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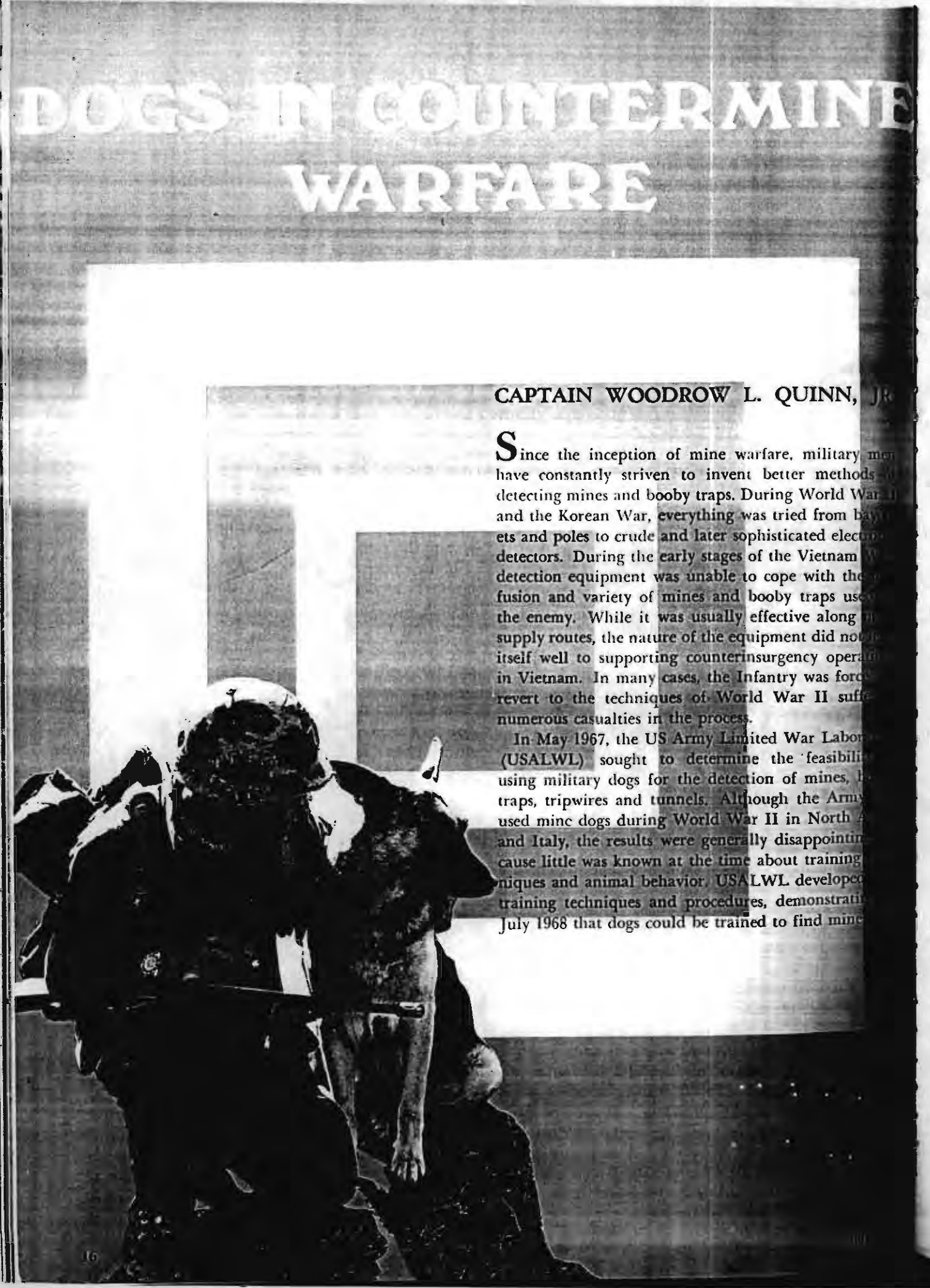
DOGS IN COUNTERMINE WARFARE

CAPTAIN WOODROW L. QUINN, JR

Since the inception of mine warfare, military men have constantly striven to invent better methods of detecting mines and booby traps. During World War II and the Korean War, everything was tried from bayonets and poles to crude and later sophisticated electronic detectors. During the early stages of the Vietnam War detection equipment was unable to cope with the profusion and variety of mines and booby traps used by the enemy. While it was usually effective along main supply routes, the nature of the equipment did not lend itself well to supporting counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam. In many cases, the Infantry was forced to revert to the techniques of World War II suffering numerous casualties in the process.

In May 1967, the US Army Limited War Laboratory (USALWL) sought to determine the feasibility of using military dogs for the detection of mines, booby traps, tripwires and tunnels. Although the Army had used mine dogs during World War II in North Africa and Italy, the results were generally disappointing because little was known at the time about training techniques and animal behavior. USALWL developed dog training techniques and procedures, demonstrating in July 1968 that dogs could be trained to find mines



booby traps effectively. In August, the 60th Infantry Platoon (Scout dog – mine tunnel detector dog) began training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. This experimental platoon deployed to RVN in April 1969 with 28 mine and tunnel dog teams for field evaluation.

During the next six months, the platoon was tested with the 25th Infantry Division and the Americal Division. This evaluation showed it to be one of the most effective mine-detection systems introduced into the war. The mine and tunnel dog teams found 110 mines and booby traps and 129 tunnels, caches and punji pits. The comments of 85 percent of the commanders interviewed were favorable: "We were in a booby trapped area. The dog saved my men from serious injury or death." ". . . If the dog hadn't been with us. I'm afraid we would have suffered casualties. . . ." The verdict was clear – the concept worked.

The mine and tunnel detector dogs were trained to detect and sit within two feet of any hostile artifact hidden on, below or above the ground; to discover and alert on tripwires, caches, tunnels and punji pits; and to clear a safe lane eight to ten meters wide. A commander who properly employed the teams could rely on the dogs to safely discover approximately 90 percent of all hostile artifacts along his line of march.

. . . If dogs think of such things, Romper would have been thinking that her fur coat was much too hot for the 100 degree heat in the Boi Loi Woods. But Romper was thinking of other things as she padded silently under a tall bush. As the slight breeze shifted,

she paused, then changed direction and moved slowly forward, testing the breeze carefully with her very pointed nose. After circling an innocuous-looking bush, she glanced back at her handler and carefully sat two feet from the mortar round a 17-year-old boy had spent 30 minutes camouflaging. She watched impatiently as her handler spoke to the men behind him and then when beckoned, quickly moved toward him, the saliva forming as she saw him reach in his pocket for her reward. . . .

Based on the initial success of the mine and tunnel dog concept, in July 1970 the Infantry School was directed to assume responsibility for the program and to develop improved training techniques to further increase the dogs' effectiveness.

The concept underlining the training, which is well known to behavioral scientists uses a positive stimulus (food) to obtain a conditioned response (finding mines). Unlike the scout and sentry dogs, whose utility capitalizes on their natural instinct for prey and the chase, the mine dog has no inherent interest in ordnance. He must be conditioned to believe that to eat, he must find ordnance. The Infantry School has established an 18-week course of training for mine and

tunnel dogs. They are trained under the supervision of experienced instructors during the first 12 weeks, and then are joined by their potential handlers for the remaining six weeks.

The training teaches the dog that mines have food on them. Later the food disappears, but he quickly discovers that if he goes to the mines, food will be forthcoming. He then learns that he is expected to sit by the mines to eat. This is the critical period when the dog is learning on his own that he must make a deliberate, voluntary response (sitting within two feet of an uninteresting metal object without stepping on it) and wait patiently for his reward.

As his training progresses, the dog must depend more on his nose and his sixth-sense, since the targets become

harder to find and he learns that he must also find wires stretched across the trails. Finally, to graduate he must detect and consistently respond to at least 90 percent of the well-hidden targets.

. . . The water was chilly as King splashed in a rice paddy west of Da Nang. Nearing the dike, he moved from left to right, looking for an easy place to climb out. Seeing one, he moved toward it, then moved faster as his nose picked up the familiar, unpleasant odor. King hesitated as a wisp of the odor came off the water, took a cautious step, and then quickly withdrew as his foreleg made fleeting contact with something taut. Thinking of the cold water, he stood indecisively until his training overcame thoughts of comfort and then spashed happily toward his handler as he heard the piercing tone of the whistle. . . .

Subsequent to the success of the original platoon, the mine and tunnel dogs have consistently proven their value in most types of operations conducted in RVN.

. . . Moving along the dirt road out of Trang Bang was easier than fighting through the heavy brush, and Butch was happy as he trotted swiftly around the curve. Stopping, he turned and waited, wishing that his handler, the men with mine detectors and the rumbling vehicles would hurry-up. When they finally made it to the curve, his handler gave the move-out gestures and Butch resumed his pace. Farther along, he suspiciously watched the water buffalo in the rice paddy, remembering what his handler had done to him the time he had chased one. He forgot the water buffalo as he detected the strong scent of a 50-pound mass of TNT buried in the shoulder of the road. Spinning quickly, he ran toward the source, sniffed to make sure and sat. Where was that handler he thought, wondering how much food he would get for this one. . . .

The teams have proven to be extremely effective while working with engineer minesweep teams on road clearing operations. The dogs can find non-metallic mines that electronic detectors miss and can distinguish between a metallic mine and a tin can. This ability has prompted efforts to make them an integral part of every engineer battalion in RVN.

One can only guess at the number of casualties prevented by these dogs, as one can only guess at the number of mines and booby traps they have missed. However this writer does know that, while supporting the 25th Infantry Division during the period November 1969 to April 1970, not one unit using mine dogs sustained casualties that could be attributed to the team's performance. We also gratefully remember the time King found a tunnel the VC were digging under the berm of Cu Chi Base Camp, less than 100 meters from his sleeping quarters.

In January 1970, mine and tunnel dogs assisted an operation to locate a suspected tunnel complex being constructed by an NVA regiment near Long Thanh Airfield, east of Saigon. Two mine and two tunnel dog teams were sent with an NCO. The next morning accompanied by Thai engineers, the teams began searching the cleared area between the rubber plantation and the outer wire. One of the dogs detected an air

hole, then several more in a line working toward the wire. By early afternoon, the teams had found 10 more tunnels in a 500 meter stretch of the perimeter, all of which were blown by the Thai engineers. Quantities of detonator cord, blasting caps and claymore wire were also found.

The US Army's mine and tunnel detection dogs have proven to be one of the most effective means of reducing casualties in Vietnam. Vietnam, however, has only opened the door to further study, experimentation and the combat use of the mine and tunnel dog concept.

Captain Woodrow L. Quinn, Jr., commanded the 38th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) from April 1969 to April 1968. A 1968 graduate of Infantry OCS at Fort Benning, he took his Scout Dog training with the 26th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) at Fort Benning before his assignment to USARV. Captain Quinn is currently in charge of Mine/Tunnel Dog training with the Military Dog Committee, Company Operations Department, USAIS.