

Remembering Our Canine War Heroes

By Christi McDonald

On this Veterans Day, it's fitting that we remember those who have served to defend and protect our country, both human and canine. More than 2,000 military working dogs are currently deployed around the world, working for the United States Department of Defense as sentries, scouts and explosives detectors to help safeguard American military bases and soldiers.

More than 600 "soldier dogs" have served alongside the men and women in the United States armed forces in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and author Maria Goodavage gave readers an unprecedented view of these heroes in her book, "[Soldier Dogs: The Untold Story of America's Canine Heroes](#)", published earlier this year. But we must also recognize the courageous soldiers that came before these.



A soldier is pictured in 1916, during World War I, taking bandages from a kit carried by a British military dog. George Grantham Bain Collection – Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Dogs were used in warfare as early as the first century BC, when armies defending the Roman Empire included canine forces. Mastiffs were used by Britain against Caesar's invading armies in 54 and 55 BC.

In more contemporary times, Germany made the greatest use of dogs as part of its armed forces. It has been estimated that during World War I the Germans trained and utilized hundreds of thousands of military and police dogs. Many dogs were used in Europe during World War I in conjunction with the medics in the field, to carry bandages and other supplies to wounded soldiers.

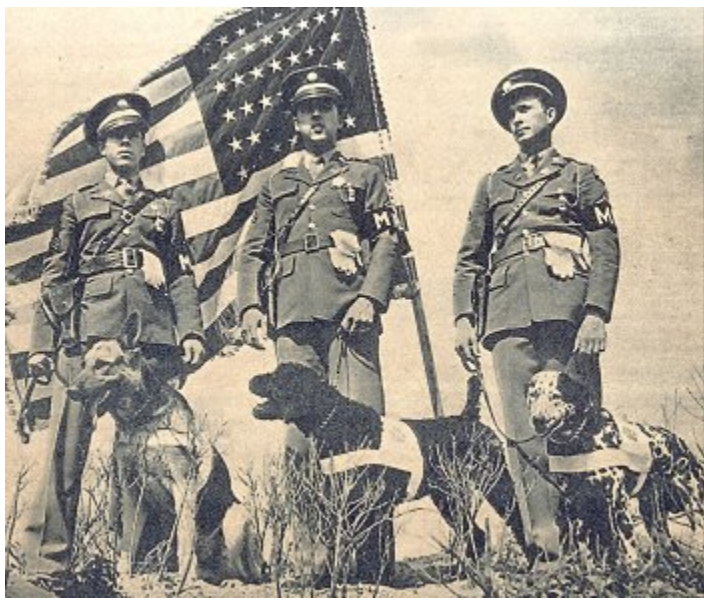
The United States didn't begin to deploy dogs in the military until after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. And when dogs did become part of the U.S. armed forces, the program actually started outside of the military complex.



President Roosevelt's Scottie, Fala, helped his cousin, Laura Franklin Delano during a Dogs for Defense bond drive in 1943. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

In January of 1942, shortly after the U.S. entered World War II, a new group formed that called itself "Dogs for Defense" to encourage Americans to donate dogs to the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps to become part of the nation's defense. Among the leaders of this movement was Mrs. Milton (Arlene) Erlanger of the Pillicoc Kennel, who bred Standard and Miniature Poodles. Mrs. Erlanger enlisted the help of Arthur Kilbon, a reporter for the New York Sun, as well as her handler and kennel manager, Henry Stoecker. Mrs. Erlanger didn't want the organization to seem exclusive to Poodles, so she and Stoecker sought support from the Professional Handlers Association, then headed by Len Brumby, as well as obedience clubs around the U.S. Funding for Dogs for Defense initially came from member clubs of the American Kennel Club and from individual fanciers around the country.

When the United States entered World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration encouraged American citizens to make personal sacrifices for the war effort and to make donations whenever possible. Citizens on the home front got involved by conducting war bond drives, rationing the use of gasoline, sugar, tires, nylon and other products, planting "Victory Gardens" to help bolster the public food supply, and volunteering for the Red Cross and the USO. Donating to Dogs for Defense was another way that citizens were encouraged to give what they had in support of the country.



When dogs first began to be used in the military, German Shepherds, Standard Poodles and Dalmatians were among the breeds utilized.

Dogs for Defense began as an agency designed to procure and train dogs to serve in the Army, Navy and Coast Guard. Within the first several months, it became clear that a standard method of training, as well as established training centers, would be the most efficient way to properly train the dogs, as well as their handlers in the armed forces. Eventually the Army took over training, while the focus of Dogs for Defense remained procurement. By the end of 1942, the Army had established a standard for the training of dogs and handlers.

At first no specific breeds were required; dogs that were between the ages of 1 and 5 years that were healthy and had “the characteristics of a watch dog” were accepted. Before long, however, an official list of breeds that were classified as acceptable “war dogs” was created, the first of which included 21 breeds: Airedales, Belgian Sheepdogs, Bouviers, Boxers, Briards, Bullmastiffs, Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, Collies, Curly Coated Retrievers, Dalmatians, Doberman Pinschers, German Shorthaired Pointers, Flat Coated Retrievers, German Shepherds, Giant Schnauzers, Irish Water Spaniels, Labrador Retrievers, Norwegian Elkhounds, Rottweilers, Standard Poodles and Wirehaired Pointing Griffons, along with any cross of these breeds.



Two of these bronze statues were dedicated in 2000 after installation at March Field Air Museum in Riverside, Calif., and at the National Infantry Museum in Ft. Benning, Ga. The inscriptions read: "They protected us on the field of battle. They watch over our eternal rest. We are grateful."

By 1944 the number of breeds used had been reduced to seven: German Shepherds, Belgian Sheepdogs, Dobermans, Collies, Siberian Huskies, Alaskan Malamutes and what were called "Eskimo dogs." The U.S. Marine Corp adopted the Doberman Pinscher as its official breed and worked closely with the Doberman Pinscher Club of America in procuring dogs. Today the Belgian Malinois is among the most sought-after dogs for use in the military.

Dogs were trained and used as sentries, messengers, scouts and for mine and explosives detection. In addition to these duties, in the jungles of the Pacific theater during World War II, the keen sense of smell dogs possess was utilized to alert handlers to ambushes by the enemy in dense undergrowth, to search for wounded soldiers and to find airmen shot down over the jungles. Dogs were often known to drag wounded soldiers to safety.



Dedicated on June 10, 2006, this U.S. War Dogs Memorial, located at the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Holmdel, N.J., is a bronze statue of a kneeling Vietnam War soldier and his dog, set on a black granite base. The memorial was designed by sculptor Bruce Lindsay and honors all the nation's war dogs and their handlers – past, present and future.

Since World War II, dogs have been used extensively in the military and in every conflict in which the U.S. has been engaged. In the Korean and Vietnam wars, the [U.S. War Dogs Association](#) estimates that military dogs and their handlers saved more than 10,000 lives. It is further estimated that as many as 4,900 dogs were used in Vietnam between 1964 and 1975. John Kubisz, D.V.M., a veterinarian who served in the 764th Veterinary detachment in Vietnam, said this: "There'd be a lot more than 50,000 names on the Vietnam Wall without these dogs, and I don't think the average American even knows the role they played."

One great black mark remains on the service these canine soldiers gave our country. When the Vietnam War ended, the U.S. did not have a system in place to return the dogs to the United States. Many were euthanized; others were turned over to the South Vietnamese Army. For many years afterward, dogs that became too old to serve – over the age of 10 – were euthanized. But under a law passed in 2000, retired military dogs are now allowed to be adopted by their current or former handlers, law enforcement agencies or citizens who pass a screening and are deemed capable of caring for them. Military working dogs can now live out their days with families who treasure and respect them for their years of service to our nation.



Dedicated on Veterans Day 2008, this memorial is located at the U.S.S. Alabama Battleship Memorial Park in Mobile, Ala.

In 1967 the United States Air Force created a formal patrol dog training program, which has since evolved into the Lackland Training Detachment. Virtually all military working dog training for the U.S. Armed Forces today takes place at Lackland. In recent years, dogs have continued to serve in Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq, and in fact military working dogs accompanied SEAL Team Six on the mission to find and kill Osama Bin Laden in May 2011.

In recent years, many war dog memorials have been created all over the United States, attesting to the appreciation of the country's citizens for these brave and dedicated canine soldiers. In 2000 the first official War Dog Memorial was dedicated at March Field Air Museum in Riverside, Calif., while an identical memorial was unveiled at the National Infantry Museum in Ft. Benning, Ga. The bronze statues are of a GI in combat gear with a German Shepherd at his side. The inscriptions read: "They protected us on the field of battle. They watch over our eternal rest. We are grateful."

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Christi McDonald is a second-generation dog person, raised with a kennel full of Cairn Terriers. After more than a decade as a professional handler's apprentice and handling professionally on her own, primarily Poodles and Cairns, she landed a fortuitous position in advertising sales with the monthly all-breed magazine *ShowSight*. This led to an 11-year run at *Dogs in Review*, where she wore several hats, including advertising sales rep, ad sales manager and, finally, editor for five years. Christi is proud to be part of the editorial team for the cutting-edge Best In Show Daily. She lives in Apex, N.C., with two homebred black Toy Poodles, the last of her Foxfire line, and a Norwich Terrier.

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