

Still Remembered in 2000



NOTE - Robert Brown went on to retire from the Army. Presently residing in New Jersey with his civilian canines, he has become an accomplished artist.

Budda (4A82) bravely served his country for the "human equivalent" of over 40 years. During his time in Vietnam he had eight handlers, all of whom survived to return home. He was wounded five times. He had five confirmed enemy kills in close combat. He protected and saved the lives of uncountable numbers of American servicemen. For all of this, the military leadership awarded him the death penalty

*by: R. "Pete" Peters
39th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog)
March 1966 - July 1967*

IF I COULD ONLY TALK



My military career began in late 1965 or early 1966. I can not be sure of the exact date because as a civilian I had no use for calendars. My life consisted of sleeping and waking up whenever I felt like it, getting fed, and having the run of the house. I had it made and I knew it. I would gladly have gone through my whole life there with my job title of "Pet". But that was not to be. My life was to drastically change. One day two strangers appeared at my house. I had never seen people dressed exactly alike before, and I guess that made me a little uneasy. My natural instincts were to be wary of them so I raised the hairs on my back just enough to make them aware of just who was boss here. It didn't go un-noticed, but nothing was said. After signing a bunch of papers, my owner was given leather, basket-like contraption that I had never seen the likes of before. When he held it out and called "here, Budda" I went to him eagerly to get what I thought was a new toy. I will never forget the shock of that thing going over my face and being buckled in place. This was the first time I had ever been muzzled. To make matters worse, a silver chain was put in place over my head and my old leather collar with the brass name and address plate on it was removed and discarded. Immediately after that I was lead out the front door of the only home I had ever known, never to return. I was lead to the street and placed in an aluminum box with air holes in it. If I could only talk I would have let them know that this must be some sort of mix-up or something. The box was then placed in the back of a truck, and away I went to my new life in the military.

I was taken to the K-9 Processing Center at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas where I met many others who had met the same fate as I. We were constantly poked, prodded, measured, and weighed during this period of our induction. The guys in the uniforms called it "physical and emotional profiling". I called it "BS"!!! They wrote in my records

that I had an "attitude problem". After a couple of weeks of this it was determined that I was physically fit, and had the required attributes to remain in the military and become a Scout Dog. I wish I could have told them my thoughts on the subject, especially about what the veterinarian did with that thermometer. Ouch!!! Next, it was back into the aluminum crate and off to basic training.

The flight to Georgia was uneventful and lasted only a couple of hours. Upon our arrival there we were assigned to the 39th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog). This unit had seen action in the Philippines in WWII and in Korea. Now, in March 1966 they were being reactivated for Vietnam and I was to be a part of it all. Sgt Bob Brown was assigned to be my handler. We had loads of conflicts over just who was to have control over who. Eventually we came to the understanding that for the time being we would merely tolerate each other and hope for the best. After all, he was the one who fed and cared for me. Basic training was the pits. We were green dogs being trained with, and by, equally green handlers. What a circus! It was day after day of nothing but "circle training". We had a steady diet of "NO", "HEEL", "SIT", "STAY", and "DOWN". The only one I had a problem with was "NO". It just wasn't in keeping with my nature. If I could only talk I would tell them that this was all BS, and they could send me back home any time. Then one day we didn't do that circle thing. Sgt Brown strapped me into a leather harness and removed my choke chain. Then he took me for a walk down a narrow path through the woods. Not too bad so far. He kept saying things like "SEARCH", and "EASY". I had no idea what he was talking about at the time, and was unable to ask. Suddenly I sensed that we were not alone there. I had caught a whiff of someone else, and that made me nervous. My natural instincts took over, causing me to raise my head slightly and smell onto the wind to detect whoever was there. My ears perked up and rotated forward to detect any sound that might help me pinpoint this person. As I was unsure of his intent, my muscles tensed and the hairs on my back stood up. Sgt Brown quickly moved forward, kneeling just behind me and with both arms outstretched pointed in the same direction that I was looking. He began patting my shoulder and said "attaboy Budda, attaboy". Then we advanced upwind and suddenly somebody burst from the bushes and ran away. We both gave chase, but I guess Sgt Brown was a bit slower than me because I couldn't quite catch up with the decoy because the leash restrained me. If I could talk I would have said "damn, this is FUN". But all I could do was bark and jump around. We did this a few more times and it finally sank into my hard head that this was what we were supposed to do. Hey, this is easy. And the more we did it the easier it was. I was having fun, and suddenly Army life didn't seem too bad.

This all went on until July of 1966. Then one day as we were taken out in the morning we saw a line of those aluminum crates again. There were 27 crates in all, one for each of us. I knew we would be traveling again. I had no idea that I had a one way ticket to a combat zone. The platoon had three 2 1/2 ton trucks, a jeep, and a utility trailer. We, in our crates, were loaded into two of the trucks. Our rations, water cans, veterinary supplies, tents, and other gear went into the trailer. The remaining deuce and a half was for all of our handlers and their duffel bags. We set out from Fort Benning bound for Warner Robins Air Force Base near Macon, Georgia. The 80 mile convoy trip was hot in those darned crates. If I could talk I sure would have told them a thing or two. I was

really tired of this crate business! But we all thought we would be out of them now that we were here. WRONG! Our little convoy split into two groups and they drove right onto the flight line and right up the rear ramps on the two C-141 Starlifters that were waiting there for us. As soon as everything was chained down and secure, we took off. This was a far longer trip than any of us had expected. After a 2 hour refueling stop in Alaska and another in Japan, we finally landed at Ton Son Nhut airbase in Vietnam after 27 hours. Damn, did those planes ever stink by then!

Our arrival date was July 26, 1966. We stayed there at "tent city B" for a couple of days and then our orders came down. We were being assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa. When we got there, our area was just a clearing in the woods, just inside the perimeter. The squad tents went up for our handlers, and we were staked out next to our crates. Construction of my new home was started almost immediately. We were attached to the Engineer Company and they had the materials, equipment, and know-how to build my kennels and the hootches for the men. Items that we couldn't get through normal channels were gotten either by trading out some extra dog food, or by a "midnight requisition". I think that was how the emergency fire pump appeared behind the kennels one morning. It was just the thing for washing down our runs each day. A little over-kill though.

My first combat mission was during Operation Toledo in August, 1966. When we returned to the kennels after the 28 day operation all of the handlers were awarded their Combat Infantryman Badges. Although we dogs were not eligible for military awards or decorations, many of our handlers passed them along to us in appreciation of a job well done.

There was little rest for us at the kennels. Dogs needed to be worked on a daily basis to maintain their sharpness and physical conditioning. New training was initiated to pass on what was learned during the previous missions. There was a 30 acre area adjacent to the kennel area that was all woods and a stream. This made an excellent training area to run our practice patrols. We got some deactivated VC mines and "potato masher" grenades from the EOD team to help us. They were either buried in a pathway or rigged with tripwires attached to a rat trap for us to detect. Probably due to this continual training between missions, no scout teams from the 39th were injured by booby traps during my first year in country. Many were detected though.

My life became a whirlwind of missions. Brownie (as I now referred to Sgt Brown) and I had become inseparable buddies. We each trusted each other completely. That bond was our means of survival. We made it through Operations Sioux City in Xom Cat, Attleboro in Minh Than, Waco around Bien Hoa, Cedar Falls in the Iron Triangle, Big Springs in war zone D, and Junction City in war zone C near Tay Ninh. I felt honored in March of 1967 when Brownie and I were selected for a very special secret mission. Out of all the Scout Teams in country, we had been selected to go TDY with the 5th Special Forces Group and be attached to one of their A Teams. I liked to think we were chosen due to my skills and temperament, but I guess Brownie's security clearance level may

have helped a little. I never told anyone where we went or what we did. Hey, I couldn't talk anyway!

After returning to our kennel at Bien Hoa I got the shock of my life. Brownie would be going home in July when his DEROS date was up. After all we had been through together the team was being broken up. My handler for the past 15 months was now under direct orders to stay away and have no further contact with me. They said it was to prepare me to accept Brownie's replacement. Since we had all come over as a unit at one time, all of the other dogs were in the same position. How could the military screw us dogs like that? Our tour of duty had changed into a life sentence. My old "attitude problem" returned. From here on I would do my job, but I didn't have to like it or be nice to anybody. It's probably good that I couldn't talk then. Article 15 for sure! But I knew that they had to feed and water me, and since we had no rank or pay that could be taken away, I really didn't give a damn.

My next handler was an OK kind of guy, as were all of those that followed. One, Rick Hovis, even gave up his platoon clerk job to become my handler! We all worked hard, but the personal chemistry just wasn't the same. Brownie would be a part of me forever.

The summer and fall of 1967 were especially rough. The 173rd was moving north into II Corps to intercept the NVA that were coming in from Laos and massing in the central highlands. I worked in Pleiku Province, sweeping the Ia Drang valley. From there we moved farther north into Kontum Province. It was here in the hills above Dak To that we were in the middle of some of the most vicious fighting of the war. Many of my friends and their handlers became casualties there. I still had my attitude problem, and the hand to hand fighting had shown me just what I was really capable of doing to whoever I felt was an enemy.

The entire Brigade was now set up at An Khe and a break in action was what we all needed. I was just getting used to kennel life when the Tet Offensive began. The remainder of 1968 and 69 was split between patrolling near highway 19, the main artery into the western sector of the highlands, and then going east to the coastal plains at Bong Son. The supply route 1.

Next we were back in our crates again. The Brigade was moving again. This time to a place called LZ English, located just north of Bong Son. We all hated those crates. It seemed that each time we were moved in them, our whole world sort of fell apart. Everything was always completely different when we got where we were going. Dogs prefer familiar places, faces, and routines. I was tired of all the changes, and my attitude got worse. Long days on point left me tired that night and stiff the next morning. I was grumpy and the platoon all knew it. It was determined that it was time for me to retire. It was unofficial of course, but I was not assigned to another handler, therefore I had no more missions. Life was easy around the Kennel area. I had regular meals and spent much of the day sleeping in the shade. The platoon Sergeant, SFC Kelly, took a liking to me and would take me out for walks and some exercise. I only bit him once. After all, I still had an image to maintain. I was a seasoned veteran and a survivor. I felt I

deserved the praise I got. When handler Don Bradley went up for the 173rd Airborne Brigade's coveted "Sky Soldier of the month" award, he was asked which of the dogs was most famous. Without hesitation he answered "with such a long list of accomplishments, plus many confirmed enemy kills, that could only be Budda". But by now I was a little overweight and turning slightly gray. It didn't worry me though. Most of the handlers would be in similar shape by the time they retire.

Then one day in July of 1971 I noticed a different mood around the kennels. Many of the other dogs were being put into their crates and loaded into a truck. I eagerly followed because I was tired of Camp English. Since most of the handlers had left we might even be going home. That would be great. We deserved a break after all we had done. It wasn't a very long trip. We were taken to a nearby Air Base and there were many dogs there from all over the country. There were Scouts, Trackers, and Sentry dogs all together here. I guess we really are being sent back home! Maybe they will ship me to Brownie. I wonder if he thinks about me as often as I have thought of him. Does he remember all we went through together? I am so excited that I can hardly stand still. In the Veterinary Clinic I can't understand why everyone is crying. Just give me my DEROS shots and get me on that plane and I'll finally be getting out of here. I can hardly wait! In all of my excitement I barely felt the needle. I was used to them anyway. It feels just like the tranquilizer shot that we got before we left on the plane ride over here back in July of '66. I feel a little sleepy all of a sudden. I think I'll lie down and rest right here. It seems to be getting darker. Will Brownie remember me? I feel numb! I think I'll rest right awhile and think of what it will be like to be home. I'm Tired.

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