



DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY  
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA 15282

February 10, 2006

Sherri McGraw, M.A.  
1150 Windmill Lane  
Pittsburgh, PA 15237  
mcgraw107@duq.edu  
412-318-0692

SFC Robert B. Himrod (USA-Ret)  
3713 S. Wiley Rd.  
Yakima, WA 98903

Dear Robert.

Hope all is well with you and you are enjoying the New Year!

Enclosed you will find a sample of my progress on the war dog study. After reading and re-reading all of the written narratives and transcripts of the interviews, I wrote a brief general summary describing what it was like to be a military dog handler during the war. I am asking that you please review this general description and offer your critical feedback. Let me know if you feel I have overlooked vital aspects of the experience or grossly misinterpreted something. I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelop for you to return your comments to me. If it is more convenient for you, feel free to email them to me.

As always, I sincerely appreciate your help on this project and I look forward to reading your comments. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me.

All the best and take care.

  
Sherri McGraw

6 MAR 06

Hi MIKE,  
Nice talking with  
you yesterday. Here  
is the summary I  
spoke of. It's  
an interesting  
study. Catch you  
later and good  
luck with the  
book.

Bob ... ARF!

## The Relationship Between the Soldier and Military Working Dog During the Vietnam War

### General Structure.

The Vietnam War brought human and canine together in a unique way, encouraging the formation of a strong physical and psychological bond. One did not typically volunteer to be a dog handler: rather, he was selected for training based on his knowledge and previous education.

One clearly differentiates the bond that he formed with the dog from the relationships he had with the men around him. The relationship between soldier and military working dog was first of all a physical and intellectual one, starting with the basic care of the dog. One took remarkable care in maintaining the dog's hygiene and health. He groomed the dog, brushing his coat to ensure that he was free of parasites and debris so the dog could work comfortably and effectively without distractions or restrictions. The handler also took the dog to the veterinary technician for routine physical exams and treatment of minor injuries. Grooming was also an opportunity for them both to relax and escape the stresses of fieldwork. Taking care of the dog was similar to how one might care for a human infant.

One spent many hours training the dog to obey his basic commands, gradually progressing to more specific training that would be essential to their work in the field. Their effectiveness as a working team depended on their ability to communicate well with each other. Both he and the dog learned to recognize and interpret each other's expressive movements and vocalizations, thus developing a unique style of interacting within rhythmic sounds and gestures. They both joined in synchronized and alternating rhythmic patterns of moving and exchanging sounds, facial expressions, and gestures with anticipated reliability. One established himself as the leader of the team and guided the dog in exploration, identification and detection of objects that were determined to be a threat. Similarly, the dog encouraged his handler to stay alert and focus on him in the event that he did encounter a threat, thus requiring his handler's attention. In the process of knowing and focusing on what the other was doing, the team discovered their own rhythm of movement and understanding of meaning and forged a deep trust and admiration for one another.

As a team, the soldier and the dog were interdependent; one without the other was not as effective. Their lives depended on each other doing their job well. One had to pay close attention to his dog and understand his alerts, while the dog had to search for and point out potential threats and clearly communicate that back to his handler. One relied on his dog for insight and protection. The dog relied on his handler to meet his basic need for sustenance and acceptance. One clearly understood that taking care of the dog was one of the most important things he could do to ensure his own survival and that of the other men. Meeting the dog's needs also meant that one was taking care of himself, because if the dog's needs were not met, he could not effectively do his job and thus protect his handler.

In the field, one carried the team's equipment as well as provisions for himself and the dog. They worked closely together, typically attached to each other by a leather leash, essentially becoming an extension of each other. They often ate and drank from

the same cup and shared a sleeping bag at night and a poncho in the rain. At night, one usually slept with the dog tied to his ankle, which made him feel secure in the knowledge that the dog would warn him of potential threats.

In the field, one was often socially isolated from fellow soldiers. The team supported other infantry units and one's relationships with the men in these units typically amounted to casual conversations at best. One was never with a field unit long enough to form any significant relationships with the men and it was difficult to trust people with whom he was not familiar, especially in tentative situations. However, he had already established a close trusting relationship with his dog; another he could rely on for protection and emotional support. One had more confidence in the dog's ability than in the abilities of his human counterparts. Consequently, the dog became more of a friend and companion. One could talk to the dog and share his thoughts and feelings with him, and the dog was there to listen and bear witness to his experience. One also found solace in petting and grooming the dog, as the physical contact was relaxing and seemed to ameliorate his fear and anxiety. Giving the dog a hug gave the soldier a sense of comfort, warmth and reassurance, suggesting that he was not alone, that he would not die alone. In short, the dog helped him cope with the harsh realities and demands of a hostile environment.

The team experience critical events while working in the field, such as ambushes, firefights and booby traps, which helped to transform their relationship. It was not long before one realized that he was not in control of his environment and thus began having doubts and concerns about how he and the dog would perform together in the field. After the team's first significant encounter with the enemy, at which time the dog proved himself as a valuable presence, one was quickly reassured. His confidence in the dog and in himself swelled once he realized how effectively they worked together as a team. One learned to appreciate the dog's exceptional ability to detect threats and protect him, and that his abilities extended beyond the simulated training ground. The dog also played a vital role in helping to mitigate the confusion and uncertainty that surrounded them. As a result, their attachment and allegiance to each other intensified.

Although one felt a strong connection to the dog, he cautiously advises others that the dog was not what most people would call "a pet." The military dog was a working animal that at times could be easily roused in a tense or threatening situation, not the calm and cuddly creature that we commonly associate with man's best friend. One was grateful for the dog and would not have wanted to be in that situation without him, but first and foremost, he was valued and respected as work animal. In fact, the dog is often referred to as "walking radar," a tool used to, in effect, *illuminate* the landscape. Despite his reputation as a superior detection device and vital instrument in the field, the dog was also something *more* than basic equipment. He was a living being that could form a relationship with his handler and was not some inanimate piece of machinery. He was a partner, a friend, a comrade, a companion, and a fellow soldier.

The team's close physical interaction had a survival value, the function of which was that of care and protection from the enemy. Although their individual goals both reflected a desire to stay safe and survive, the manner in which they achieved that goal differed slightly. One was motivated to survive so he could return home to his family after his tour of duty was complete. In order to achieve his goal, he took care of his dog, his protector. The dog's primary goal was to please his handler and gain his praise and

acceptance. The dog achieved his goal by obeying his handler and doing what was expected of him, in return ensuring his own survival, as his handler would continue rewarding him with praise and sustenance. Despite taking different approaches in meeting their goal, one found that he could identify with the dog in the sense that they were both in the same situation, a struggle for survival. One could relate to the dog and felt a sense of being understood by another. They were not alone in their situation; they had each other's support and comfort. They both found themselves at the mercy of the people who had recruited, trained and shipped them off to this trouble world.

The unique position that one was in with the dog had a significant affect on his self-image. To begin, the dog team was responsible for saving lives. One was not required to engage in the fighting unless he determined that it was necessary to protect the team. Therefore, one often identified with being a lifesaver rather than as a killer. Further, the dog's presence brought attention to the handler. One stood out from the crowd, was looked upon as someone special and treated differently. The dog was a conversation starter and hence opened up opportunities for social interaction between his handler and other men. Others approached the team and shared stories relating to their beloved pet back home and petted the dog, maybe to feel safe or in some cases for good luck.

Parting from the dog was a bittersweet emotional moment for most handlers. Although one was about to return home to his family, he had to say goodbye to his best friend for the last time, leaving him behind to face an uncertain fate. One was grateful for the dog and his unwavering loyalty and protection, but he desperately wanted to go home. It was usually understood that the dog would not come home, but one did not know precisely what would ultimately happen to the dog. He also understood and respected the common belief that human lives are more important than a dog's life. Nevertheless, the dog was often regarded as a hero who had earned honor like other soldiers, and deserved to be welcomed home. One wanted his dog to be treated with the same dignity and respect that he expected for himself. In the end, one had to face the harsh reality that the dog would never come home and would never know anything outside of war for the rest of his life. The tragic fate of the dog still haunts the handler today.

The bond between the soldier and his military working dog has a timeless quality, one that endures despite their separation so many years ago. At some point in his life, one's emotional connection to the dog seemed to transcend the team's working relationship. Although one went on with his life after the war, he often reflects on that special bond that he had with the dog and what that has meant to him. He wants others to know and understand the important role that the dog played in his life and the many other lives that the dog saved. The dog is immortalized through one's own vivid images of his proud dog watching over him, reminding him of the dog's steadfast loyalty and admiration. Today, one's efforts are directed towards memorializing the military working dog team, to at last recognize the great contributions and sacrifices that they made during the Vietnam War.