



Silent Voices: Stories & Recognition for War Dogs of Vietnam & Canine Soldiers Today

Alan B Cunningham

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A few years ago I read, with great interest, and sadness, the story of the war dogs of Vietnam. Although they were responsible for saving the lives of many American soldiers, they were forgotten by our government at the end of the war, and cast aside as nothing more than equipment. I vowed to herald the silent voices of these courageous and forgotten animal heroes through education and the promotion of memorials and commemorative postage stamps. Mine is but a small voice, yet a voice, for the thousands of service animals that have sacrificed their lives, in silence, for our freedom during times of war. These are the silent voices that must be heard. Many people have asked me if I have personally interviewed war dog handlers. The answer is yes. But they were too disheartened to revive the tragic events of their canine companions. So in respect to them I use the stories that others have been fortunate enough to hear. And I share them with those that have chosen to remain silent. May America listen. . . Throughout history, and during every modern war, soldiers have served as dog handlers. The bond created between dog and man became a relationship and memorable experience like no other. In the course of the Vietnam War an estimated ten thousand American potential casualties (or seventeen per cent of the total fifty-eight thousand American fatalities) were prevented as a result of the four thousand canine soldiers. Only two hundred sixty-one dog handlers were killed in action. In many instances the dogs prevented soldiers from triggering a booby trap or stepping on a land mine. They also alerted their handlers to hidden enemy soldiers as far as a thousand yards away. The canine warriors detected underwater saboteurs by the smell of their breath from the reeds they used as snorkels. Some dogs even covered their handlers with their own bodies to protect them from gunfire and shrapnel, while losing their own lives in return. Former dog handler, Charlie Cargo, tells of the day his dog Wolf, a German Shepherd, refused to allow him to proceed any further up the trail. "I looked straight ahead and not more than two feet away was a trip wire. I would have died right there if he hadn't found the wire." The amazing stories of canines saving American soldiers in Vietnam goes on and on. From 1960 to 1975 Vietnam became one of the longest and most unpopular wars ever fought by the American armed forces. Unfortunately many of our heroic soldiers returned home abandoned and unrecognized. And much like their human counterparts, many of the Vietnam canine veterans also received a different kind of homecoming. Fewer than two hundred of the four thousand canine soldiers were returned home. Of the tens of thousands of missions logged by the four thousand American war dogs in Vietnam, some three hundred twenty-five died in the line of duty, while approximately six hundred succumbed to tropical disease. The team was so effective that the Viet Cong offered a bounty for dead dogs or their handlers. What happened to the remaining seventy-two percent of these heroic dogs?

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