

THERE'S A SPECIAL QUALITY IN  
SOME DOGS—CALL IT  
LOYALTY, HEROISM OR JUST PLAIN  
COURAGE—THAT COMES  
ALIVE UNDER FIRE

# THE DOGS *of* WAR

EARLY IN JULY 1943, JUST BEFORE DAWN, Gen. George Patton's Seventh Army hit the beach in Sicily. Under a deafening naval bombardment, soldiers scrambled through waves and incoming fire to hug the sand.

Operation Husky was the largest amphibious invasion of the war at that time. More than 160,000 troops went ashore. With them was a G.I. who could hear and smell things no ordinary soldier could detect. Although he was unarmed, his powerful jaws could crunch an enemy's bones. Some of his companions wondered what good he could possibly be against machine guns and tanks, but soon they would all be glad he was on their side. His name was Chips and he was a dog.

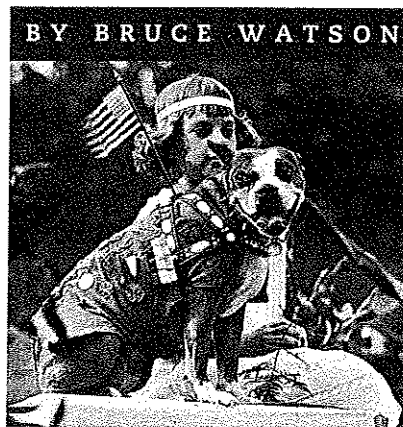
Months earlier, Chips had been living the good life in Pleasantville, New York. When his owner heard that dogs were doing their part to win the war, he enlisted Chips in the

Army's new K-9 Corps. Upon completion of training, Chips landed in Morocco. Later, when Roosevelt met Churchill at Casablanca, Chips was among the security force. Then, during Operation Husky, he became a hero.

At 0420 on July 10, with the sky softening over Sicily's southern coast, Chips and his handler pushed inland from the beach. As man and dog approached a hut, it erupted with machine-gun fire. All human soldiers hit the ground, but Chips broke free and, trailing his leash, sprinted straight at the hut. Moments later, an Italian soldier stag-

gered out with Chips tearing at his arms and throat. Behind him were several other soldiers, arms up. Chips' handler called him off and took the prisoners.

Chips had not come through unscathed. He had a small scalp wound. Powder burns on his coat suggested that the enemy had fired at him point-blank. But Chips had



Stubby (above) wore medals he earned during World War I at a 1921 parade in Washington, D.C. Marine canines (right) headed for action in the Solomon Islands with their handlers in 1943.



taken the nest. Later that day he helped his handler capture ten more prisoners. Soon he was being hailed across America. Unlike other military heroes, however, Chips showed no respect for rank. When Dwight Eisenhower tried to pet him, he nipped the general's hand.

"Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war," Shakespeare proclaimed in *Julius Caesar*. But long before the bard wrote his famous metaphor, real dogs had already gone to war. From battles fought with bow and arrow to those waged with laser-guided weapons, dogs have compiled a distinguished service record. In the fog of combat, some have turned tail. Hundreds more, armed only with keen smell and hearing, have been cut down by enemy fire. But to paraphrase Milton, they also serve who only stand and perk up their ears. Merely by "alerting" to the enemy, war dogs have saved thousands of lives.

The American military was late to learn this lesson, but more than 1,300 dogs now serve in the nation's armed forces. They guard military bases. They sniff out explosives. And they occupy a special place in the hearts of their handlers. When "Havoc!" has been cried, the dogs of war have demonstrated over and over again that they are a soldier's best friend.

When Steve Mac Robbie became a dog handler during the Vietnam War, he didn't know he was joining a tradition as old as war itself. He just knew that he hated military police school and he loved dogs. So when an officer at MP school asked for dog handlers, Mac Robbie volunteered. "Everyone said, 'Don't do it, it's a short ticket to 'Nam,'" Mac Robbie remembers. "My hand was the only one to go up." In June 1969 Mac Robbie was sent "in country." There, after his first dog, Max, proved too old to patrol and his second one, Duke, chomped 15 holes in his arm, he



Around 4,000 dogs served in Vietnam. Their duties included looking for signs of enemy activity (above) and accompanying troops helicoptered in and out of battle (right).

paired up with Prince. More than 30 years later, seated in his home in Billerica, Massachusetts, the graying Mac Robbie shows me photograph after photograph of a sable-colored German shepherd. "Prince was my buddy," the gruff-voiced vet says. "Every free chance I had, I'd play with him. He was my main purpose for being there."

In Vietnam, U.S. soldiers had a saying: "The night belongs to Charlie," meaning the Vietcong. At night the VC played a deadly game of chicken around American bases, cutting fences, firing mortar rounds, keeping everyone on edge. From midnight to dawn, when a lonely 19-year-old draftee patrolled outside the prime-

ter of Tay Ninh base, the only thing between him and death was his dog. "Dogs are the best piece of equipment the Army ever invested in," Mac Robbie tells me. "They're always on duty. You could trust your life with them."

No one knows when dogs were first drafted. Assyrian temples in Iraq feature bas-reliefs of battle dogs. Egyptian hieroglyphics show soldiers with dogs on leashes. Unsung packs of dogs must have served before the first canine combat hero emerged from the Peloponnesian War. Sorter was one of 50 dogs placed by Corinthian soldiers on the coast near their citadel. One dark night the Greeks invaded. All human guards were asleep, but the dogs descended on the enemy, barking



and snapping. Sorter, the sole survivor of the melee, ran through town waking the soldiers. After the Greeks were repelled, the grateful victors gave their hero a collar that read "Sorter, Defender and Savior of Corinth."

Many a dog lover must shudder to think of an innocent pooch on the front lines, and most dogs have no more taste for combat than most people. Yet there is *something* in *some* dogs—call it loyalty, ferocity or just plain courage—that comes alive under fire. When it does, even seasoned soldiers stand in awe. Napoleon's troops saw it at the Battle of Austerlitz, where a dog named Moustache showed them the canine brand of bravery. When an Austrian soldier killed the French flag bearer and tried to wrest the flag from the dead man's hands, Moustache leaped at the enemy's throat. The Austrian dropped the flagpole, which the dog then carried in his mouth across the battlefield. For his heroics Moustache was decorated by Napoleon's field marshal.

Citing such stories, dog lovers have often called for canines to get their marching orders. Benjamin Franklin recommended that dogs, "large, strong and fierce," be recruited to fight Indians, but none ever were. Those found among troops in the Civil War were mostly farm dogs brought by their owners. During World War I, Stateside kennel clubs lobbied for dogs in combat, yet when the Yanks arrived "over there," they were the only army fighting entirely on two legs. The Germans had deployed approximately 30,000 dogs, the French and British another 20,000. America's first canine war hero had to sneak into action.

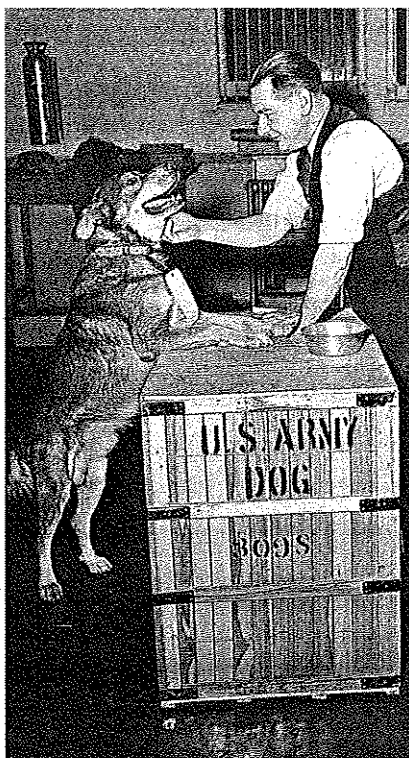
During the summer of 1917, a stray bullterrier with a cropped tail infiltrated training of the Army's 102nd Infantry. Soldiers quickly named the dog Stubby, and when the 102nd shipped out, they smuggled Stubby aboard, pulling him through a porthole with a rope. After landing in France, Stubby kept the troops company,



refusing to flee despite relentless shelling. Then one night while sleeping in a trench, he snapped awake, gave a low growl and raced around a corner. Seconds later a voice cried out. Stubby's best friend, Cpl. Robert Conroy, grabbed his rifle and followed. There he saw Stubby with his teeth sunk into the hindquarters of a German spy. The spy was quickly disarmed, but Stubby held on until coaxed to let go.

After the story of his heroics spread, Stubby met President Woodrow Wilson and shook his hand, without nipping it. Gen. John Pershing awarded Stubby a medal, and later he was designated an honorary sergeant. Back home, the dog attended American Legion conventions and led parades. Stubby's final honor, such as it was, came after his death when he was stuffed, mounted and put in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Today he is on display at the National Guard Armory in Hartford, Connecticut.

Dogs like Stubby are natural-born soldiers, but soldiers must be trained. Aaslan is not the type of dog I'd want for a pet, unless I lived in a combat zone. When I met him at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, he was being auditioned for boot camp. One trainer held onto his leash while another came near, shouting and swinging a stick. The German shepherd snarled and strained at the leash. He passed that test, and others. When the "enemy" threw a bone nearby, Aaslan remained eager to attack. When allowed, he bit into a burlap sleeve with what handlers call a "hard, full mouth." Later he stood unfazed as a trainer approached firing a .38 revolver in the air. Checked out by vets, Aaslan showed no hip displacement or signs of being a "one man dog" who would obey only one handler. Two-thirds of the dogs who come to the 341st Training squadron



Chips, a hero in the invasion of Sicily, enjoyed a friendly pat on his way home.

at Lackland, the world's largest dog-training school, are rejected. But Aaslan made the cut.

Since 1978, all military working dogs have been trained at Lackland. More than 300 German and Dutch shepherds and Belgian Malinois live on the base, where they are used to train handlers and other dogs. Contrary to popular belief, K-9s are no longer trained to be ruthless killers. During Vietnam, sentries like Steve Mac Robbie's Prince were lethal weapons on a hair trigger. Some refused to let anyone near their handler, even when he had been shot. Others were too aggressive to work in teams. Today dogs are trained to be more disciplined. "In war, the enemy is armed—dogs aren't," says Stewart Hilliard, associate scientist of behavioral medicine with the Department of Defense. "So there's no sense in just training a dog to attack. Our training isn't primarily about biting people, it's about locating them. If a dog is too aggressive, it probably can't be trained. The modern war dog must be controllable even in a crowd."

Standing in an open field under the Texas sun, I watch Marine Sgt. Frank Mika "learning" his dog, and vice

versa. Mika tells me he has spent six weeks teaching Remco various "phases of controlled aggression." On voice command or hand gesture, Remco will 1) escort his handler through enemy territory; 2) charge at an enemy; 3) sit quietly while his handler searches the enemy; and 4) attack without command if that enemy even touches his handler. Today Remco will show me another phase—the standoff. Across the field, some sucker of a private stalks Mika and his buddy. Held on a short leash, Remco "alerts," sitting rigid, ears erect. He can pant but must never bark, which might tip off an enemy platoon. Suddenly Mika shouts, "Git him, boy! Whooo!" Remco bolts across the field. But as soon as the dog attacks, Mika yells "Out!" and Remco returns to his handler. Remco has not been trained to go for the throat but for the limbs. Yet no matter how deeply his teeth are sunk into an arm, he must "out" when ordered. "Good out, Remco!" the dog hears after he releases the sleeve that keeps the poor private's arm in one piece.

Before shipping out, Remco will learn to search buildings and scout enemy territory, alerting at the slightest noise. And he will come to know that his handler is "top dog." "With these dogs, you have to be the alpha male," says Jimmy Thornton, a handler during Vietnam who now trains canines at Lackland. "We have dogs that are testing us all the time."

The Air Force currently trains dogs for the Army, Navy and Marines, along with dogs that will work at airports searching for explosives or drugs. Most are purchased from private kennels in Europe, and all are lifers. Having spent an average of \$4,000 to buy a dog and \$30,000 to train it, the military wants its money's worth. Once trained, each dog will serve up to ten years, then retire at Lackland. It may not compare with being someone's



On patrol during World War I, a French soldier and his companion resembled Halloween tricksters. Special gas masks had to be designed to fit over dogs' snouts.

lapdog, but the war dog's life has changed since America's first official K-9s were enlisted by their owners during World War II.

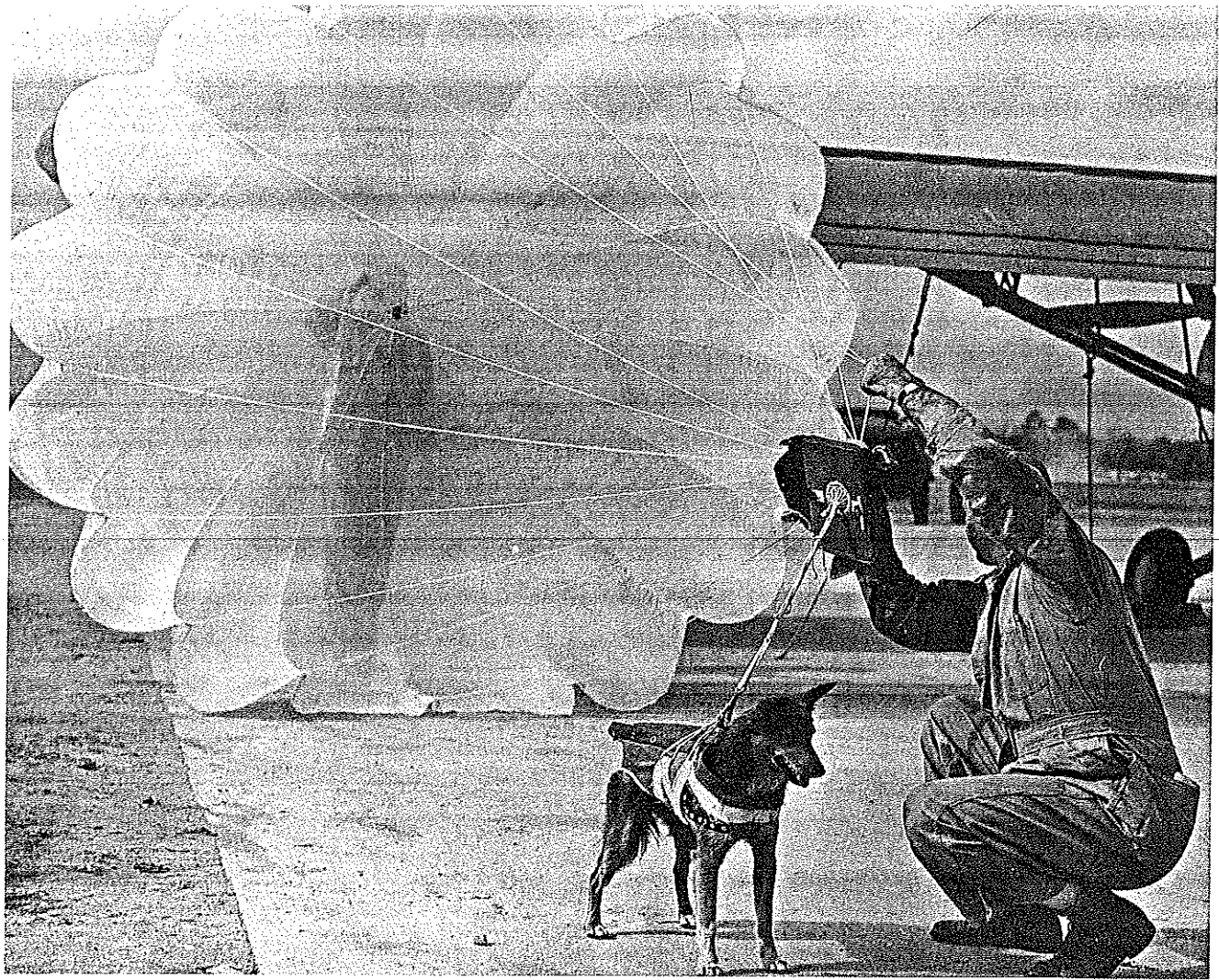
On December 7, 1941, the U.S. military had just 90 dogs—sled dogs stationed in Alaska and Greenland. Not long after that, breeders and owners

banded together to form a lobby group called Dogs for Defense, Inc. The Army's Quartermaster Corps asked the group to train 200 sentries to guard its supply depots. The *New York Times* mocked the idea, calling the new recruits "WAGS." Then some Army wag dreamed up the

name K-9 Corps, and like all good soldiers, the corps got its own song.

*From the kennels of the country,  
From the homes and firesides, too;  
We have joined the canine army,  
Our nation's work to do . . .*

During the war, patriotic owners donated more than 40,000 dogs, never



At least a few dogs parachuted into combat during World War II. A rigger checked out one dog's harness and chute at Lawson Field in Fort Benning, Georgia.

knowing if they would see them again. At first, almost any big dog would do. Recruits had to weigh between 55 and 85 pounds, stand 23 to 28 inches at the shoulder and be no more than 5 years old. More than 75 percent failed their preinduction physicals and were sent home with their tails between their legs. Those who passed received their own special "dog tag"—a number tattooed on the ear—and were shipped to boot camps, where they spent 14 weeks in training. The new soldiers came from 32 different breeds. Some of them lacked the proper spirit. During training, soldiers struggled to arouse one Irish setter named Ambrose. Even when they cracked a whip near him, he remained everyone's best friend. Finally, they sicced him on an "enemy." To their delight, he tracked the man down and knocked him over. Then he licked the

enemy's cheek. Ambrose was given an honorable discharge. And eventually the ranks of accepted K-9 Corps breeds were narrowed to seven—German shepherds, Doberman pinschers, Belgian sheepdogs, collies, Siberian huskies, malamutes and Eskimo dogs.

By the summer of 1942, America's war dogs were ready. That June a Nazi submarine ran aground off Long Island. Saboteurs came ashore and were captured. Suddenly America's coasts seemed vulnerable. Soon, like the "Defender and Savior of Corinth," hundreds of dogs, called "coasties," were patrolling the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf shores. Then, Secretary of War Harold Stimson ordered the military to use dogs as messengers and scouts, and on search-and-rescue patrols. The following summer, while Chips was preparing to storm the sands of Sicily, the First Marine War

Dog Platoon shipped out of San Diego bound for the Pacific theater.

On the morning of November 1, 1943, gusting winds whipped the palm trees of Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. High surf tossed American landing craft like corks as 12,524 soldiers and 36 dogs invaded. In a driving rain, Japanese and American planes dueled above the beach. Enemy machine guns opened up, and the dogs went to work. Patrolling inland through snake-infested swamps, the dogs were deployed in pairs. One walked at the front, the other at the rear of an advancing column. To send messages, one vet remembered, handlers pinned them on a collar, shouted "Report!" and the dog was "off like a gunshot."

Andy, of the Doberman breed the Marines called "devil dogs," was working off-leash 25 yards ahead of M

At Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, dogs are trained to attack in one situation (below) and restrained in another (far right). Veteran dogs are used as "teachers" to show student handlers how to negotiate in water with a canine companion (right).

Company. Whenever he advanced too far, his handler clucked softly to get his attention, then motioned him back with a hand. Andy loped along, enjoying the game. Then he stopped. The short hairs on his back bristled, alerting the soldiers to the presence of the enemy. Three times Andy alerted that day, each time saving his squad from an ambush.

Dogs were no more at home in the tropics than G.I.'s. Their feet swelled in the heat and were bloodied by coral reefs. Many succumbed to heartworm or heat exhaustion. Some were driven mad by the constant shelling, and others, confused in combat, turned on their handlers and had to be killed. Still, officers were pleased with this new weapon. It could carry a message through thick jungle twice as fast as a man. In favorable winds, it could alert to danger 1,000 yards away. And once alerted, a handler could pinpoint the enemy by looking between his dog's ears, using its nose as a pointer.

On New Britain, dogs accompanied 48 patrols in 53 days, helping their handlers capture or kill 200 of the enemy. They also served sentry duty at night. A special bond developed. Soldiers slept beside their dogs and carried them over treacherous coral. Such affection soon led to a change in policy. Because dogs were most effective when teamed with soldiers they loved, handlers usually stayed with the same dog from training to the front. And as the front advanced, dogs served in nearly every major campaign in the Pacific.

Americans trained more than 10,000 dogs during the war. They parachuted into France, hauled ammunition through the snow, carried messages through enemy lines and traversed suspected mine fields ahead of soldiers. Yet when they came home, they

didn't get a hero's welcome. After a brief retraining, they simply went back to their doghouses. Even Chips had to settle for a pat on the head. Weary from battle, he returned to his owner after the war ended, and died shortly thereafter.

At least Chips came home. In Vietnam, hundreds of military dogs ended up missing in action. Steve Mac Robbie has plenty of pictures of Prince, but he would trade them all to find out what happened to his partner. During their eight months in Vietnam together, Prince and Mac Robbie did not take any prisoners. They did not lead any lifesaving missions. Like so many military tours, theirs featured hours of boredom punctuated by moments of terror. The Tay Ninh base they were assigned to, near the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was a hot spot. Many nights Prince alerted to VC infiltrators, and Mac Robbie radioed his reports. Sometimes a helicopter gunship flew over and fired into the darkness. More often, the danger disappeared, leaving a soldier and his dog alone with their thoughts. One night Prince gave a different alert, his ears back instead of forward. Seconds later, from just yards away, the growl of what sounded like a big cat tore through the night. Without Prince, Mac Robbie might have been mauled.

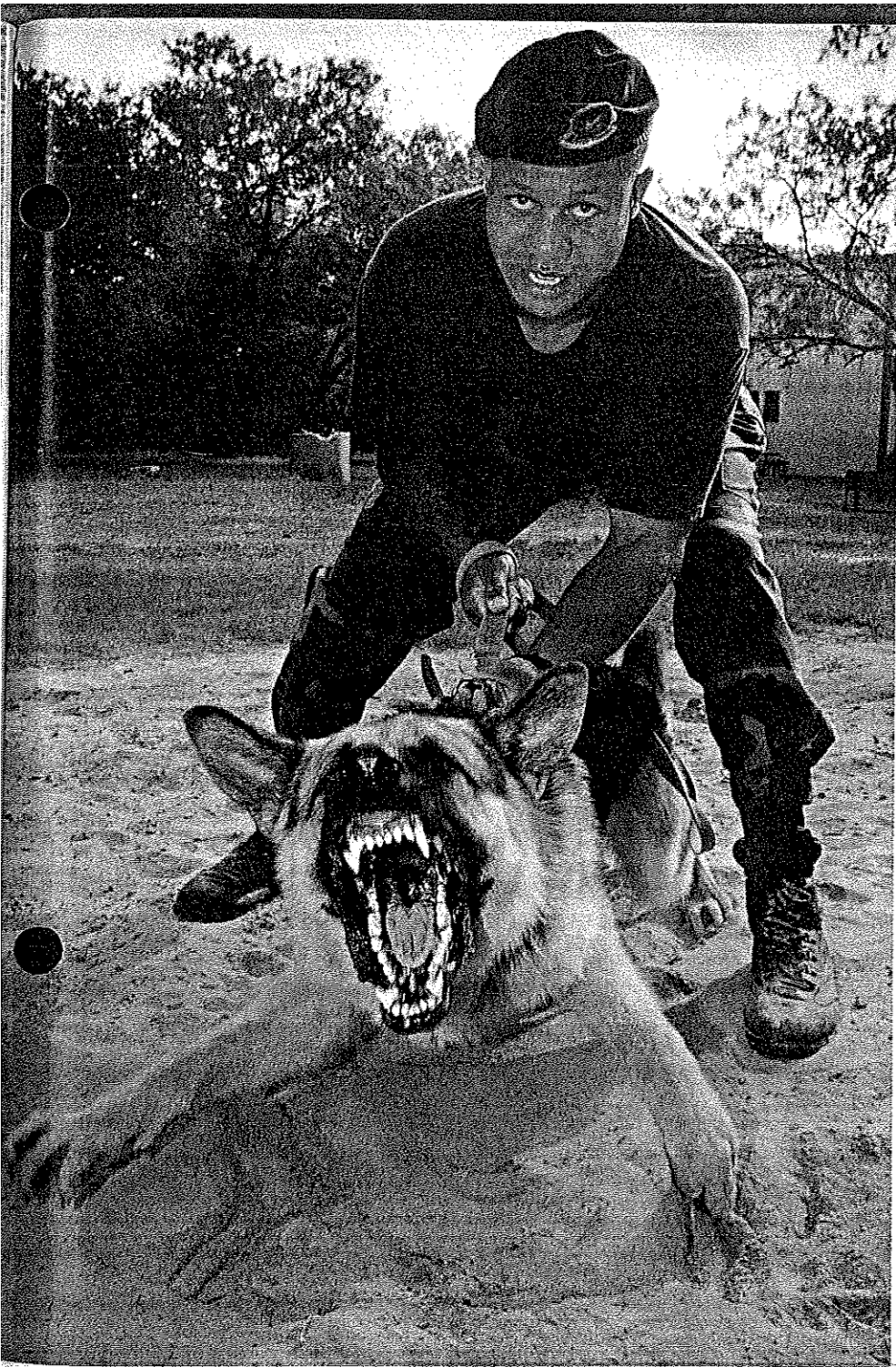
Mac Robbie says he doesn't remember saying good-bye to Prince. "I've blocked it out of my mind," he tells me, fighting tears. "It was the toughest thing I ever had to do." Mac Robbie came home and lost track of Prince. But Prince probably didn't make it home. Nor, chances are, did John Flannelly's dog, Bruiser.

In September 1969 Flannelly and Bruiser were leading a patrol 12 miles south of Da Nang. Suddenly the Ger-



man shepherd stopped. His ears went up. Flannelly fired and then "all hell broke loose," he remembered. Flannelly went down, his chest ripped open so he could see one lung. He told Bruiser to leave, to get out of danger, but the dog stayed, tugging at his handler's shirt. Flannelly reached up, grabbing Bruiser's harness, and the dog began to drag his master to safety. Taken to the nearest hospital, Flannelly refused to be transferred for better care until he saw his dog.





One afternoon, Bruiser came. Flannelly, who now lives in Lynn, Massachusetts, recalls, "I never saw him coming, I was in such a daze from the medication. He crawled up from the bottom of the bed and put his head in my face. I was so happy to see him, I just hugged him and cried."


Thanks to his dog, Flannelly came home. No one is sure what ultimately happened to Bruiser or to many of the several thousand other canines that served in Vietnam. Some ex-handlers

and other military men believe that, after preventing an estimated 10,000 casualties, many of the dogs were essentially abandoned. Tom Mitchell, chairman of the California-based Vietnam Dog Handlers Association (VDHA), says hundreds were sent on to further military assignments elsewhere after completing their Vietnam duties. Perhaps a thousand were turned over to the Vietnamese, a fact some veterans equate with abandonment or a death sentence in a country

where dogs were not infrequently eaten for dinner. Still others died from disease, and others were euthanized. Nearly 300 were killed in action, according to Mitchell, and around 200 were returned to this country.

Over the years a few memorials have been erected to honor K-9s. But since the establishment of the War Dog Memorial Fund in March 1999, two impressive new monuments have been created. Last Presidents' Day about 100 veterans gathered in Riverside, California. Many brought their current dogs, others just photographs of old friends. They had come to help dedicate a memorial adjacent to the March Field Air Museum. Amid tearful speeches, an 18-foot statue of a German shepherd and his handler was unveiled. Beneath the dog and soldier are these words: They Protected Us on the Field of Battle / They Watch Over our Eternal Rest / We are Grateful. The War Dog Memorial Fund also raised money to build another new memorial dedicated in October at the Infantry Museum at Fort Benning, Georgia.

This year, the House of Representatives and the Senate acknowledged the contributions military dogs have made when they approved legislation allowing the animals to be adopted by their handlers or other qualified persons. Adoptions have not been permitted since the 1940s. Of course the enactment requires a Presidential signature before it becomes law.

Maybe the most fitting memorials are the scrapbooks kept on shelves, the pictures hung on walls and the stories of heroism soldiers share. "Don't mention me in your article," one ex-Marine told me after speaking about his tour in Vietnam. "Mention my dog, Tiger. He was my hero. All the dogs were my heroes." 

*Bruce Watson wrote about baseball czar Kenesaw Mountain Landis in October.*