The Dogs of War: History of the U.S. Military Dog

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Introduction

Dogs have had a place in American history since the time the nation was founded in the 1700s. From 1861 to 1864, during the American Civil War, dogs were used as prison guards, particularly those who tended to be more vicious. These dogs became mascots and not only provided military services, but also raised morale during this time of hardship.¹ This paper will outline the major historical events, some interesting stories, and advancements made in the incorporation of the dog into the United States military.

World War I

Initially, the Red Cross was the first organization to train dogs for use in World War I.² Red Cross dogs (Figure 1) were trained to find wounded soldiers while ignoring the dead, and deliver needed supplies, such as canteens of water. The dog would return to its handler and indicate that it had found a survivor and lead them to the injured soldier. Some of the more commonly used breeds included the Bulldog, retrievers, Airedale terriers, shepherds, and German Shepherds.³

When the United States officially entered the war on April 6, 1917, it was the only army that did not utilize military dogs, with the exception of some sled dogs that were located in Alaska. These few dogs entered the war and were used to haul ammunition and supplies to snowy areas that were otherwise difficult to reach. Several recommendations were made by different departments and associations, such as the German Shepherd Dog Club of America and the Army and Police Dog Club of the United States, to incorporate the use of dogs into the military, but for some unknown reason these proposed plans were never adopted.³ The United States would rely on the British and French armies for dogs during World War I.

![Figure 2. Photo of Sergeant Stubby wearing military uniform and decorations, ca. 1918-1921. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ASergeant_Stubby.jpg.](image)

However, this does not mean that dogs did not have a place in this war. Many dogs were adopted as mascots, providing not only companionship, but sometimes saving lives. Stubby, a stray pit bull, who became the mascot of the 102nd Infantry, is one such example. He warned the group of an incoming gas attack one night, which gave the soldiers time to put on their gas masks. Stubby also apprehended an infiltrator while on sentry duty, who was then quickly captured. During the nineteen months that he was overseas, Stubby participated in seventeen battles.⁵ While in Paris, he also served as a therapy dog in a hospital and was promoted to the rank of honorary Sergeant.⁴ When he returned to the United States, he was

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awarded numerous medals and awards (Figure 2). He was given a gold medal from Gen. John Joseph Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, was made a life member of the American Red Cross, the YMCA, and the American Legion, and was also awarded a silver medal from the Eastern Dog Club of Boston. In 1926, Stubby passed on and was preserved and put on display with his medal at the Red Cross museum. Eventually he was transferred to the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History. Stubby is just one example of how dogs, while not officially recognized by the United States military, still held an important role in World War I (Figure 3).

World War II

The first recognized division for canines in the United States military did not occur until World War II with the creation of the War Dog Program. However, it was not the Army that initially realized that dogs could provide advantages during war times. When the war began in September 1939, it was breeders, dog owners, and a few military men who were able to envision how dogs could be a valuable asset. They began to train groups of dogs, mainly for sentry and casualty work. This group eventually became known as Dogs for Defense, DFD, in January of 1942. A few leaders of this group included Mrs. Milton Erlanger, a dog breeder, author Arthur Kilbon, Harry I. Caesar, who was elected President of Dogs for Defense, and head of the Professional Dog Handlers Association, Len Brumby. Dogs for Defense (Figures 4a and 4b) teamed up with the American Kennel Club for funding and to spread word about the newly formed organization.

Around this time, the American Theatre Wing War Service, a group of movie actors, radio hosts, and onstage personalities, were looking for any way to donate time to the war effort. Helen Menken, an actress, met with Maj. Gen. Edmund Gregory to determine if there were any ways that the group could offer their services. At that time, he did not have any opportunities available, but told them he would let them know if one did surface. A short time after that, Gregory met with the Lt. Col. Clifford Smith of the Quartermaster Corps to discuss security of the army supply depot and Smith suggested the use of dogs for sentry duty. An initial experimental program was approved to train two hundred dogs for sentry duty. Gregory got in contact with Menken to apprise her of the opportunity for this
new development in a program that the American Theatre Wing could support. Menken was aware of Dogs for Defense and notified the group of the experimental program. Dogs for Defense eventually became responsible for recruiting and training dogs for use in the war and this became the first governmentally recognized program for the potential use of dogs during war times.⁵

Upon inspection of the program three months later, it was found that not much progress had been made, mostly because the trainers were unfamiliar with how to train dogs for sentry work. It was also noted that the program was not training men how to work with and handle the dogs. The program was reorganized in the summer of 1942 and by July 16th, the Secretary of War had directed the Quartermaster General to include other areas of training, besides sentry work, for dogs in the War Dog Program. Some of these included search-and-rescue sled dogs, roving patrols, and messenger services⁶ (Figure 5). With the recognition of the advantages that dogs offered, their use was quickly utilized by other branches of the United States military, such as the Coast Guard to use on beach patrols, and by the Navy for sentry duty.¹⁵

The Quartermaster Corps, which eventually became responsible for the training of the dogs, had several centers (Figure 6) located across the United States, with the first being at Front Royal, Virginia. When the program was first initiated, more than thirty different dog breeds were accepted; however, as the program matured this was narrowed down to a few that were specifically suited for the jobs required of them. These breeds included German Shepherds, Belgian Sheep Dogs, Doberman Pinschers, Farm Collies, and Giant Schnauzers.¹⁰ There were certain physical requirements that the dogs had to meet in order to continue with the training. Only dogs fourteen months to three and a half years with a weight between 55 and 85 pounds and a shoulder height of 23 to 28 inches were accepted. Additionally, they were inspected by a veterinarian, who tested blood and feces, and vaccinated for rabies and distemper. Any dogs infected with leptospirosis were not included in the program due to the highly contagious nature of the disease. They were dipped to control external parasites and any dog that passed the examination was put in quarantine for 21 days. At the end of this process,
the dogs were tattooed on the left ear with a serial number for identification. Many of the dogs that underwent this process were donated by American families who wanted to support the war effort. In a two year period, approximately 40,000 dogs were donated. Preliminary exams narrowed this number down to 18,000 dogs. Initial examinations of size, health, and temperament brought the number down to 8,000 that were sent to basic training in just those two years.5

"Basic Training," which lasted 8-12 weeks, was where the dogs learned their basic commands and became habituated to the practices of war, such as wearing gas masks, riding in military vehicles, and the sound of gunfire. Afterwards, each dog would be trained specially for a specific job, which included sentry, scout or patrol, messenger, or mine dog. Sentry dogs were used on patrol and would alert the handler by growling or barking when strangers were present. Scout or Patrol dogs were able to do the job of the sentry dog, but were also used to detect snipers and ambushes because they could be trained to work in silence. Messenger dogs could travel between two different handlers and deliver messages as they were needed. Mine dogs were trained to find trip wires, booby traps, and metallic and nonmetallic mines. The majority of the dogs that were trained were used as sentries10 (Table 1). Overall, 10,425 dogs were trained for military use during World War II.15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of dog</th>
<th>Trained for Army</th>
<th>Trained for Coast Guard</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentry</td>
<td>6,121</td>
<td>3,174</td>
<td>9,295</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scout</td>
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<td>Sled and pack</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine detection</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Breakdown of positions for trained dogs.

Of the more than 10,000 that were trained in the War Dog Program during World War II, Chips (Figure 7), a German Shepherd and husky mix, is probably one of the better known and more famous.4 He was donated and trained at Front
Royal, Virginia, in 1942 and was assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division. The unit was assigned to several different locations, including North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany; consequently, he became one of the first dogs to be shipped overseas. He was trained for sentry duty, but on several accounts went above and beyond this position. One instance was when stationed in Sicily, he is told to have attacked a pillbox, a type of bunker, where an enemy machine gun crew was hiding, seized one man, and caused the entire crew to surrender. There are also numerous reports of Chips alerting his unit to the existence of enemy troops and their capture. For his efforts, Chips received the Silver Star and the Purple Heart, however, both were later revoked. He is also infamous for biting the hand of Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander, when he went to pat his head. This was due to his training that only his handler is allowed to touch his head. Chips is just one example of the advantage that war dogs provided American troops during World War II.

Several health problems arose as more dogs were used during the war. Some of these were due to the environment that the dogs were living in, such as increased heat and humidity causing heat exhaustion and swollen feet. Hookworm and heartworm infestations, which were severe enough that many had to be euthanized, were not uncommon. Improper nutrition also led to health concerns, for example, feeding raw rabbit meat sometimes lead to taeniasis, or tapeworm infections. Army veterinarians began to develop proper guidelines and protocols to protect the dogs from these health problems. Another situation that arose was the use of phosgene and mustard gas as weapons and the need for development of a gas mask that would protect the dogs. A prototype was developed in 1943, but had several problems in that it was uncomfortable, did not fit the head of larger dogs, such as the German Shepherd, and did not account for the heavy breathing of dogs through their mouth as a way to dissipate heat, which could lead to heat stroke. These problems were eventually corrected (Figure 8) and the problem resolved. Veterinary care was also provided for bullet injuries, shrapnel wounds, and other physical lesions.
Korean War

After World War II ended, many of the war dog programs were discontinued and scout dog platoons were deactivated. Originally there had been plans to continue developing their training for use in the future, but this was difficult due to lack of interest, financial cuts, and reduction of manpower. When the Korean War started in June of 1950, there was only one active dog platoon remaining, the 26th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog, located in Front Royal, Virginia. The platoon had been relocated several times, with one location being Fort Riley, Kansas. These dogs were primarily used for official demonstrations, television appearances, and occasionally for infantry units during maneuvers. In May 1951, the 26th Scout Dog Platoon was ordered to Korea for scout duty (Figure 9), almost exclusively at night which was new in the history of war dogs. Three Silver Stars, six Bronze Stars of Valor, and 35 Bronze Stars for meritorious service were awarded to members of the platoon for their services. When the war ended, many of the scout dogs were retrained for sentry duty and kept in the Far East Command.5

This left very few war dogs in the continental United States, and with the development of nuclear weapons, sentry dogs were needed by the Strategic Air Command, part of the United States Air Force, to help protect its airfields, equipment storage facilities, and missile sites. At the same time, the Department of Defense began deactivating many of the Infantry Scout Dog Platoons, stating there was little need for them. The Air Force began developing its own sentry dog program, which turned out to be very successful, and started acquiring dogs. Recruiting teams, consisting of a team leader, a procurement officer, a veterinarian and assistant, and several dog trainers and handlers, were sent across the United States to gather dogs for use. However, they continually struggled to gather enough qualified dogs to meet their demand.5

Vietnam War

In 1960, with the establishment of a military dog program for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the Air Force began to send dogs into Asia to be trained as sentry and scout dogs. The program wanted to determine if military working dogs were practical in the environment, to begin experimenting with a combination sentry and scout dog, to figure out which breed is most suited to a tropical climate, and to see if it was possible to set up an in-country breeding program. The program had a rough start and did not gain any more knowledge than what was already known during World War II. Another problem was that there were only 20 veterinarians in the entire country, most of them retired, and none that treated dogs, so general health of the dogs was substandard. In 1962, handlers and veterinarians were recruited and the situation began to improve. By September 1964, the program had over 300 dogs, however disease quickly brought this number down to just 50 scout and 80 sentry dogs by 1966. With the end of the war the dogs were abandoned and it is not known what became of them.5

Sentry dogs were not a part of the Vietnam War in any American security plans until 1965, when an air base was infiltrated by a Vietcong engineer who managed to get past security guards and several electronic detectors. At this point, the United States Air Force initiated Project Top Dog 145, which called for 40 handlers and sentry dogs to be sent to several air bases. The project was successful and proved that dogs, specifically German Shepherds, were able to stand the heat of the environment (which was the main reason
for not using them sooner) and be useful in the war. By 1967, there were 476 sentry dogs in use by the air force and they had proved themselves very useful in detecting not only intruders, but also protecting handlers from the natural environment, such as the poisonous krait snakes which were numerous and deadly to humans.\(^5\) It is estimated that more than 10,000 American lives were saved by the warnings of the Vietnam War dogs.\(^{13}\)

![Handler and dog on duty with 101st Airborne Division during the Vietnam War.](http://www.qmfound.com/K-9.htm)

As the war continued, it was determined that scout dogs would be of greater use than sentry dogs due to their ability to work in silence. The 26\(^{th}\) Infantry Scout Dog Platoon was asked to begin training dogs for scout duty and the German Shepherd was the breed of choice. Once the dogs acclimated to the environment, they fared quite well and prevented many soldiers from being ambushed\(^3\) (Figure 10). It is said that the Vietcong disliked the war dogs more than the soldiers and would reward anyone who would kill the dogs.\(^{13}\)

The use of mine-detection dogs, or M-dogs, was also utilized in this war. These dogs were trained to detect buried mines, trip wires, booby traps, and other manufactured objects not normal to the environment. The dogs were trained by positive stimulus, such as food, praise or affection, when they correctly located the buried object. The Department of Defense eventually granted a $625,000 contract to expand the training program and at the end of the testing period 85\% of the patrol leaders believed that the dogs enhanced security.\(^3\) On an interesting side note, dogs were not the only animal that was used to try and detect mines. Pigs, coyotes, cats, raccoons, skunks, deer, and ferrets were also used.\(^2\)

The health problems of the dogs during the Vietnam War were numerous and due to many different causes. Probably one of the most common was heatstroke from working in the heat and humidity for long periods of time. Broken legs and dislocated shoulders from jumping out of vehicles and helicopters was not uncommon. Foot injuries from walking over rocks, coarse grass, and hot surfaces were also seen, particularly in sentry and mine dogs. In June 1967 an epidemic spread throughout the dog population, wherein the dog would have a fever for days or weeks and then recover. Two to four days later, epistaxis would occur and the dog would become anorexic, lose weight, develop sores, and become weak in the hindlegs. Death occurred a few days later. The disease was first called idiopathic hemorrhagic syndrome, but later became officially known as tropical canine pancytopenia. It was eventually determined to be spread through tick bites and the spread of \textit{Ehrlichia canis}. A tick-control program was initiated and tetracycline used to control the disease.\(^{5}\) These are just a few of the health concerns that plagued the dogs, handlers, and veterinarians during the Vietnam War.

At the end of the Vietnam War it was against army regulations to take the war dogs home, although many of the handlers tried everything within their power to convince them otherwise. This caused upset to the animal lovers in America, and, in an effort to appease them, the military decided to return the healthy dogs to the United States. By the time that any dogs with any type of infectious disease were excluded, only 105 dogs returned to the United States.\(^{5}\) What exactly happened to the remaining dogs is unknown; some were known to have been turned over to the South Vietnamese and others were euthanized.\(^6\)
War on Terror and Operation Enduring Freedom

Some of the most recent wars that dogs have been part of include the War on Terror and Operation Enduring Freedom. The most common breeds used today in the United States include the German Shepherd and the Belgian Malinois. They are trained for very specific roles, including work as patrol dogs or detection dogs. Patrol dogs are generally very tolerant of civilians and are used for searching, scouting, tracking, and general observation. Detection dogs are trained to detect controlled or explosive substances. In addition, some dogs might be trained for specialized purposes.

The Military Working Dog Program has progressed from the initial War Dog Program in World War II to a very standardized set of instructions that has finally begun to fully recognize the value of the dogs in war. Under this program, the dogs are provided proper food and housing, training, and veterinary care. The results of this program are realized nearly every day, when we hear about border patrols and bombs being detected in the news. Probably one of the latest and well known examples is the presence of a military dog when Osama Bin Laden was finally apprehended.

Conclusion

The history of the war dog is a very long and interesting one, dating back hundreds of years. Our canine counterparts have stood beside and protected the soldiers of United States’ history. Even though only recently have we recognized them for the advantages that they bring, protection and companionship, they are sure to remain an integral part of America’s future.

REFERENCES


Third Prize in the 2012 J. Fred Smithcors Student Veterinary History Essay Contest.

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