The United States Army's Use of Military Working Dogs (MWD) in Vietnam

Frank Hoeflinger

The United States Army's use of Military Working Dogs (MWD) in Vietnam provided the Infantry units on the ground with a mobile, accurate and cost-effective detection system (the MWD team) capable of detecting enemy soldiers (both Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars), mines and booby-traps safely. In this regard, the U.S. Army followed in the footsteps of ancient armies, including those of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, who benefited from the advantages provided by dogs during war. From the distant past to the present day, military dogs have provided invaluable service to the soldiers they served with and protected.

Background on the Use of War Dogs throughout History

Since the beginning of recorded history, dogs have been used to support combat operations. They have been used to attack enemy personnel and animals and to destroy a unit's cohesion and formation. It is believed that the Egyptians used war dogs in battle as early as 4000 BC.[1] There are Egyptian murals commemorating the fighting spirit of the Egyptian war dogs. The murals show vicious animals being unleashed by the soldier-handlers and leaping upon the enemy. The Emperor Hammurabi of Babylon equipped his soldiers with huge war dogs, and in ancient Greece, the Corinthians used dogs as shoreline sentries as a defense against an Athenian amphibious assault. According to legend, fifty war dogs leaped, with open jaws, at the Athenians as they crept ashore during a surprise night attack. The legend says the dogs fought ferociously but were all slain, except for one who awoke the Corinthian troops in a nearby town by barking. The Corinthians rallied and defeated the Athenians.[2] A war dog was immortalized in a mural depicting the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC when the Athenians defeated the Persians.

The Romans had veterinarians and war dog handlers. The Romans classified their dogs as watchdogs, sheepdogs, and hunting dogs. The hunting dogs were further classified into attackers, trackers, and chasers.[3] The Romans even employed war dogs to interdict enemy communications.[4] Attila the Hun used packs of large dogs to stand as sentries around his camps to prevent a surprise attack. During the Siege of Rome (AD 537 – 538), the commander Belisarius "continually sent detachments of soldiers...whose duty it was to always pass the night about the moat, and he sent dogs with them in order that no one might approach the fortifications, even at a distance, without

being detected."[5] During the medieval period, large war dogs, such as mastiffs, were clothed in chain mail and released to attack enemy horses, negating the effect of the mounted men-at-arms.[6] Napoleon used war dogs during his campaigns in the early nineteenth century by deploying fighting dogs in front of his reserves. During World War I, the Germans used 28,000 war dogs, while the French used 20,000 and the Italians used 3,000.[7] The French employed large sheep dogs for sentry duty; the Belgians used dogs to tow machine gun carriages, and the Italians used large numbers of dogs on the Alpine front. Pound for pound, a dog can pull a greater weight than a horse.

When the Imperial German Army implemented the rolling barrage prior to the introduction of "storm trooper tactics" in World War I, one of the problems was communications between the forward observer (moving with the initial assault units) and the artillery batteries far to the rear. One of the solutions implemented was the use of messenger dogs to carry "corrections" (shifting the fire to a new target) back to the artillery command post.[8] In the United States, the first recorded use of war dogs by the U.S. Army was during the Second Seminole War. The Army bought 33 Cuban-bred bloodhounds (at $151.72 each),[9] and these dogs and their five handlers were used by the Army to track the Seminole Indians and the runaway slaves the Indians were harboring.[10] In the American Civil War "dogs were used as messengers, guards, and unit mascots."[11] During the Spanish-American War, war dogs were used as scouts, most famously by patrols of Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Rider" regiment. The dogs were trained as "point scouts" and patrols accompanied by dogs were almost impossible to ambush.[12] The U.S. armed forces received and trained more than 20,000 dogs for use as scout, tracker, mine detector, attack, and sentry dogs during World War II. The dogs were procured through a "Dogs for Defense" program that accepted family pets donated to the war effort. The majority of the surviving dogs were reunited with their families at the end of the war. It was found, due to terrain, that the dogs were much more effective in the Pacific theater than they were in Europe. In the China-Burma-India Theater, twelve War Dog teams were assigned to Merrill's Marauders during the last months of the campaign. "On three separate occasions they alerted to a superior enemy force without the enemy's noticing the patrol. In seven incidents, patrols were unable to locate snipers that picked off men with impunity until scout dogs were brought in. Each sniper was not only located but eliminated with no further loss of American lives."[13]

The 26th Infantry Platoon (scout dog) was the only scout dog platoon in the Army at the start of the Korean War. Members of the platoon were awarded three Silver Stars, six Bronze Stars for valor, and 35 Bronze Stars for meritorious service.[14] On 27 February 1953, the Department of the Army recognized the accomplishments of the platoon in General Order Number 21. The platoon was so effective that the Army authorized one scout dog platoon for every Infantry

division in Korea. The war ended before those additional platoons could be trained and shipped to the combat zone.

Background Information of MWDs in Vietnam

Overall the U.S. military was to incur approximately twenty percent of its casualties from mines and booby traps in Vietnam.[15] Colonel David Hackworth, who was a battalion commander in the 9th Infantry Division in 1969, paints an even grimmer picture. Col. Hackworth's battalion, the 4th Battalion 39 Infantry, was then stationed and fighting in the Mekong Delta. The Mekong Delta is a large area, comparable with the Florida Everglades. The region is marked by wet, flat terrain and is subject to flooding, with little dry ground and limited avenues of travel by boat or foot marked the region. Col. Hackworth, then a Lieutenant Colonel, wrote in his book, *Steel my Soldier's Hearts*: "Twenty young men from the 4/39th [Infantry Battalion] were killed just before I took over, from November 1968 until 20 January 1969."[16] Then the names of twenty soldiers who died during the timeframe are listed and their causes of death: 4 soldiers from enemy small arms fire, 14 died as a result of enemy booby traps, 1 died of illness, and 1 soldier drowned. That is a seventy percent casualty rate from booby traps.

A solution was needed and the war dog platoon was revived as The Infantry Platoon, Scout Dog. A total of 3,800 MWDs served in Vietnam.[17] The U.S. Army organized 22 scout dog platoons[18] and 22 combat tracker teams (platoon-size elements) for combat operations. The Scout Dog School was established at Fort Benning, Ga., under the auspices of the Infantry School. The Scout Dog School trained both dogs and handlers, which were then rotated to Vietnam as individual replacements. The Army also established a Combat Tracker School at Fort Gordon, Ga., which trained both the tracker dogs and handlers, and the "visual" trackers who complemented the dog's skills on the combat tracker teams. The dogs were used for scouting, tracking (both enemy personnel and lost/wounded U.S. service members), sentry, attack, mine/booby trap, and tunnel detection. This number does not include the U.S. Army MP sentry dog and U.S. Air Force guard dog units."[19]

Use of Dog in the Offense

The offense is the U.S. Army's preferred posture, because only an offensive posture allows an army to dictate the time and place of an engagement. The U.S. Army in Vietnam was still draped in the offensive spirit that had been its driving force across the countries of northwestern Europe during WW II. In Vietnam, the U.S. Army attempted to maintain that offensive posture by conducting patrols and search and destroy missions to prevent the enemy from maintaining freedom of movement, and to gather intelligence. In

November 1967 elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade were conducting offensive operations in the vicinity of the Dak To mountains with the objective of destroying the 66th Regiment of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The 173rd Airborne Brigade made contact with enemy units on the Dak To mountains and initiated an assault against the enemy units dug in on the mountaintop. Alpha Company, 4th Battalion 503rd Infantry was air assaulted into the battle area with the mission of re-establishing contact with the enemy. While maneuvering to assault the enemy, Nikki, a scout dog attached to Alpha Company "alerted" to the presence of enemy soldiers in the vicinity. The invaluable "alert" prevented Alpha Company from making contact with the enemy on the enemy's terms and allowed Alpha Company to retain the initiative and avoid the inevitable ambush and casualties. The results of the battle were the destruction of the NVA 66th Regiment and the reduction of the threat to the vulnerable provinces of the Central Highlands.[20]

Use of Dogs in the Defense

On 11 October 1967 the 1st Battalion 18th Infantry (1/18 Inf.) of the 1st Infantry Division was conducting combat operations in the vicinity of Loc Nihn. The 1/18 Inf. was attempting to make contact with elements of the 271st NVA Regiment, then assigned to the 9th Viet Cong (VC) Division. The battalion was operating in thick jungle where visibility was limited to approximately ten feet.[21] After the battalion left its night defensive position, the scout dog attached to Bravo Company "alerted" to the presence of the enemy. The lead rifle company moved in a patrol formation called a "clover leaf" to provide maximum security, and to ensure that contact was made while the Infantry was in the best posture possible. The company continued to maneuver forward with the scout dog continuously alerting. After traveling approximately 1,800 meters, the lead platoon was ordered to conduct a "reconnaissance by fire." In this technique, fire is placed on likely enemy positions which will trick or force the enemy to reveal its position by returning fire. The Viet Cong returned a heavy fire from positions as close as 30 meters to the lead platoon. Because the lead platoon was alerted to the presence of the enemy, prior to initiating its small arms fire, the platoon was prepared to receive enemy fire, and the VC's fire inflicted no casualties. After making the initial contact, the 1/18 Inf. withdrew into a defensive perimeter to prevent the numerically superior enemy from destroying the battalion piecemeal. "During the three hour engagement the battalion was never decisively engaged."[22] "The combined firepower of tactical fighters, armed helicopters, and artillery, was directed simultaneously on the enemy position, which had been detected from an airborne scent picked up by a scout dog."[23]

Use of Dogs during Patrols

MSG (R) John C. Burnham served two tours in Vietnam, the second tour as a dog handler in the 44th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog). The 44th IPSD was assigned to support the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division. According to Mr. Burnham,

> A handler and his German Shepherd scout dog performed as a team in the mission of leading combat patrols and providing early silent warning of danger. A scout dog team was deployed out front as "point man," which is the most vulnerable and dangerous position of a tactical formation moving through enemy territory. The handler interpreted his scout dog's alerts on enemy movement, noise, airborne and ground scents of booby traps, land mines, base camps, underground tunnel complexes, and underground caches of weapons, food, and medical supplies.[24]

Because the handler was focusing his attention on following the dog and interpreting the dogs "body language" and "attitude," the handler required the supporting unit to provide a security element to protect the handler from any enemy activity.

During a patrol in the vicinity of the perimeter of Dau Tieng, the platoon that (then) Sergeant (Sgt.) Burnham was supporting activated a booby trap injuring a soldier. Sgt. Burnham then told the Platoon Leader that he would walk point and have the platoon follow where the dog went. Sgt. Burnham then led the patrol back to the perimeter. While walking, Sgt. Burnham's focus was on his dog, Clipper, and not on the vegetation or terrain around him. Clipper began going left and right, but did not give any alert that he detected anything. After reaching the perimeter, Sgt. Burnham was informed by the platoon leader that every time Clipper went left or right, a soldier would check the area and find a trip wire. Clipper and Sgt. Burnham had successfully led the patrol through a maze of booby traps without the loss of a single American soldier. For volunteering to take the point and leading the platoon successfully through a maze of booby traps, Sgt. Burnham was recommended for the Bronze Star.[25]

Conclusion

Since the beginning of recorded history, dogs have been used to support combat operations. They have been used to attack enemy personnel and animals and to destroy a unit's cohesion and formation. War dogs have been used by the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, during the medieval ages, by Napoleon, during the Seminole Wars, the American Civil War, the Spanish-American War and throughout the twentieth century. War dogs have been used for

attack, defense, communication, supply, medical, and reconnaissance missions.

According to Paul S. and Elizabeth Daum, writing in *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social & Military History*, "Army after-action reports [AARs] reveal 83,740 missions...and credit scout and mine/tunnel dog teams with more than 4,000 Communist troops killed, 1,000 captured, over 1 million pounds or rice and corn recovered, 3,000 mortars located, and at least 2,000 tunnels and bunkers exposed."[26] The United States Army's use of Military Working Dogs (MWD) during the Vietnam War provided the infantry units on the ground a mobile, accurate and cost-effective detection system (the MWD team) capable of detecting enemy soldiers (both Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army regulars) mines and booby-traps safely. The MWD Team could be employed in the same terrain that soldiers were deployed on, and in almost any weather conditions. The MWD team was used as an offense and defensive sensor system as well as a mobile sensor system when used offensively and during foot patrols. The value that the MWD's brought to the infantry fight as has been shown was incalculable.

Notes

[1] Lisa Rogak, *The Dogs of War: The Courage, Love, Loyalty of Military Working Dogs* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011), 40.

[2] Nigel Allsopp, *Cry Havoc: The History of War Dogs* (Australia: New Holland Publishers, 2011), Kindle Edition, location 659.

[3] Allsopp, *Cry Havoc,* location 230.

[4] Mary Elizabeth Thurston, *The Lost History of the Canine Race: Our 15,000-year Love Affair with Dogs* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 49.

[5] Henry Bronson Dewing, trans., *Procopius History of the Wars, Books V and VI*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), Kindle Edition, location 117.

[6] David Karunanithy, *Dogs of War: Canine Use in Warfare from Ancient Egypt to the 19th Century,* (London: Yarak Publishing, 2008), 50.

[7] Toni Gardner, *Walking Where the Dog Walks, An Interspecies Odyssey in Vietnam,* (Baltimore: Minou Press, 2006), Kindle Edition, location 2942.

[8] Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtrooper Tactics:Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918,* (Westport: Praeger, 1995) Kindle Edition, 66.

[9] John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War 1835 – 1842 Revised Edition* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985), 266.

[10] John Misall and Mary Lou Misall, *The Seminole Wars; America's Longest Indian Conflict* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 171.

[11] ATTP 3-39.34 (FM 3-19.17), MILITARY WORKING DOGS, May 2011, Department of the Army, 1-2.

[12] Allsopp, Cry Havoc.

[13] Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs: A History of Loyalty and Heroism* (Dulles: Brassey's, 1996), 105.

[14] Michael G. Lemish, *War Dogs: Canines in Combat* (Dulles: Brassey's, 1996), 157.

[15] John C. McManus, *Grunts: Inside the American Combat Experience from World War II Through Iraq* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 408.

[16] Colonel David H. Hackworth, and Eilhys England, *Steel my soldiers' hearts: the hopeless to hardcore transformation of 4th Battalion 39th Infantry*, United States Army, Vietnam (New York: Rugged 2002), 27.

[17] Maria Goodavage, *Soldier Dogs: The Untold Story of America's Canine Heroes* (New York, Penguin, 2012), Kindle Edition, pg 18.

[18] Mary Kathleen Murray, LCDR, USN, *The Contributions of the American Military Working Dog in Vietnam* (GPO, Fort Leavenworth, 1998), 4.

[19] SSG Francis Hoeflinger, Reggie Smith, LTC Richard Vargus, "Low Tech Answer to a Persistent and Deadly Threat," *Infantry* 100 no. 4 (Sep – Oct 2011):46-7.

[20] John Albright, John A. Cash, Allan W. Sandstrum, *Seven Firefights in Vietnam* (Washington D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History U.S. Army, 1970), Kindle Edition.

[21] LTG John H. Hays, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 2002), 42.

[22] Hays, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations*, 43.

[23] Hays, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations*, 45.

[24] John C. Burnam, *A Soldier's Best Friend: Scout Dogs and Their Handlers in the Vietnam War* (pp. xi-xii). Kindle Edition.

[25] John C. Burnam, *A Soldier's Best Friend: Scout Dogs and Their Handlers in the Vietnam War* (pp. xi-xii). Kindle Edition, location 99 – 135

[26] Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social & Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61.

Bibliography

Albright, John, John A. Cash, and Allan Sandstrum. *Seven Firefights in Vietnam*. Washington D.C., Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1970.

Allsopp, Nigel. *Cry Havoc: The History of War Dogs*. Australia, New Holland Publishers, 2011. Kindle Edition

ATTP 3-39.34 (FM 3-19.17), MILITARY WORKING DOGS, May 2011, Department of the Army.

Burnam, John C., *A Soldier's Best Friend: Scout Dogs and Their Handlers in the Vietnam War*. Union Square Press, 2008. Kindle Edition.

Dewing, Henry Bronson, trans., *Procopius History of the Wars, Books V and VI*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919. Kindle Edition.

Gardner, Toni. *Walking Where the Dog Walks, An Interspecies Odyssey in Vietnam*. Baltimore: Minou Press, 2006. Kindle Edition.

Goodavage, Maria. *Soldier Dogs: The Untold Story of America's Canine Heroes*. New York: Penguin, 2012. Kindle Edition

Gudmundsson, Bruce I. *Stormtrooper Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918*. Westport: Praeger, 1995. Kindle Edition.

Hackworth, Colonel David H., and Eilhys England. *Steel my soldiers' hearts: the hopeless to hardcore transformation of 4th Battalion 39th Infantry, United States Army, Vietnam*. New York: Rugged Land, 2002.

Hays, Jr., LTG John H. *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations*. Washington D.C., Department of the Army, 2002, 43. http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/tactical/index.htm. (accessed February 10, 2013).

Hoeflinger, SSG Francis, Reggie Smith and LTC Richard Vargus. "Low Tech Answer to a Persistent and Deadly Threat," *Infantry* 100 no.4 (Sep – Oct 2011): 46 – 48.

Karunanithy, David. *Dogs of War: Canine Use in Warfare from Ancient Egypt to the 19th Century*. London: Yarak Publishing, 2008.

Lemish, Michael G. *War Dogs: A History of Loyalty and Heroism*. Dulles: Brassey's. 1996.

Lemish, Michael G. *War Dogs: Canines in Combat*. Dulles: Brassey's, 1996.

Mahon, John K. *History of the Second Seminole War 1835 – 1842 Revised Edition*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985.

McManus, John C. *Grunts: Inside the American Combat Experience from World War II Through Iraq*. New York: New American Library, 2010.

Misall, John and Mary Lou Misall. *The Seminole Wars; America's Longest Indian Conflict*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004.

Murray, Mary Kathleen. "The Contributions of the American Military Working Dog in Vietnam." Master's thesis. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1998. http://www.k9writer.com/MWD_THESIS.pdf.

U.S. Department of the Army. *FM 7-40 Scout Dog Training and Employment*. March 1973.

Thurston, Mary Elizabeth. *The Lost History of the Canine Race: Our 15,000-year Love Affair with Dogs*. New York: Avon Books, 1996.

Tucker, Spencer C. ed. *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social & Military History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Francis "Frank" Hoeflinger, is a 22 year veteran of the US Army. A retired Infantry NCO with 15 years overseas experience including West Germany, the Jungle Operations Training Center (Panama), OEF, and Korea. Frank is an undergraduate in AMU's Military History Bachelors program, with a concentration in 18th and Mid-19th Century American Military History. Frank's interests are the Pike & Shot era, linear warfare period, Light Infantry, Military Working Dogs, and Counterinsurgency warfare. Frank has previously had an article printed in INFANTRY Magazine. Frank is married, has two step-sons, and lives in the Tampa Bay area.