

America's military dogs are the unsung heroes of war

By Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.23.14

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Members of the War Dogs group sit with their dogs, none of which have served in the military, outside the home of Jerry Witt (upper left) in Menomonee Falls, Wis., on May 5, 2014. Photo: Mike De Sisti/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel/MCT

MENOMONEE FALLS, Wis. — Jerry Witt survived a full year in Vietnam because of his buddies Skip and Satan.

Satan and Skip were soldiers, but their dog tags were tattooed in their ears and their weapons were their keen noses and eyesight.

Skip was a German shepherd/collie mix, while Satan was a black Labrador retriever. And when Skip was killed, the loss of his four-legged buddy felt like a punch to the gut to Witt, an Army dog handler assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division infantry units.

“He got into a trip wire during the monsoon season when it’s raining 24/7 and of course rain washes away scent. He froze in a trip wire. He turned his head and basically told me — ‘Don’t come any closer, I’m in trouble,’” Witt recalled.

Skip was flown out of the Vietnamese jungle and survived surgery, but died a week later from an infection.

“Skip saved my life many, many times,” said Witt. He is a member of War Dogs, a Wisconsin group dedicated to honoring the memory of military canines.

Soldier's Best Friend

It's no secret militaries have used dogs for decades. But more people are learning of America's furry warriors as news reports have spotlighted heroic dogs such as Cairo, the Belgian Malinois assigned to SEAL Team Six that killed terror leader Osama Bin Laden.

Among many tasks, they patrol bases and sniff for explosives. They also find bombs, capture bad guys, track missing people and comfort wounded service members.

Menomonee Falls-based War Dogs will do just about anything to spread the word about a little-known part of American military history. Its members march in parades, appear at shows and give presentations on the history of the four-legged fighting forces.

War Dogs members own pups belonging to breeds used by the U.S. military, including one dog that served in [Afghanistan \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=Afghanistan\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=Afghanistan).

Honoring Their Service

To honor military canines, War Dogs raised \$5,400 for a 6-foot-tall gray granite statue that will be unveiled June 22 in Menomonee Falls. Law enforcement dogs and their handlers, veterans groups and War Dogs members and their pups will participate. Also, Army dog handlers who served in Vietnam are coming from Colorado, Minnesota and Illinois to attend.

There are no dues and no meetings. War Dogs members simply show up to march in parades or give presentations with their pooches in tow.

The only requirement is they must wear the War Dogs T-shirt with the logo "Hell on Paws — America's Unsung Heroes of All Wars." Their dogs wear camouflage bandannas.

Also, members' dogs must belong to the 16 or so breeds used by the U.S. military. The breeds include the German shepherd, collie, Labrador retriever, Belgian Malinois, Airedale, boxer, beagle, Newfoundland, husky/malamute, giant schnauzer, standard poodle, pit bull and Jack Russell terrier.

It Began With A Single Parade

Carol Singer and a friend started War Dogs in 1999 after she researched the history of Doberman pinschers during World War II. Singer has a 9-year-old Doberman named Bella.

"It started with one parade and snowballed from there," Singer said.

Whenever War Dogs marches in parades, the group lines up in a single file with its dogs on leashes. The response is often overwhelming and emotional, particularly from veterans.

"At parades we see men wearing World War II caps stand and salute," said Tracy Hays. Hays owns an American Staffordshire terrier named Kestrel.

Always bringing up the end of the War Dogs line of pups in parades is Carolyn Summers. She carries her Yorkshire terrier D.D. in a military helmet.

Many people are surprised a pint-size Yorkie was a war dog, but D.D. represents a Yorkshire terrier named Smoky. During World War II, Smoky carried telegraph wire through a narrow pipe at an airfield, flew on rescue missions and visited wounded soldiers.

Summers contacted Smoky's owner, William Wynne, to let him know she was honoring Smoky's service after reading his book "Yorkie Doodle Dandy." The 91-year-old Wynne wrote back from Ohio thanking her for remembering Smoky.

Hays' dog Kestrel represents a terrier named Sergeant Stubby. The terrier spent 18 months with an American infantry division during World War I. It helped capture a German spy and save his unit by alerting them of a gas attack.

Big Bounty On The Dogs

During Vietnam, handlers such as Witt trained in Georgia at Fort Benning, and then picked out a dog once they arrived in Vietnam. They carried three days' worth of dog food along with their own gear on missions.

Often they were targeted by the enemy because the dogs were so effective at tracking. Witt was told enemy soldiers bringing back a dog's ear and a handler's dog tags earned extra money.

Of the 48 soldiers in Witt's dog training class at Fort Benning, only 13 survived Vietnam. Witt knew dog handlers who signed up for additional tours of duty to spend more time with their dogs because they knew they couldn't bring them home.

Classified as "equipment," not military personnel, half of the American military dogs were euthanized at the end of the Vietnam War. The others were given to the South Vietnamese army or left to fend for themselves.

"It became a very sore subject to me and my fellow handlers. It was tragic. These dogs, they were like people, for them to do that was despicable," said Witt, whose dog Satan was given to another handler in Vietnam when his tour was up in 1969.

Witt and other military dog handlers from Vietnam lobbied Congress to change the rules and bring dogs back to America once their service in a war zone is over. In 1992, President Bill Clinton signed legislation that now ensures all military dogs are treated like true veterans.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the article.

Menomonee Falls-based War Dogs will do just about anything to spread the word about a little-known part of American military history.

What figure of speech is used in the above sentence?

- (A) alliteration
 - (B) idiom
 - (C) metaphor
 - (D) simile
- 2 Select the sentence that contains an idiom that means "to increase rapidly in intensity or importance."
- (A) And when Skip was killed, the loss of his four-legged buddy felt like a punch to the gut to Witt, an Army dog handler.
 - (B) "It started with one parade and snowballed from there," Singer said.
 - (C) "It became a very sore subject to me and my fellow handlers," said Witt.
 - (D) During Vietnam, dog handlers picked out a dog once they arrived in the southeast Asian country.
- 3 Which sentence from the article DOES NOT help describe the utility of dogs in various military operations?
- (A) They also find bombs, capture bad guys, track missing people and comfort wounded service members.
 - (B) But more people are learning of America's furry warriors as news reports have spotlighted heroic dogs such as Cairo, the Belgian Malinois assigned to SEAL Team Six that killed terror leader Osama Bin Laden.
 - (C) Carol Singer and a friend started War Dogs in 1999 after she researched the history of Doberman pinschers during World War II.
 - (D) During World War II, Smoky carried telegraph wire through a narrow pipe at an airfield, flew on rescue missions and visited wounded soldiers.

- 4 Which sentence from the article BEST shows the attachment military dog handlers had to their dogs?
- (A) And when Skip was killed, the loss of his four-legged buddy felt like a punch to the gut to Witt, an Army dog handler assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division infantry units.
 - (B) War Dogs members own pups belonging to breeds used by the U.S. military, including one dog that served in Afghanistan.
 - (C) They also find bombs, capture bad guys, track missing people and comfort wounded service members.
 - (D) During Vietnam, handlers such as Witt trained at Fort Benning, Ga., and then picked out a dog once they arrived in Vietnam. They carried three days' worth of dog food along with their own gear on missions.

Answer Key

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