogs. The British for their part were happy to oblige, but first there were significant diplomatic hurdles that had to be overcome. In 1954 the British signed the Geneva Convention that divided Vietnam along the 17th Parallel and formalized British neutrality. Malaysia, too, was neutral with respect to Vietnam and the British feared that by agreeing to train American troops for Vietnam, this would be viewed as a violation of their neutrality. After serious negotiations, the “Joint U.S. British Proposal to Train Combat Tracker Teams (CTT) for the Army” was signed in September of 1966.

The joint proposal allowed for the training of fourteen U.S. Army tracker teams. In order to provide the Americans with combat tracker team capability in a minimal amount of time, the proposal was divided into three phases. The first phase was designed to deploy two U.S. combat tracker teams to Vietnam within three months of their beginning training with the British. The teams would then be sent to Vietnam for

immediate evaluation. The second phase was to provide for the training and deployment of an instructional capability within the U.S. Army. Because untrained dogs would be used for this phase, it was determined that this phase would last approximately one year. The third phase would establish a combat tracker team training center in either Thailand or Malaysia. This phase was not planned in detail as the Army was awaiting the results of the first two phases.⁴ Finally, the proposal called for the British to supply the first dogs used for the American program.

Acquisition

Unlike the sentry and scout dog programs, the tracking program did not face the same problem of acquisition in the start-up phase. Phase one of the joint proposal between Britain and the U.S. provided for the former to supply thirty dogs for two training classes that formed the first fourteen tracker dog teams.⁵ This relieved the Army of the burden of procurement that challenged the earlier working dog programs.

Phase two of the joint proposal dictated that the U.S. develop its own training capability for its tracker dog program. Consistent with this, in June 1967, USARV recommended that the Department of the Army ask an “appropriate agency” to begin procurement of Labrador Retrievers for tracker training. The goal was to have approximately eighty operational tracker dogs by August 1969.

Based on the early success of the first American tracker teams, the Army in November 1967, proceeded with phase three of the proposal calling for the establishment of the U.S. Combat Tracker Team Center. The dogs for this command were procured from the Army Mobility Equipment Command, in Saint Louis, Missouri at a cost of \$330.00 each.⁶ Male and spayed female Labrador Retrievers were pre-screened for the program which minimized delays in the dogs’ training that the sentry and scout dog programs had encountered.

Training

The first American tracker dog handlers were drawn from a pool of volunteers who were already dog handlers in Vietnam. Because of the diplomatic sensitivities surrounding the joint agreement between the U.S., Britain, and Malaysia, the training for these volunteers began almost covertly in October 1966. Army tracker Steve Cradick describes the experience as follows:

Myself and about 20 other volunteers were sent to a MP compound near Saigon. A couple of days later we were given \$100 each in U.S. currency and told to buy some civilian clothes in Saigon. After getting our clothes we had our photos taken in white t-shirts, with no dog tags. We were then told to turn our gear into supply which left us only with the civilian clothing. The next morning we boarded a truck to the airport and off we went, in a civilian aircraft. All this time we were not told what was going on or why. On the plane we were issued red

passports, with the pictures that had been taken the day before and visas to Singapore and Malaysia.⁷

Like many of his travel companions, Cradick's passport described his occupation as "construction worker" while other members of the entourage traveled under different aliases. Cliff Clemens recalled, "My passport stated I was on official government business, but many others were listed as construction workers and teachers."⁸

The tracker volunteers arrived in Malaysia and were transported to the British Jungle Warfare School (JWS) where their training was to take place. The school itself was located deep in the jungle and staffed exclusively by British, New Zealand, and Australian troops. After being briefed as to their assignment at JWS, the American soldiers were then resupplied with British uniforms and boots and their training began.

The eight American tracker teams were organized for training in accordance with the British concept of three team elements that provided for command, tracking, and protection. Each team included one officer, one noncommissioned officer (NCO), one RTO, one handler, one visual tracker, and one coverman. This concept of organization had proven especially effective by the British against communist guerrillas in Borneo and Malaysia.⁹

Cradick recalls that the first four weeks of training were conducted without the British handlers or the dogs. It was an intensive period involving the use of tracking, escape, evasion, and jungle survival. Upon completion of this phase, the teams began training with a handler and dog. It was during this part of the training that the Americans began learning how to use the dog including its habits and speed on a track.¹⁰

Throughout

the training the soldiers were engaged in physical exercise to ensure optimum fitness on the trail.

Overall, the focus of the British tracker training was “Bush Craft.” This term referred to the skills required for living and moving in the jungle with emphasis on visual tracking. Army Lieutenant Harold Bell, one of the first officers to complete tracker training, is convinced that Bush Craft skills learned were responsible for his survival in Vietnam. Bell writes,

I was amazed at what we learned--by the end of our training we could move through dense jungle almost without a sound. A pretty remarkable accomplishment, considering that we were a mixture of surfers from L. A., brothers off the block and college kids from suburbia.¹¹

Bell would go on to serve as the lieutenant Officer in Charge (OIC) of the 63rd Infantry Platoon (Combat Tracker) Provisional, from August 1967 to May 1968.

Graduates of this first class of trackers were considered members of “provisional teams.” This referred to the fact that the program was still in the experimental stage, subject to operational evaluation in Vietnam and was in accordance with phase one of the joint British and American agreement. The teams were assigned to either the 63rd Infantry Platoon--Combat Tracker (IPCT), Americal Division or the 65th IPCT, 9th Infantry Division. Eventually, many of these first trackers would become instructors when the U.S. Army established its own training school in the U.S..

The British-Malaysian-American agreement was to expire in October 1967. In June of that year, however, USARV requested an extension to ensure that replacement personnel for the first trackers were trained in sufficient time to maintain the operational readiness of the fourteen existing tracker teams. At the same time, in accordance with phase three of the agreement, the Army was investigating the possibility of establishing its own school in Vietnam. For security reasons, this idea was rejected in favor of a CONUS location.¹² Responsibility for this phase would be assigned to forces in the U.S.

In the fall of 1967, the Department of the Army directed that the U.S. Continental Army Command (USCONARC) develop a tracker program in the U.S. In November, the U.S. Army Military Police School (USAMPS) was directed by USCONARC to establish a combat tracker team program at Fort Gordon, Georgia. As graduates from JWS and experienced trackers, Sergeant First Class Joe Nicholson and Staff Sergeant Neil Couch of the 1st Cavalry were transferred from Vietnam in the spring of 1968 to assist USAMPS in setting up the CTT program.¹³ The establishment of the American school marked the beginning of the phase three of the joint agreement.

By June 1968, authorization was granted for 200 officers and men to begin CTT training at Fort Gordon. To assist USAMPS with visual tracking and dog training, British and New Zealand experts were brought in to prepare training literature and begin training the Labrador retrievers.¹⁴ The early training of the dogs was especially important as the Army was procuring untrained dogs and it would be several months before the dogs would be ready for deployment.

Initially, all trainees for the CTT program in 1968 were volunteers from troops already in Vietnam. A number of these volunteer trackers never received formal CTT training but were actually trained on the job (OJT).¹⁵ It readily became apparent, however, that the screening process would make it difficult for the Army to obtain a sufficient number of qualified personnel for the tracker program. Recognizing this, the Army acknowledged that while not all members of the tracker program who were recruited in CONUS would be volunteers, the screening process for the program would remain the same as in Vietnam.¹⁶ This was a concern and a continuing problem within the sentry and scout dog programs that would challenge the programs throughout the war.

In order to ensure a successful tracking program, the Army instituted high standards for program entrance. The prerequisites for the program were:

1. Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) 11B.
2. Standard aptitude score of at least 100.

3. Normal color perception; visual acuity correctable to 20/20.
4. Excellent hearing.
5. Graduate of a RVN-oriented infantry AIT course.
6. Ability to think quickly and act decisively in emergency situations.¹⁷

These prerequisites were simply part of the initial screening process. Once the minimum criteria were met, a tracker candidate would have to possess the necessary motivation and stamina to meet the rigorous demands of the CTT course.

The training program at Fort Gordon was both mentally and physically challenging to both man and beast alike. Like the men, the Labrador retrievers selected for the program were screened for entry into the combat tracker program. Also, like the men, not all of the dogs who entered the program would graduate. Vietnam dog handler, Bobby Railey, recalls his training experience at Fort Gordon,

We received an untrained dog (most were black Labrador retrievers). We had to train the dogs under the watchful eyes of our instructors, in obedience and how to track. My dog, Ting, washed out and I received another dog, Bo, in the middle of training.¹⁸

A certain level of program handler attrition at the training level was expected by the Army in light of the thirty percent attrition rate experienced by the British at the Jungle Warfare School.¹⁹ An even higher rate within the American school was expected due to the fact that unlike the British, not all of the tracker candidates were volunteers.

The training program at Fort Gordon was divided into three parts. The first part was a five week concentrated course for the training of the visual tracker, the person responsible for following the visible track in the field. It was during this time that the candidate's ability to identify a track was first developed. The second part involved dog and handler training and lasted approximately nine months (three months if the dog was previously trained). The third part brought together the visual tracker with the handler and his dog and formed the three-member combat tracker team.²⁰ This was a three-week training program designed to improve the tracking capabilities of the team. These three parts formed the nucleus of the training necessary to form a skilled and cohesive team.

For the Noncommissioned Officer-In-Charge (NCOIC) of each tracker team, the training requirements were even more demanding. Due to the nature of their work, the NCOIC was required to complete both the visual tracker as well as the combat tracker course. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, this vital member of the team was required to have actual combat experience with a team.²¹

The Labrador retriever proved ideally suited for his role in the U.S. Army. The retrievers that entered the Army's tracker program were generally two years old at the time they began their training. The training period, which would include basic obedience and tracking, lasted approximately eight months. If the dog was previously trained, the tracker training period was approximately three months. Upon successful completion of their tracker training, a dog could expect to work up to six more years. Although their

training did not include attack skills, handlers soon discovered that their retrievers would defend in certain circumstances. Additionally, while the animals were not trained to alert on booby traps, numerous reports attest that the retrievers often did.²² Moreover, the Labrador's good disposition facilitated brief transitions between handlers, expediting the turnover process and operational readiness of the tracker team in Vietnam.

Employment

Upon graduation from Jungle Warfare School, the first American trackers were assigned to one of four provisional teams and returned to Vietnam in February 1967. Eventually the number of teams would grow such that by the war's end, there would be twenty-eight tracker teams assigned to all major combat units.²³ First, however, in accordance with the Joint British Proposal, these pioneer trackers would have to demonstrate their effectiveness in Vietnam.

The tracker dog program evolved situationally, meeting the operational demands of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. The organization of the teams, for example, changed to best support the units to which combat trackers were assigned. Recalling his experience as the officer-in-charge of the first team assigned to the 63rd Infantry Platoon, Harold Bell writes that originally there were twelve members to his provisional team. Bell further organized his men into two "subteams" so that duties could be rotated, maintaining one team on "alert" at all times. Bell describes the routine for the "alert" team as follows,

We would usually hang around the telephone in our hooch, waiting for a call from the Brigade Operations Center--we would then be hustled down to the LZ [Landing Zone], get picked up by a helicopter, and be flown to the unit in the bush that had requested our assistance.²⁴

Later, the trackers were reorganized into a platoon of four, five-man teams commanded by a Lieutenant. Additionally, each team was assigned a handler and a dog. The practice remained, however, of holding a tracker team at designated level of readiness awaiting the development of a mission.

The mission of the American tracker teams in Vietnam, like their organization, differed from that of their British counterparts. At Jungle Warfare School the British trackers were trained as “hunter-killers,” a term which meant that the teams were to track or “hunt” the enemy and engage or “kill” the enemy. Due to its preponderance of anti-aircraft and artillery firepower, the U.S. Army deemed it unnecessary for the tracker teams to make contact with the enemy. The mission of the team would be to track the enemy and then locate and report their position. Although designated combat trackers, the Army was clear in its guidance that the teams were not combat units. Nonetheless, tracker teams often found themselves engaged in combat with the enemy while waiting for American firepower.²⁵

As the war progressed, the combat trackers found themselves performing additional duties as part of their tracking mission. Teams were often called upon to follow and recover Americans that had been captured by the enemy. A tracking mission might also involve locating U.S. Army patrols or individuals that had become lost or separated from their units in the jungle. Following an engagement with the enemy, the trackers were often brought in to “back track” and determine where the enemy might have hidden its supplies or equipment.²⁶ The specialized skills of the tracker teams proved invaluable to the units they were supporting.

Fundamental to the success of the combat tracking team was the composition of the tracking team and the method of tracking. Both man and dog supplied skills that optimized the success of the tracking operation while providing protection to the team as well. The cross-training of each team member further enhanced the survivability of the combat tracker team.

The composition of the American tracker teams was a modified version of the one employed by the British. A commissioned officer, assisted by a senior non-commissioned officer, commanded four five-man teams assigned to a division. Each five-man team was composed of a senior Noncommissioned Officer-In-Charge (NCOIC), a

dog handler and one dog, a visual tracker and two cover men.²⁷ Each member of the team had specific duties and responsibilities while conducting tracking operations.

The NCOIC was overall responsible for the conduct of his team on tracking operations. As such, this member of the team was most concerned with determining how to best employ the skills of the visual tracker and the tracker dog. For example, when operating in densely populated coastal lowlands, the team would often depend more heavily on the scent track than the visual track.²⁸ The extensive combat experience required of every NCOIC enabled this team leader to make the best possible decisions with respect to the team's employment.

Leading the team was the Labrador retriever and his handler. Working on leash, the dog handler and his dog were trained to follow one scent on the ground. This scent was often located by the visual tracker in the form of blood, a foot print, or article of clothing and provided to the dog. This is called the "scent picture" and it was this picture that was fixed in the retriever's mind and allowed the dog to follow only one scent amid hundreds that might have been encountered on the trail.²⁹ This skill was possible because each human possesses a unique smell akin to the uniqueness ascribed to a fingerprint. When the dog was near the subject being tracked he was trained to alert his handler. The alerting signal was different with every dog and it was the responsibility of the handler to closely watch his dog for the alert.

No less important to the team was the visual tracker. This vital member of the CTT was specifically trained to detect and interpret signs left behind by a fleeing enemy passing through various terrain and vegetation. An experienced visual tracker was capable of determining the gender of the person being tracked as well as the type of weapon being carried. Even a less experienced visual tracker was capable of determining the size of the party being tracked, the type of load being carried, and even whether or not they were Vietcong or NVA regulars.³⁰ The keen powers of observation possessed

by the visual trackers often proved valuable to the team even when not on a tracking operation.

Providing protection for the tracking team, were two cover men. With the handler concentrating on the behavior of his dog and the visual tracker occupied with detecting visible signs of disruption, it was up to these members of the team to defend against a possible enemy attack.

Quantifying the success of the combat trackers and their contributions towards the American war effort in Vietnam is impossible. There were numerous uncontrollable factors that negatively influenced the effectiveness of the tracker teams. These factors included the time of day the team began tracking, the environment and weather as well as the age of the track to be followed. Any one of these factors could prevent the tracker team from reestablishing contact with the enemy.

The time of day that the tracker team was called played a significant role in determining whether or not the team would be able to pursue the enemy. In general, tracker teams would not operate in the jungle at night due to insufficient lighting for visual detection. Although the team's dog did not depend on light to follow a track, the team's visual tracker relied heavily on being able to locate visual signs of the enemy. Only with sufficient moonlight and in areas of grass or low shrubs would it be prudent to pursue the enemy at night.³¹

Environment provided the greatest number of obstacles to the tracker teams' success. Temperature, precipitation, wind, and terrain all factored into the ability of the combat trackers to perform their mission. Tracking was easier in mild temperatures when moisture was slowly evaporating into the air, leaving fresh, moist, tracks. The intense tropical sun of South Vietnam, often made tracking a difficult chore. Heavy rain, common in Vietnam, would often wash away the tracks of the enemy even before the combat trackers could arrive on the scene. Additionally, a strong wind could challenge the olfactory senses of the most seasoned Labrador, making it difficult to maintain a good

scent on the enemy. If the enemy fled through running water or on a road over which motor vehicles had passed, his track would almost certainly be lost.³² In these cases, both the scent and visual signs required to follow a track would be nearly impossible to detect.

The most critical factor influencing the tracker team's success was the age of the track. Ideally, a team would arrive on the scene within two to three hours of last known contact with the enemy.³³ The scent of the enemy would still be fresh and visual signs would generally be intact. After twenty-four hours, however, the scent would diminish or be obliterated by environmental factors such as rain, and visual signs would likewise be altered. At this point, the likelihood of reestablishing contact with the enemy would be minimal.

One of the primary reasons why quantifying the effectiveness of the combat trackers in Vietnam is impossible can be found in the mission of the teams themselves. Highly specialized, the combat trackers could follow a track and reestablish contact with the enemy, but ultimately the success of the mission lay with the foot soldiers that were following behind or the supporting air and artillery fires. If the support element were unable to keep up with the trackers or if the supporting fires were out of range at the time of reestablishing enemy contact the mission would be lost.

In spite of these inherent obstacles, however, the American combat trackers in Vietnam were often successful and received favorable reviews for their performance. An article in the 101st Airborne news magazine in 1969, highlights the achievements of some of the tracker teams. While assigned to the "Tigers," the reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Battalion, 327th Airborne Infantry, a combat tracker team is credited with maintaining contact with the enemy, despite the elusive techniques of the NVA. On several occasions the NVA managed to break contact but the combat trackers were able to track down the enemy in the A Shau valley and reestablish contact. In the process, two Russian 85mm cannons were captured by American airborne troops.³⁴

In another case, visual tracker, Joe R. Erickson, tracker dog handler Thomas M. Kimbrough and his dog, Tarka, are credited with assisting in the capture of ten Vietcong. Dispatched to the scene of the previous night's firefight, the tracker team quickly located an enemy footprint in a rice paddy and proceeded to track. Twice Tarka alerted, first on a dead Vietcong and again on a group of twenty villagers in another rice paddy, working around some water buffalo. The villagers were rounded up and it was discovered that ten of the Vietnamese were Vietcong that had participated in the night's firefight.³⁵

Despite these accounts, there are very few published articles concerning the exploits of the combat tracker teams in Vietnam. One reason for the lack of press coverage could be attributed to the small number of combat tracker teams that operated in Vietnam. Between 1966 and 1971, there were only eleven Army combat tracker platoons deployed in South Vietnam. These platoons were responsible for covering an area of nearly 66,000 square miles although most of the trackers operated primarily in the areas of I and III Corps north of Saigon.³⁶ Still another reason for the lack of publicity surrounding the combat trackers could simply be the relatively few missions to which the teams were assigned. Due to the specialized nature of their work, there were far fewer missions, for the tracker teams than the scout dog teams.

Evidence as to the effectiveness of the combat trackers can be found in copies of the U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV), Form 408, "Monthly Report of Combat Tracker Operations." For example, in the Commanding Officer's October 1970 report for the 62nd Infantry Platoon (Combat Tracker), 1st Air Cavalry Division, combat trackers participated in operations that resulted in one enemy being killed in action and another two soldiers being taken prisoners of war. Although three visual trackers were wounded in action along with a dog handler, there were no other American casualties. Additionally, tracker operations had resulted in the recovery of a variety of weapons, ammunition, and documents.³⁷ Unfortunately, not all of the tracker reports were so favorable.

The threat of ambush was an inherent danger in combat tracking operations. While the visual tracker and dog formed an effective team in terms of reestablishing contact with the enemy, neither the tracker nor the dog was able to gauge the distance to the enemy being followed. Consequently, combat tracker teams were at risk of ambush, especially if the enemy suspected they were being tracked. On 23 January 1970, for example, all patrol members of the 75th IPCT were wounded by grenades when they were ambushed by the enemy they were tracking.³⁸ This was not an isolated incidence and additional measures had to be taken to safeguard the trackers and the follow-on troops.

The most effective solution to the ambush threat was to combine the forces of the scout dog with those of the tracker dog. Although not force doctrine, a number of tracker teams began to take a scout dog team along for operations whenever possible.³⁹ With the Labrador retriever on the enemy trail ground-scenting, and the German shepherd airborne

scenting, the combined team provided significant defensive capabilities against the possibility of enemy ambush.

In the early days of the combat tracker program, a number of the trackers were former scout dog handlers. Many of these men cross-trained their tracking dogs to alert to both a ground scent as well as an airborne scent. Former scout dog handler Thomas Kimbrough trained his tracking dog to alert to booby traps, a measure that was responsible for saving his life more than once. In an interview with the 101st Airborne news magazine, Kimbrough recalled,

On quite a few occasions, Tarka has refused to go further, in spite of my persistence. I have found trip wires, mines, and punji pits in our path, which he would not let me walk into.⁴⁰

While cross-training the tracker dog made perfect sense, the Army never coordinated the training or the employment of the scout and tracker dog teams.

The absence of doctrinal operational guidance was a major obstacle to optimizing the effectiveness of the combat tracker teams. As pioneers in their field, the first American trackers lacked any employment doctrine of their own. Having been trained by the British, the U.S. Army adapted the doctrine taught at the Jungle Warfare School with respect to organization and mission. In the area of employment, however, the Americans trackers were left to develop their own doctrine. Unlike the British, the American trackers encountered two types of enemy each with its own distinct brand of fighting. Reports from senior NCOs in the field indicated that it was often easier to track North Vietnamese troops because their actions were fairly predictable. Dealings with the Vietcong insurgents, however, were markedly different. In a June 1968 Army report on the Military Working Dog, it was recommended that doctrine be developed “to show the differences in utilization against main force units and local guerrillas in insurgency environments.”⁴¹

Summary

The combat tracker program is one of the least known programs in the history of the American involvement in Vietnam. Despite the problems associated with acquisition, training, and employment, the trackers and their dogs distinguished themselves in the field and provided a valuable contribution to the war effort. The lessons learned from this now deactivated program bear recording in order to avoid similar problems and optimize its effectiveness should the combat tracker program be required in future military operations.

1 “The First Trackers,” *Dog Man*, March-April 1996, 1 and 5.

2 Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs: Canines in Combat* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1997), 172.

3 William Henry Harrison Clark, *The History of the United States Veterinary Corps in Vietnam, 1962-1973*, (Roswell: W. H. Wolfe Associates), 208.

4 A. K. McIntosh and C. L. Westbrook, *A Review of the Military Working Dog Program* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Technical Operations, Inc., Combat Operations Research Group for Headquarters, U.S. Army Combat Developments Command, 1968), 3, CORG-M-353.DAAG-05-67-C-0547.

5 Clark, 138.

6 Lemish, 212.

7 Steve Craddick, “Trackers Jungle Trained,” *Dog Man*, September-October 1994, 4.

8 “The First Trackers,” *Dog Man*,” March-April 1996, 1.

9 McIntosh, 35-36.

10 Cradick, 4.

11 Harold Bell, “The Trackers,” *Dog Man*, July 1994, 2.

12 McIntosh, 34.

13 John Dupla, “CTT or IPCT,” *Dog Man*, July-August 1997, 1.

14 McIntosh, 35.

15 Dupla, 3.

16 McIntosh, 40.

17 *Ibid.*, 41.

18 Bobby Railey, “Becoming A Scout Dog Handler,” *Dog Man*, March-April 1997, 3.

19 McIntosh, 41.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 Lemish, 210.

23 Clark, 138.

24 Bell, 2.

25 "The First Tracker," 5.
26 McIntosh, 38.
27 Ibid., 36.
28 Bell, 2.
29 Lemish, 209.
30 McIntosh, 37.
31 Ibid., 38.
32 Clark, 137.
33 Lemish, 211.
34 "Tracking Charlie," *Dog Man*, March-April 1996, 1.
35 Ibid.
36 "Scout and Tracker Dog Deployment--1968/69," *Dog Man*, May 1994, 3.
37 "Monthly Report of Combat Tracker Operations," USARV Form 408, November
4, 1970.
38 Lemish, 212.
39 Ibid.
40 "Tracking Charlie," 1.
41 McIntosh, 40.

CHAPTER 6

MINE/TUNNEL DOGS

The reactivation of the 60th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) (Mine/Tunnel Detector Dog) in 1968, marked the official beginning of the Mine/Tunnel Dog program in Vietnam. This chapter will discuss the history of the program, the employment of the Mine and Tunnel Dog teams and conclude with lessons learned from the experience in Vietnam.

Background

The U.S. Army had unsuccessfully experimented with the use of mine dogs in World War II. In the early 1950s, the Stanford Research Institute was contracted to study the means by which dogs could locate buried mines. Using fear motivation and electrical shock, the Stanford results proved inconclusive and the concept of using dogs to detect mines lay dormant for another fifteen years.¹

It was at the height of hostilities in Vietnam that the Army realized the technical superiority enjoyed by the American forces was no match for the crude booby traps and mines employed by both the NVA and the Vietcong. The electronic mine detecting equipment was ineffective when employed in a metallic environment such as a railroad bed and useless against the crippling and deadly booby traps encountered in the jungles and fields of Vietnam. The tunnels and “spider holes” used by the enemy presented additional dangers as the American Army did not possess a truly effective means of detection. In May 1967, the U.S. Army Limited Warfare Laboratory (USALWL) decided to investigate the feasibility of bringing back the mine detection dog (M-dog).²

Recognizing that the Army did not have the resources necessary to conduct testing for the mine dog program, USALWL contracted Dr. Robert Lubow and Dr. Eugene Bernard, co-founders of Behavior Systems Incorporated (BSI), to execute the study. In accepting the initial contract, Lubow and Bernard were agreeing to undertake a

task in which they possessed limited experience. Neither one of these behavioral scientists had ever worked with dogs or even owned one as a pet. Their previous research involving animals for military applications was limited to laboratory experiments involving pigeons.³ None-the-less, they developed a program that would ultimately save countless lives half a world away in Vietnam.

The stakes for this risky venture were high. The final contract for over one half million dollars would be awarded to BSI following a successful in field evaluation of the mine and tunnel dogs by the Army. A 90 percent detection rate for trip wires, booby traps, mines, and other ordnance was the objective sought by USALWL.⁴ Lubow and Bernard quickly set about procuring initial funding and people who would be willing to assist in the training of the dogs.

Seven months later, in July 1968, six dogs stood by their handlers poised to demonstrate their proficiency in front of a crowd of USALWL representatives, DoD civilians, Army officers and dog handlers. These six dogs represented the twenty-eight German shepherds that had successfully completed training. Fourteen of these dogs were experts at detecting mines, trip wires, and booby traps. The remaining fourteen dogs had been trained to detect tunnels.⁵ There was a great deal of pressure on the handlers and their dogs to perform. Lubow recalls that at least part of the audience was hostile towards the program and the dogs who were standing by to demonstrate their proficiency. As representatives of the Army's tracker dog school at Fort Gordon, the officers resented a civilian company performing work that they felt should have come under their jurisdiction. Adding to this resentment was the fact that the training was being supervised by college professors with "long-haired hippies" for handlers. Lubow writes, "Only our German shepherds, straight and sleek, ears at attention, gave any semblance of military order."⁶

The field evaluation was a great success for BSI with the dogs performing in outstanding fashion. Time after time the dogs alerted to buried mines and an assortment

of booby traps and tunnels. Despite the obvious proficiency of the dogs, however, there remained a few skeptics in the audience. According to Lubow, one Army colonel in particular, maintained that there were visual signs that were cueing the dogs to their targets. When one dog alerted to a particularly well concealed punji pit, the officer ordered the dog team to stand still while he personally examined the area for visual signs of the target. After dropping to his hands and knees and thoroughly inspecting the surrounding area, the colonel rose to his feet, pronounced that the alert was a false response, and that in fact, there was no punji pit. As he walked around the dog, the colonel fell through the camouflaging into the pit.⁷ Fortunately for the colonel, the pit had not been filled with punji sticks.

By day's end the field evaluation was pronounced a success and shortly after, Behavior Systems Inc., was awarded a contract to train twenty-eight mine-detecting dogs for the Army and another twenty-eight for the Marine Corps. BSI would receive approximately \$625 thousand for successfully completing this task.⁸ This time the training would include the Army dog handlers that would eventually deploy to Vietnam for further evaluation in an actual combat environment.

Encouraged by the initial test results and the success of BSI's field evaluation, the Army reactivated the highly decorated 60th Infantry Platoon at Fort Gordon in August 1968. The platoon carried a new designator in recognition of the mixed complement of dogs that would be employed by the unit and as such became the 60th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) (Mine/Tunnel Detector Dog).⁹ It was at Fort Gordon that the Army would establish its own training program for the mine dogs.

Further north, at BSI's new training site in Shotwell, North Carolina, mine and tunnel handlers and their dogs were undergoing an aggressive training program. Upon graduation the dogs were able to detect ordnance buried six inches, elevated up to five feet in the air, or located up to ten feet off the trail or route on which they were working. Additionally, the dogs were being trained both on and off leash although maximum

efficiency was derived from a dog working off his leash. Further, the dogs were being trained to work up to 300 feet ahead of their handlers, frequently out of visual contact. Depending on the environmental conditions, the dogs were demonstrating the capability of detecting up to 200 feet from their targets.¹⁰

The training program for the mine and tunnel dogs was significantly different from that of their sentry, scout, and tracker counterparts. In his book, *The War Animals*, Dr. Lubow details the particulars of the mine and tunnel dog training. While all military working dogs received extensive obedience training that included prompt responses to the commands of heel, down, stay, come and move out, the mine and tunnel dogs were not trained to the command of “sit.” The dog was trained to sit only upon alerting to a target be it mine, booby trap, or tunnel. When the dog did sit, he would do so silently and approximately two feet away from the target stimulus.¹¹ This type of silent response was necessary in order to prevent the handler from accidentally detonating a mine or booby trap or from alerting enemy troops hiding in a tunnel or spider hole.

Silent methods of operation necessitated that dogs respond to inaudible signals from their handlers. Since the dogs were trained to work ahead of their handlers, the handlers carried whistles that only the dog could hear. Upon hearing this signal, the dog was trained to immediately look to his handler for further commands. When reaching what Lubow describes as a “choice point” or a point where the dog must decide in what direction to continue, the dog had to look to and follow the hand signals provided by the handler.¹² This type of behavior required strict obedience training by the dog and an especially alert handler.

While the dogs were being trained, BSI was concurrently working on a training and operating manual for mine and tunnel dogs as part of their contract.¹³ This manual appears to have been used by the Army when its own training program was established at Fort Gordon. This assumption is made because *The War Animals*, references this manual as both a contracted Behavior Systems Inc. publication and a U.S. Army Limited Warfare

Laboratory publication. It is doubtful, however, that Lubow anticipated the use of the BSI manual by any training organization other than his own. This assumption is made due to Lubow's belief that there existed an unwritten understanding with the Army that if the contract for the fifty-six dogs was satisfactorily executed, that BSI could expect additional work in training mine-detecting dogs.¹⁴ It was on this basis that BSI had expanded its training facilities and program for the training of the 56 contracted dogs.

The following year in 1969, Behavior Systems Inc. completed the training within the terms of the contract and on 22 April, the newly trained handlers from the 60th IP(SD) (M/T) arrived in Vietnam with their dogs for the final evaluation. Two mine-detector dog squads and two tunnel-detector dog squads, led by an officer and three support staff personnel, composed the unit.¹⁵ The evaluation was to take place in two phases. In the first phase, the dog teams would be assigned to the 25th Infantry Division for three months followed by three months with the Americal Division. Throughout the evaluation period there were to be interviews with the units employing the dogs as well as on-site observation by the project officer.¹⁶ Vietnam would be the real test of the mine and tunnel dog program.

The 5 1/2 month trial period proved successful, demonstrating that a commander who properly employed the mine dog teams, could expect at least a 90 percent detection rate of hostile artifacts along his march.¹⁷ The results were impressive and no doubt life-saving. Vietnam historian Michael Lemish notes that during the trial period the mine dogs alerted to seventy-six trip wires and explosives, twenty-one tunnels, punji pits, and spider holes, and alerted six times to the presence of enemy personnel. Although the dogs failed to detect twelve items, it is significant to note that these "misses" occurred after heavy rainfall, or were very old targets. More importantly, the electronic mine detectors failed to detect a number of these as well. The results of the tunnel dog teams were no less impressive. Lemish notes that these dogs located 108 tunnels, bunkers,

spider holes, and punji pits. Additionally, they alerted to thirty-four mines, booby traps, and trip wires as well as one attempted ambush.¹⁸

The majority of the patrol leaders that worked with the dog teams during the evaluation period responded favorably towards the experiment. After the trial period these men were questioned as to the effectiveness of the mine/tunnel dog program and the responses were overwhelmingly positive. According to Lemish, 85 percent of the patrol leaders believed that the participation of the dog teams on patrol had enhanced the security of the mission. Only 12 percent believed that the teams had had no effect on the missions and an even fewer 3 percent believed that the dog teams had hindered security and had performed poorly.¹⁹ Although not every patrol leader responded favorably to the mine/tunnel program, comments accompanying the surveys reflected the overwhelming support for the dogs and their handlers.

The Marine Corp's experience with the mine/tunnel dogs was just as impressive. The following year, on 7 March 1970, 18 handlers and 14 dogs reported for duty with the Marines in Vietnam. In May, the second group of 20 handlers and 15 dogs arrived in Vietnam for evaluation. The handlers and their dogs were part of a 270 day field evaluation to determine the suitability of using mine dogs with the Marine Corps troops in Vietnam. Like their Army predecessors, the mine/tunnel dog teams proved their effectiveness in the field.

Assigned to infantry and engineer units of the First Marine Division and Combined Action Forces, the handlers and their dogs were exposed to a representative sample of the overall environment in Vietnam.²⁰ As with the Army evaluation, the Marine Corps project involved field missions, followed by questionnaires completed by the handlers and the tactical unit leaders. Additionally, there were interviews with unit personnel as well as on-site observation by supervisory personnel. Every effort was made to ensure that the evaluation was as comprehensive as possible.

As early as April 1970, the Marine Corps project officer was reporting successful operations involving the first group of handlers and dogs. In the monthly report covering the period between 18 March and 30 March 1970, dogs were recorded as having detected several mines and booby traps in a variety of situations.²¹ Of particular interest to the Marine Corps was the fact that during the evaluation, the dogs that were specifically trained to detect mines and booby traps, were also alerting to tunnels and punji pits.²² Although it would be impossible to quantify an exact figure, the final report does credit the dogs with certain savings of lives.

In the project's final report issued 7 January 1971, the dog teams had once again proven their effectiveness. Based on the positive reports from the field, the Marine Corps drew three conclusions. First, that the mine dogs had demonstrated the ability to locate mines and booby traps; secondly, that they were operationally suitable when used to supplement other preventive measures; and finally that the dog teams had garnered a positive acceptance rate in 99 percent of their employments.²³ The key to the program's future success, however, would ultimately hinge on whether or not the tactical units would correctly employ the dog teams. The report pointed out the dogs had difficulties with the heat and distractions such as other animals, and that the mine/tunnel dogs were operationally suitable if "utilized with discretion and in accordance with their capabilities."²⁴ This point would ultimately prove the most challenging aspect of the program.

Acquisition and Training

Despite the initial success of mine/tunnel dog program in Vietnam, the DoD did not issue further contracts to Behavior Systems Inc., for either the acquisition or training of dogs. Instead, the Army was tasked with continuing the program at the scout dog school at Fort Gordon. The assumption is made that the acquisition process for the mine and tunnel dogs at Fort Gordon was similar or identical to that of the scout dogs since the

same breed was being utilized. However, further research would be required in this area to confirm this assumption.

The training of the mine and tunnel dogs was in accordance with the program established by BSI. Using the manual that had been written by Dr. Lubow, the Army trained German shepherds using positive stimulus (food) to obtain a conditioned response. Unlike the scout and sentry dogs, whose training capitalized on a dog's instincts to prey and chase, the mine/tunnel dog had no inherent interest or instinct in seeking out ordnance. The training of the mine/tunnel dog, then, depended on the animal believing that to eat, he needed to locate ordnance.²⁵ On the surface the concept appeared simple but in practice the training of the dogs would take a considerable amount of time and effort.

The Army's course of instruction for the mine and tunnel dogs was conducted in two phases. According to *Infantry* magazine, the first phase was twelve weeks long in which the dogs were trained under experienced instructors. At the end of this phase the dogs were joined by potential handlers for the remaining six weeks of the course.²⁶ It was an intense and demanding course of instruction with no guarantee of graduation. The standards were high and a dog could graduate only after demonstrating a minimum detection rate of 90 percent for hidden targets.²⁷ The rigorous course of instruction would help to maximize the dog's success in an actual combat environment.

As with the sentry, scout, and tracker dogs, the developers of the mine and tunnel dog program recognized that the human component was every bit as important to the mine and tunnel dog team as the animal itself. In the Marine Corp's final report of the 270-day field evaluation, the issue of the training and selection of the handlers was specifically addressed. "Mature, responsible persons of average intelligence and who are career oriented as well as those who have some experience in the military by far proved the most desirable."²⁸ Unfortunately, as with the other working dog programs, this

standard was the ideal and not the reality as the employment of the dogs would soon bear out.

Employment

The mine and tunnel dogs proved to be the most effective means of combating the deadly booby traps, mines, spider holes and tunnels of the Vietcong and NVA. There are numerous accounts of the life-saving exploits of the dog teams and the Army's After Action Reports confirm these successes. The dogs and their handlers proved themselves in a variety of missions to include road and railroad clearing as well as booby trap and tunnel detection.

The Army's engineer battalions found the mine dogs to be especially helpful in the clearing of mines along roads and railroad beds. Previous to the arrival of the dogs, the engineers had used metal detecting equipment to locate mines along logistic routes. This equipment was only effective against mines made of metal and was incapable of distinguishing between a metal mine and a tin can. Because the dogs were trained to detect the explosive itself and not the actuating device, they were able to detect non-metallic mines that would have been previously undiscovered except by detonation. In one report, a dog was credited with detecting a pressure type device attached to approximately forty pounds of C-4 explosive.²⁹ Recognizing the dogs' utility, *Infantry* magazine reported that efforts were made in 1971 to make the dog teams integral parts of every engineer battalion in Vietnam.³⁰

No less impressive was the success of the dogs involved in tunnel detecting operations. For example, in January 1970, two mine and two tunnel dog teams assisted in an operation in the vicinity of Long Thanh Airfield, located east of Saigon. It was here that the Army suspected that an NVA regiment had built a tunnel complex from where they were staging their attacks. The teams began work early in the morning and by early afternoon they had discovered ten tunnels in a 500-meter stretch of perimeter. Within the tunnel complex the dogs located detonator cord, blasting caps, and claymore wire.³¹ This

significant accomplishment was typical of the early success enjoyed by the mine and tunnel dog teams.

The monthly After Action Reports submitted by the unit commanders offer further evidence as to the effectiveness of the mine and tunnel dogs. In his report for December 1969, the commander of the 38th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) reported alerts to five booby traps, five caches, two mines, twenty-nine unoccupied tunnels and thirteen spider holes. These alerts resulted in the discovery of enemy weapons, explosives, 500 pounds of rice, medical supplies, and NVA uniforms and equipment.³² Still another report later in the year, credited one dog with alerting to eight enemy booby traps and one mine.³³ Some of the reports included remarks from the unit commanders testifying to the effectiveness of the dog teams while other reports simply listed the number and types of alerts. These reports offer but a glimpse as to the life-saving accomplishments of the mine and tunnel dog teams.

If not for the after action reports submitted by the Army commanders, little would be known of the accomplishments of the mine and tunnel dog teams. The only other service to employ these teams was the Marine Corps and their units did not use the monthly report forms. Lemish notes that the Marine Corps accounts of the mine and tunnel dog teams were spotty at best.³⁴

One aspect of the mine and tunnel dog story in Vietnam is certain, however, and that is that often the teams were misemployed in the field and this probably reduced their overall effectiveness. Lemish writes that as the war progressed, many of the new handlers deviated from their original training and attempted to use their own techniques when working the dogs. A small number of these dogs performed well but overall, the performance of the teams declined resulting in a higher casualty rate for dog teams and patrol members alike.³⁵

A common problem with all the working dog programs in Vietnam was that of unit commanders failing to recognize that dogs were animals that required sufficient food, water, and rest to perform their best. Although experience had shown that a dog should walk no more than four miles prior to actively searching for mines, it was not uncommon for a unit commander to force a dog to cover upwards of twenty miles, prior to beginning a mine hunt.³⁶ This is even more significant when the heat and humidity of Vietnam is considered.

Despite the problems associated with the misemployment of the mine and tunnel dogs, there is no doubt that this new class of military working dogs saved numerous lives and reduced casualties in Vietnam. In technical reports prepared for the Army by San Antonio's Southwest Research Institute, the dogs were recognized as having demonstrated "tremendous value" in the detection of mines and booby traps.³⁷ While it would be impossible to quantify this value, the contributions of the mine and tunnel dogs to the American war effort in Vietnam were certainly significant.

Summary

The mine and tunnel dog program is probably the least known of the military working dog programs utilized in Vietnam. The program was developed relatively late in the conflict and as American forces began to withdraw from Vietnam, the mine and tunnel dogs were often paired with the scout dogs and their missions blurred. Despite the problems associated with their employment, there is sufficient evidence to show that the mine and tunnel teams provided a valuable contribution to the war effort. As pioneers in

the field, the story of these men and dogs merits future study should the mine and tunnel dog program be reactivated in the future.

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- 1 Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs Canines in Combat* (Washington: Brassey's, 1997), 198.
 - 2 Lemish, 198.
 - 3 Robert E. Lubow, *The War Animals* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 176.
 - 4 Lemish, 199.
 - 5 Ibid., 191.
 - 6 Ibid., 193.
 - 7 Ibid., 193.
 - 8 Ibid.
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CHAPTER 7

LESSONS LEARNED

The American Military Working Dog played an active role in the Vietnam war and proved effective in support of U.S. involvement in the years between 1965 and 1972.

Background

Man's close association with canines extends back to the earliest records of war. Evidence of this relationship can be found in Egypt beginning around 1600 B.C. Archeological records indicate that the Hysksos, Asiatic nomads who invaded the region, brought with them the composite bow, the chariot, horses and massive Mastiff-like war dogs.¹ The value of war dogs was proven in combat and armies the world over began incorporating dogs as part of their arsenals.

Over the centuries, dogs accompanied their masters into battle serving as sentries and attack dogs. Military commanders from Atilla the Hun to Napoleon successfully employed dogs as part of their arsenals. Although Benjamin Franklin proposed that scout and attack dogs be used in the Pennsylvania militia, the suggestion was not acted upon and it would be over 200 years before the U.S. military would actively employ war dogs.²

The history of the war dog in the U.S. military did not formally begin until World War II. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, patriotic dog lovers founded the Dogs for Defense in January of 1942. This private group approached the Quartermaster General with their idea of recruiting and training dogs for war. The Army's acceptance notification marked the first official recognition of war dogs.³ The dogs served with distinction in a variety of combat roles to include scout, tunnel, and to a limited extent, as mine detection dogs. Dogs also participated in airborne assaults, parachuting with their handlers behind enemy lines. At the conclusion of the war, the army systematically

detained the canine soldiers and returned them to the families who had volunteered their pets for military service.

When hostilities erupted in Korea the U.S. Army faced an immediate shortage of working dogs. The 26th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) of Fort Riley, Kansas, was the only active unit in the Army's inventory and did not possess a full complement of trained handlers or dogs.⁴ Despite their limited use in the Korean war, the dogs were highly successful and the men of the 26th IPSD were awarded a total of three Silver Stars, six Bronze Stars of Valor, and thirty-five Bronze Stars for meritorious service.⁵ When the war ended, however, the 26th IPSD was disbanded.

Recognizing both the utility and economy of sentry dogs, the Air Force scrambled to recruit one thousand dogs to work the missile sites springing up around Cold War America. The weakest part of the sentry dog program was the procurement of suitable dogs.⁶ Part of the procurement problem was due to competition by the country's various law enforcement agencies for qualified dogs. This competition would continue to challenge the military's acquisition process with the expansion of the military working dog programs in Vietnam.

The Vietnam Experience

In examining the historical data and accounts of the military working dog teams in Vietnam, there are a number of lessons to be learned from the experience. In many cases, the lessons learned from the study of the sentry, scout, tracker, and mine/tunnel dog programs are as unique as the missions themselves. These lessons will be discussed first. The lessons learned that are common to all working dog programs will be discussed next, with emphasis on the lessons that may have applicability in today's military operations.

Lessons Learned--The Sentry Dogs

There are several lessons to be learned from the experience of the sentry dog units in Vietnam. Lessons learned include proper acclimatization of the dogs, adequate shelter

for the dogs, the psychological effect of the dogs' presence and most importantly, that American forces should not relinquish overseas security responsibilities to host nations.

The deaths of the sentry dogs that were attributed to heat stroke could very well have been averted. The fact that the climate in Vietnam was much hotter than the environment from which the dogs were coming should not have been a surprise to those managing the sentry dog program. The American military had sent dogs to Vietnam several years prior to Project Top Dog and the conditions were well documented. The problem appears to be with the dissemination of information. Had the handlers known that their dogs could possibly suffer from heat stroke upon arrival in Vietnam, precautionary measures could have been taken to prevent their deaths.

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Closely related to the issue of the acclimatization of the dogs was the issue of inadequate shelter or kennels. Once again the problem can be linked to lack of knowledge on the part of the base security force. The fact that sentry dog units arrived at more than one assignment to the surprise of the base security force is a situation that was entirely preventable. Had proper communications been established prior to the arrival of the sentry teams in Vietnam, preparations could have been made as to the shelter requirements of the dogs.

In spite of the challenges associated with the employment of the sentry dogs, the psychological effect of the dogs' presence cannot be overstated. In May 1970, Army

Majors William Newman and John Kelly concluded their study entitled, “Final Report-- Sentry Dog Utilization in Military Police Operations.” Not surprisingly the report concluded that in many instances the conditions under which the sentry dogs were employed were “undesirable or unacceptable as defined in existing policies and regulations.”⁷ While the report cited the “diminished effectiveness” of the teams, it acknowledged that “the extent of degradation resulting from these conditions could not be determined.”⁸ Nonetheless, there were significant benefits to be derived from the mere presence of dogs on a base’s security force. According to the report, “the major benefit of sentry dog employment was derived from the psychological effect of the dogs’ presence.”⁹ The mere presence of the dogs was often a deterrent in itself.

Perhaps the most unfortunate lesson learned was one that appears not to have been learned at all. In 1996 at the American air base in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, a terrorist attack killed nineteen Americans and injured an additional two hundred seventy. Tom Mitchell, President of the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association, notes that as with the 1964 attack on Bien Hoa, the internal security provided by the Americans was very good but that the perimeter security “was questionable and probably inadequate.”¹⁰ Once again, it was for political reasons that the Air Force Security Police was not responsible for perimeter security. Had U.S. Air Force sentry dog teams patrolled the perimeter, the tragedy may very well have been averted.

Lessons Learned--The Scout Dogs

The employment of scout dog teams in Vietnam provided the armed forces with several lessons to be learned. In the areas of acquisition, training, and employment there are lessons that are still of value in today’s military working dog program. Many of these lessons are similar to those faced by the sentry dogs while others are unique to the scout dog program.

As with the sentry dogs, acquisition during the Vietnam war continued to be a problem for the military working dog program. Caught unprepared for the increased

demand for working dogs in Vietnam, both the Army and the Air Force struggled to procure a sufficient number of qualified animals for the scout dog program. By assigning the acquisition process to one service or an independent agency, the method and means of procurement could have been streamlined and standardized. This consolidation of effort

could have minimized competition between services for a scarce resource and facilitated the acquisition process.

There are several lessons to be learned from the training phase of the scout dog program. These lessons cover the topics of instructors, handlers, and the curriculum environment itself. Regardless of the type of war fought in the future, the benefits of studying the Vietnam scout program will continue to be germane.

The shortage of qualified instructors for the Vietnamese scout dog program was one that plagued the Army for most of the war. The age-old problem of needing experience to get a job and needing a job to get experience was particularly acute in the scout dog program. Compounding this shortage was the very real need for volunteers to serve as instructors for the program. Due to the nature of the work, a human to animal bond was essential for maximizing the effectiveness of the training program but the shortage of instructors did not always provide for the establishment of this relationship.

Hand in hand with the shortage of volunteer instructors was the shortage of volunteer handlers. As with the instructors, the human-to-animal bond was critical for obtaining the maximum level of performance from the dog in the training environment. The need for establishing a strong rapport was doubly critical when the scout dog team reached the employment stage. Because the scout dog team's very performance hinged on the handler's ability to read his dog's signals, it was imperative that the handler be as intimately familiar with his dog's behavior as possible. A close human-dog relationship was key to this familiarity. A volunteer handler would be much more likely to develop this bond than a soldier who did not willingly enter the program.

The necessity of recreating a realistic training environment is still another lesson learned from the scout dog training experience. Prior to the recreation of the Vietnamese village at Fort Benning there had been numerous complaints from handlers that the dogs were often distracted upon entering Vietnamese villages. By populating the training village with farm animals, the dogs were able to train through the distractions and

improve their performance in Vietnam. It also afforded the handlers an opportunity to train in a more realistic environment and as such improved their performance as well.

In the area of employment, the most important lesson to be learned from the scout dog program, was in the education of the unit commanders. Ignorance as to the proper employment of a scout dog team most assuredly decreased the team's effectiveness. A basic understanding of the dogs' capabilities and limitations would have allowed for more effective employment of the scout dog team. By recognizing that a dog is a living entity with many of the basic needs of a human such as adequate sustenance, water, and rest, numerous employment problems could have been averted. Recognition of these needs, as well the capabilities and limitations of the teams, would best be taught through a standardized and mandatory training program for unit commanders.

Lessons Learned--The Tracker Dogs

There are several lessons to be learned from the study of the American use of combat tracker teams in Vietnam. In the area of acquisition, the lesson learned is unique to the tracker dog program. Lessons learned in the areas of training and employment, however, have relevance to both the scout and tracker dog programs.

The importance of selecting the proper breed of dog for a military working dog program was illustrated in the early days of the combat tracker program. When considering a particular breed for a program, careful thought should be given as to the nature of the dog being used and especially the environment in which it will be employed. It did not take long for the handlers and the tracker units to realize that a dog that bays as it tracks, is not the best dog in a combat environment. Another lesson to be considered in the area of breed selection deals with the color of the dog being used. The British used both black and yellow Labrador retrievers for tracking operations but the Americans later found that use of the yellow retriever, made an easy target for the enemy. Camouflage for the dog was just as important as camouflage for the troops.

Lessons learned in the area of training had applicability to both the scout and the tracker programs. To be an effective dog handler in either program, a soldier was required to possess an above average interest and motivation in dogs and their training. The use of conscripts for such a specialized program as combat tracking, could only detract from the training program. Additionally, the lack of coordination in the training programs of the scout and tracker dogs, made employment considerations involving the two dogs, that much more complicated.

The importance of employment doctrine to a new combat program seems fundamental but was virtually ignored with the combat trackers in Vietnam. The lessons learned from the evaluation of the first provisional trackers were never incorporated in doctrine for either the tracking teams or the infantry and fire support units that utilized the

CTTs. While not quantifiable, there is little doubt that operational guidance in the field would have improved the overall effectiveness of the combat tracker program.

The most significant lesson learned was also in the area of employment. Early in the combat tracker program it was realized that the skills of the scout dog greatly complemented those of the tracker dog. Nonetheless, despite numerous reports from the field, the Army failed to coordinate the two programs in Vietnam and individual units were left to make do as the situation permitted. Vietnam historian Mike Lemish summarized the situation best:

The Army never officially coordinated scout and tracker dogs handlers, nor was adequate training ever provided, and most training was just OJT in-country. In fact, toward the end of the American involvement, many tracker dog handlers, trained at Fort Gordon, wound up being scout dog handlers after they arrived in Vietnam.

While it would be impossible to calculate how many lives would have been saved had the scout and tracker dogs been employed together force wide, there is little doubt that official coordination would have resulted in a superior combat tracker program.

Lessons Learned--The Mine/Tunnel Dogs

There are three significant lessons to be learned from the mine and tunnel dog program in Vietnam. These lessons include positive stimulus in the training of dogs, the importance of proper employment, and the importance of maintaining accurate AARs.

Prior to Doctor Lubow's research with BSI, the military had unsuccessfully attempted to train dogs and other animals using a variety of means. These means included electric shock and other forms of negative stimulation that failed to elicit consistently accurate responses from the animals. Previous failures at this type of training had raised the question as to whether or not dogs possessed the capability to detect explosives and booby traps. It was not until 1969 that BSI proved conclusively that it was possible to train a dog to detect explosives using "the judicious application of principles of reinforcement."¹¹ In doing so, the Army learned that positive stimulation

was more effective in the training of dogs than negative stimulation and further that dogs did indeed possess the capability to detect explosives and booby traps.

The proper employment of the mine and tunnel dogs is an important lesson learned that cannot be overstated. This lesson is applicable to both the handler and the employing unit commander. For the handler, the Vietnam experience proved that deviation from training often resulted in substandard performance by the dog and a corresponding lack of confidence on the part of the employing unit. For the unit commander, failure to recognize the physical limitations of the dogs resulted in substandard performance by the mine and tunnel teams. The consequences of improper employment of the dog teams often caused casualties or death to man and beast alike.

The third lesson to be learned from the mine and tunnel dog teams in Vietnam concerns the importance of keeping accurate after AARs. Vietnam was the first time dogs had been effectively used by American forces in both the detection of mines and booby traps. Significant lessons for use in future conflicts would no doubt have been learned had handlers and unit commanders kept more complete after action records of the Vietnam experience.

Lessons Learned--The Military Working Dog Program

The most important lesson to be learned from the Vietnam experience is that of maintaining an active Military Working Dog program in peacetime as well as in war. The armies of Great Britain, Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand are but a few countries that maintain active working dog programs in peacetime. These countries in particular are noted for their extensive use of the MWDs assigned to their combat engineer units.¹² Switzerland and Sweden are two more countries that have recognized the importance of maintaining a peacetime working dog program.¹³ Many of the problems experienced in Vietnam with respect to acquisition, training and employment could have been avoided had the U.S. military embraced this philosophy.

The U.S. sentry, scout, tracker and mine/tunnel dog programs in Vietnam all experienced difficulties with respect to acquisition. The activation of each succeeding program placed additional burdens on already strained resources. A lack of coordination between military services further aggravated this problem. Had the U.S. maintained an active peacetime working dog program, many of the start up problems such as delays and duplication of efforts, could have been avoided in the acquisition process. Should military operations today necessitate the reactivation of any of the working dog programs of Vietnam, it is likely that the military would experience the same delays. A peacetime working dog program could prevent such potentially costly delays.

Without exception, the working dog programs of Vietnam all experienced difficulties associated with the training. The lack of qualified instructors was one of the most serious training problems faced by the military. The deactivation of the working dog programs at the conclusion of each war ensured that a vacuum would be left in the instructor bases. A shortage of qualified handlers in each program was another problem that resulted from the repeated deactivation of the working dog programs. By maintaining an active MWD program between wars, the shortages of instructors and handlers experienced during Vietnam could very well have been minimized.

Employment problems plagued all the working dog programs in Vietnam. Ignorance as to the basic care for the dogs was a problem that resulted in numerous unnecessary deaths from heat stroke and other environmentally related causes. There was also a general lack of understanding on the part of unit commanders as to the capabilities and limitations of the dog teams. This ignorance often proved fatal to both man and beast and was often entirely preventable.

Recommendations For Further Research

Time limitations with respect to thesis preparation, significantly reduced the scope and depth of this study. Because there has been so little written about the MWD programs in Vietnam, much of the story can only be gleaned through oral interviews with former handlers. Time constraints, however, limited the number of handlers that could be contacted and interviewed. For a more comprehensive study of the MWD program in Vietnam, it is recommended that more veterans be interviewed with respect to their roles in Vietnam.

Numerous files and records concerning the use of MWDs in Vietnam have been declassified and these records are primarily located in military archives in Suitland, Maryland. Although these records are available to the public, they have not been categorized. Most of the records are stored in boxes in no logical order and require sorting.¹⁴ Time and logistical constraints prevented travel to Suitland for the analysis and the reading and study of the records that include hundreds of AARs. It is recommended that these records be studied to accurately describe the contributions of the MWDs in Vietnam. It is further recommended that data be compiled from the AARs of the units that did not employ MWDs in Vietnam and contrast with the units that did use MWDs.

Conclusions

The military working dog teams employed by the U.S. military in Vietnam provided significant contributions to the American war effort. Army records show that MWD teams in Vietnam “recovered more than 1,000,000 pounds of rice and

corn, located over 3,000 mortars, and exposed at least 2,000 tunnels and bunkers.”¹⁵

Nonetheless, research has shown that there were environmental and human driven factors that detracted from the effectiveness of the teams. Many of the problems associated with these factors could have been prevented had the U.S. employed an active peacetime MWD program. The use of MWD teams in Vietnam and the lessons learned from the experience, merit study due to the potential application in today’s military operations.

¹ Mary Elizabeth Thurston, *The Lost History of the Canine Race* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1996), 28.

² Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs Canines in Combat* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1997), 6.

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁷ Major William F. Newman and Major John J. Kelly, “Final Report--Sentry Dog Utilization in Military Police Operations,” (Vietnam Headquarters, United States Army, Vietnam), 21 May 1970, v.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, VII-1.

¹⁰ Tom Mitchell, “The Hard Way,” *Dog Man*, July-August 1996, 2.

¹¹ Lubow, 177.

¹² William H. Thornton, “The Role of Military Working Dogs in Low Intensity Conflict,” Army-Air Force Center for Low Intensity Conflict, Langley Air Force Base, February 1990, 9.

¹³ Thornton, 9.

¹⁴ Jesse Mendez, interview by author, telephonic, Leavenworth, KS., 14 January 1998.

¹⁵ Lemish, 240.

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