



# The Paw Print

The Voice of the Military Working Dog Heritage Museum  
& Handler Center



Volume 5 Issue 5

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## Event Updates:

September 14-21—  
Kokomo, IN.  
All Veterans Reunion

October 17—  
San Antonio, TX. US War  
Dogs 25th Anniversary  
Celebration

November 9-11 —  
Columbia, SC  
10th Anniversary  
Rededication of the  
South Carolina War Dog  
Memorial.

## Remembering Our K9 Handler Heroes



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With this image, we recognize and honor the service and sacrifice of every K9 handler Killed in Action. Top left: Carl Claus, Army Handler KIA in the Korean War, Adam Cann, Marine Corps K9 Handler KIA in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Far right: George Bevich, Air Force K9 handler KIA in the Vietnam War, and bottom, Sean Brazas, Navy K9 handler KIA in Operation Enduring Freedom.

We at The Military Working Dog Heritage Museum remain dedicated to honoring the memory of handlers and other K9-related personnel who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. We share their stories and heritage, so we never forget their life, service, and loss.

With this issue, we urge you to join us online, via our social media platform, on Memorial Day as we invite handlers from every branch and generation to say the names of KIA dog handlers. This event will start online at 6:00 AM with a video message from our President, Albert Johnson. It

will continue pre-recorded video messages every half hour featuring handlers from across America reading the names of the fallen.

To the Gold Star families left behind, our thoughts remain with you as you honor your loved ones.



## From the President's Desk



President, Albert Johnson

Hello and welcome to the May issue of the Paw Print.

This month is somber for us here at MWDHM, with Memorial Day, where we focus on our fallen comrades in arms—brave men and women who gave their lives to serve our country.



On May 26th, we have a tradition at MWDHM. On Facebook, starting at 6:00 AM, I will briefly introduce our event, explaining the importance of remembering and saying the names of our KIA. Then, every half hour, we will have an active or veteran dog handler read names of the fallen. These readings will happen 21 times, and the last video of the day will be a rendition of taps. There is a lot of coordination behind the scenes to

make this happen. I want to thank our volunteers who read the names for this project and choose to honor their brothers and sisters-in-arms in this big way.

You will find an extremely important page in this edition of the newsletter. It is a list of the military working dog handlers killed in action (in our research). Please, I know the list is long, but take a few moments and say their names aloud. People die twice, once when they take their last breath and the second time when their names are no longer spoken.

In this issue, you will also find reflections on Memorial Day by retired Lt. Col. Mark Leslie. His insight into the personal meaning of Memorial Day is something I, too, will strive to put into words one day. I feel honored to have known a few of the handlers KIA during the Iraq and Afghan wars. I also try to remember and honor our fallen in the time leading up to and including Memorial Day as I oversee the Reading Videos you will see on Memorial Day.

Curtis Hendel honors a fallen brother by crafting an exquisite piece honoring Marine Corps handler, David Sonka.



We also celebrate Mother's Day on Sunday, May 11th - a day to dote on the person who gave us life. We take a different spin on Mother's Day this year. We want to discuss an unsung heroine, a mother from Lackland Air Force Base—a military working dog mom who has produced some of the most incredible working dogs the military has. This incredible mother's name is SSheila. I won't spoil any more of the story, you will just have to keep reading to find out more about this beautiful mamma.

Last but not least, a lighter piece written by Curtis Hendel. Were you ever bitten by a working dog? Curtis lets us take a front-row seat to some scary and hairy situations he experienced during his time as a handler and trainer.

You may have noticed our updated logo on the newsletter masthead. It incorporates the history and concepts of our first logo, but in a more formal style. A new volunteer, Erick Aguilar crafted this updated version recently and we are thrilled with the design. It will be transitioned into usage gradually, as many of our still-to-be posted items were created while using the older version.



I want to thank you all for being here with us and recognizing those who came before us. There is nothing more honorable than remembering our fallen.

With that, I will say, "Until next time," and remember,

**K9 leads the way!**

**Albert Johnson**



Please join us online on Memorial Day. Volunteers from around the US will conduct our annual reading of the names of KIA K9 personnel.

Visit our Facebook page on Memorial Day. <https://www.facebook.com/mwdheritagemuseum>

**If you know a Veteran in Crisis, the VA Veteran's Crisis Line is: Dial 988, Then Press 1.**



**Please join us in honoring the following KIA dog handlers —  
say their names with us on Memorial Day.**

Aaron Joseph Blasjo • Abraham Tarwoe • Abron Earl Davis • Adam Leigh Cann • Alan Eunice Davis • Alan MacDonald Sturdy • Alden John Bullwinkler • Alexander King • Alfred Everts Whitehead • Andrew John Kiefhaber • Anthony Edmond Kunz • Anthony Lorin Camp • Archie Burnette, Jr • Arnold Edward Johnson • Benjamin Harrison Mason, Jr • Bernard Francis Ford • Billy Harrison Ratliff • Billy Howard Best • Billy Joe Parrish • Billy Monroe Green • Bobby Dean Crawford • Bobby James Shelton • Brandon Keith Steffey • Carl Jacob Claus • Carl Irving Johnson • Carter Parker, Jr • Charles Douglas Blair • Charles Douglas Drysdale • Charles H Sandberg • Charles John Robinson • Charles Paul Brown • Christopher Zeno Czarnota • Christopher Diaz • Christopher Matthew Wrinkle • Clarence Creaghead • Claude Joseph Gaspard, Jr • Clayton Dean Jenkins • Clifford Wayne Marshall • Colton Wesley Rusk • Dale Robert Alcorn, Jr • Dallas George Grundy • Dan Victor Lindholm • Daniel Edward Holland • Daniel Eugene Spencer, Jr • Danny Edward Ward • Darrell Lee Colford • Darrell Thomas Swanson • Dave Russell Scott • David Alan Nudenberg • David Alfred Land • David Brennan Schachner • David Byron Magruder • David James Ohm • David James Ward • David Lee Hatcher • David Michael Sonka • David Michael Freeman • Dennis Arthur Beuke • Dennis Karl Hoppough • Dennis Robert Schossow • Dennis W London • Dick Alson Lee, Jr • Donald Lee Baker • Donald Leroy Rydgig • Donald Raymond Knutson • Donald Sherril Sullivan • Donald Therronie Tabb • Donald William Mc Intosh • Douglas Michael Cain • Dustin Jerome Lee • Earl Duane Barkley • Edward Charles McGrath • Edward Cowart Hughes, III • Edward Erlin Cox, Jr • Edward Gilbert Lee • Edward Henry Topka • Edward Lester Lawton • Edward Monroe Simpson • Eligah Lamar Davis • Elmer Glenn Ireland • Elmer Wain Mahurin • Erik Bernard Wickenberg • Erling Alton Anderson • Ernest Melvin Plattner • Eugene Thomas Fraley • Faleagafulu Ilaoa • Floyd Wayne Hartwick, Jr • Freddie Lee Johnson • Frederick Richard Levins • Garson Franklin White • Gary Allan Rathbun • Gary Paul Baker • Gary Evans Beesley • Gary Gene Detrick • Gary Leroy Fuller • Gary Richard McFall • Gary Kenneth Smith • Gary Vaughn Lovellette • Gary Wayne Fox • George Douglas Deitrick • George F Eubanks • George Kenneth Koon • George Michael Bevich, Jr • George Tallman • Gerald W Fritz • Gilbert Gonzales Palacio • Glenn Weldon McCarty • Glynn Byron Holley • Gordon Lee Crawford • Gregory Allen Rodriguez • Grover Clay Dixon • Harlan Nathan Lockhart • Harry Thomas Petersen • Harry Walter Murray • Herbert Burton Johnson • Herbert Hoover Sweat, Jr • Herschel Cyle Holt • Hilburn McDowell Burdette, Jr • Howard David Payne, III • Howard Lee Webb • Irving Geon Park • Jack Lee Connors • Jack William Conner • James Albert Michael • James Allen Johnson • James Boyd • James Bruce McLaughlin • James C Tosh, III • James Cabarubio • James Evert Blaauw • James Harold Beaver • James John Morrison • James Maynard Berge • James Michael Selix • James Michael Sunday • James Michael Triplett • James Paul Markey, Jr • James Ray Howard • James Rivera • James Roger Boyer • James R. Ide, V • Jason Lynn Norton • Jeffrey Alexander Freeman • Jeffrey Robert Standfest • Jeremiah Joseph Sullivan • Jerry Guy Giberson • Jimmy Rea Burk • Joel Conrad Loftis • John Alan Kuefner • John Douangdara • John Francis Doyle • John Henry Dyer • John Howard Roth • John Leroy Truesdell • John Michael Piasecki • John Montague Mansfield • John Oliver White • John Paul Olmstead • John Paul Southwick • John William Kobelin, II • John Willie Bennett • Jon Michael Young • Jose Antonio Rosas • Jose Munoz • Jose Soto Concepcion • Joseph A Carinci • Joseph Allen Marasco • Joseph Alvin Teresinski • Joseph Anthony Nurzynski • Joseph Cyril Kranick • Joseph Mark Mazzone • Joseph Price Lipton • Joshua Ryan Ashley • Joshua Abraham Atkins, III • Juan Patricio Martinez • Keaton Grant Coffey • Keith Charles Buckingham • Kenneth George Burlock, Jr • Kenneth John Dell • Kenneth Martin • Kory Duane Weins • Larry David Hicks • Larry Lee Johnson • Larry Jonathan Waddell • Lawrence Alan Esterly • Lawrence James Merschel • Lawrence Wayne Yochum • Leo Roland Meyer • Leon Lovell Poland, Jr • Leon Maurice Ashton, Jr • Leroy Floyd Schyska • Lindsay David Baldoni • Livingston Glenn • Lloyd Martin Kuehn • Lonnie Joseph Ducote, Jr • Luis Hilerio-Padilla • Mark Duane Marshall • Mark Randall Taylor • Mark Thomas Howard • Mark Wayne Bell • Marshall Colin Farley • Martin Earl Brophy • Martin M Mugavin • Marvin Robert Pearce • Max Ray Spangler • Max William Donahue • Melvin Carrillo • Merle Keith Carter • Michael A Grieve • Michael Anthony Vancosky • Michael Francis Smith • Michael I Thibodeaux • Michael James Bost • Michael James Drobeno • Michael James Randolph • Michael John Brodsky • Michael Joseph Yeager • Michael Lee Conklin • Michael R Munch • Michael Thomas Rowe • Mycal Lee Prince • Norman Frederick Schofield • Oscar Wayne Pierce • Patrick Lee Henshaw • Paul Edward Mattson • Paul LaFontaine Marchant • Paul Plambeck, Jr • Paul Roy Severson • Pete Sprule Segundo • Peter Claus Behrens • Peter James Clore • Peter Joseph Nicolini • Peter Pulaski, Jr • Phillip Randall Duff • Ralph Wilson Connors, Jr • Randy Eugene Dillunder • Raphael Anton Futrell • Raymon Draper Hales • Raymond Andrew Shepard • Raymond Isadore Rosinski • Raymond Steptoe • Rex Alan Vogelpohl • Richard Albert Doria • Richard Arthur Lane • Richard Charles Porter • Richard Edward Ford • Richard Kenneth Joeken • Richard Maurice Beauregard • Richard Michael Amick • Richard Michael Banaszynski • Richard Michael Hilt • Richard Michael Schwab • Richard Myers • Richard Winningham • Robert Anthony Schmid • Robert Clokes • Robert Dale Armstrong • Robert David Rhodes • Robert E Lansley • Robert Eugene Whitten • Robert Gene Smoot • Robert Helm Wood • Robert James Jenks • Robert Joseph Taranto • Robert Larry Oaks • Robert Norman Norris • Robert Norman Lebrun • Robert Paul Ahern • Robert Paul Payne • Robert Preston • Robert Scott Gray • Robert Walter May • Robert Willard Hartsock (Medal of Honor) • Robert William Brede • Robert William Elliott • Robert Winslow Belcher • Rodney Elmer Marrufo, Jr • Rodney Kenneth Mills • Roger Thomas Lagodzinski • Ronald Aaron Grider • Ronald Dean Karau • Ronald Eugene Sheppard • Ronald James Matel • Ronald Lee Chisholm • Ronald Lee Evans • Russell Leonard Castle • Russell Martin Erickson • Russell Tennyson Friedrich • Sean Edward Brazas • Stanley Carl Fuller • Stanley Terrell • Stephen Faust • Stephen Edward Jesko • Stephen Jay W Smith • Stephen Lee Lindsay • Stephen Wesley Bowman • Steven Edward Collier • Steven Lee Jenkins • Terrence Daniel Beck • Terry John Payne • Theodore A Sweatt • Theodore Louis Gyulveszi • Thomas Drum • Thomas Pretter • Thomas Wayne Quinn • Thomas William Fisher • Tim Edwin Newell • Timmy Larry Miller • Vernon E Whetham • Victor A Brice • Victor Reyes Hernandez • Virgil Jessie Roberts • Walter Levon Clark • Walter D Browne • Walter Josefak, Jr • Walter Lawrence Maurer • Wayne Bizzle Holland • Wilhelm S Hurksman, Jr • William Allison Anderson • William Andrew Montano • William Charles Sheldon • William Clayton Ray • William Donald Griffin, II • William E Groves • William George Fraser • William H. Crouse, IV • William Jess Sims • William Joseph Van Gorder • William Ladd Campbell • William M Huberty • William Martin Dunning • William Nelson Hendrickson • William Roger Goudelock • William Thomas Cumbie • William Wayne Lumsden • Willie Bozier, Jr • Winfred Lee Smith • Zainah Caye Creamer



## Reflections on Memorial Day

By Retired Lt. Col. MARK LESLIE

For me, Memorial Day is difficult. It is a day filled with mixed emotions. I am not overly sensitive, but it upsets me when someone innocently says, "Happy Memorial Day," or thanks me for my service.

This day is not about me, or anyone else that served or is currently wearing the uniform. This day is to honor those that have perished in the service of our nation: Those that have made the ultimate sacrifice; those that are no longer with us; those we were privileged to know.

I'm not one of the veterans that say, "All the heroes I know are dead," because they are not. I know plenty of true-life heroes. I served with many of them; many of them are right here at Fort Polk while others are scattered across the nation and globe. They are very much alive. They are extraordinary human beings that performed incredible acts of selfless service and bravery on and off the battlefield. I am honored and privileged to have known these Soldiers — it is one of the many blessings I have had in my life and I reflect on them often. But they are honored on Veterans Day, not Memorial Day.

Memorial Day is for heroes no longer here with us. Admittedly, some of them are no longer here because of things beyond a leader's control and honest mistakes caused by the fog of war and the fact that combat is just that — combat. I share this only to help put this in context to the meaning of Memorial Day and why so many veterans feel the same ire when one wishes us a happy Memorial Day.

It is not necessarily a happy day, but neither is it a day filled with remorse. It is a strange mix of emotions that those not experienced with the bond that service builds or the horror of combat and the loss that accompanies it, will ever understand. I feel grateful for having known a few of those that have made this ultimate sacrifice, and I reflect on the time shared with them as some of the highlights of my life.

I feel I would have a much emptier life if I had not been given this gift of knowing them, their friendship and Soldierly camaraderie. But then I feel deeply saddened their family and we as an Army and nation lost them so early and their full potential will never be known. Sometimes — no,



We honor them at events.

Rocky Mountain Dawgs Project and the 460th Security Forces Squadron hosted the 3rd annual RMDP Iron Dog Competition June 10, 2017 on Buckley Air Force Base, Colo. The RMDP Iron Dog Competition is held in honor of Cpl. David Sonka and multi-purpose canine Flex, who were killed in action May 4, 2014, in Farah Province, Afghanistan. (US Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Holden S. Faul/ Released)



We honor them with memorials.

Chief Gunner's Mate Kevin Found and Master-at-Arms Samantha Berrios salute next to a shadow box of Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Michael Brodsky, a fallen MA, during a Fallen Master-at-Arms Remembrance Ceremony Nov. 5, 2019 in the base gymnasium. NSA Souda Bay held the ceremony to honor the five MAs killed in action: Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Mark Mayo, Master-at-Arms 1st Class John Doungdara (a dog handler), Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Sean Brazas (a dog handler), Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Michael Monsoor, and Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Michael Brodsky (a dog handler). (Photo by Joel Diller/Released)

many times — not just on Memorial Day, I am grief-stricken with thoughts of them. I feel that this grief is somewhat selfish, for what I feel can be nothing compared to what their family feels.

In my 30 years in the Army and several conflicts, I was considered rather bold and maybe even reckless with my own safety in dangerous situations. I don't think it was brave, just fear cloaked in necessity, and the brava-do and showmanship required of my position.

But those characteristics do not carry on in every aspect of life. This Memorial Day will mark the sixth anniversary of one of my close friends being killed in combat. I have yet to summon the moral courage to visit his final resting place and pay my proper respects, to share that final drink with him or tell him how much I miss him. I have refrained for many reasons, but I think that revelation alone should tell the uninitiated why I don't want you to tell me, "happy Memorial Day," and I think many combat veterans harbor the same thoughts.

This Memorial Day, I hope to make that overdue journey, Todd. I owe you that much.

So, on this Memorial Day, when you see your veteran husband, father, son or daughter deep in reflection, don't wish them a happy Memorial Day. Give them a moment, give them some space, and most importantly, give them some understanding and finally — just maybe a hug. Let them know you understand. Listen to the stories they tell of their friends.

As the noted English novelist Terry Pratchett said: "Do you not know that a man is not dead while his name is still spoken?"

This quote aptly fits the stories told by a veteran of a friend no longer here. He is likely trying to keep his friend's memory alive through telling of his exploits and contributions.

A hero lives forever in the minds of many.

Today is not about the veteran or the active-duty Soldier — it is about the men and women buried across this nation in countless veteran and local cemeteries. They are not faceless, they are our friends, and fathers, sons and daughters — and we miss them.

Honor them on this and every Memorial Day.



**We honor them by naming buildings after them.**

**Staff Sgt. Craig Miller, holds on to Bo, Sgt. 1st Class Donald Tabb's MWD, as Tabb's nephew, Ukarrie, gets ready to throw a ball after the ceremony that named the MWD kennels at Fort Rucker, Ala., in Tabb's honor, May 17, 2013. (US Army photo by Nathan Pfau)**



**We honor them by visiting their gravesites.**

**The gravestone of Tech. Sgt. Jason Norton and Staff Sgt. Brian McElroy, assigned to the 3rd Security Forces Squadron at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, stands at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. (US Air Force photo illustration by Senior Airman Racheal E. Watson/Released)**



## Where and How To Honor Our Fallen

by Dixie Whitman

On Monday, 26 May, Americans across the country will honor and remember the brave servicemen and women who lost their lives fighting to safeguard our great nation. And while Memorial Day Weekend is often considered the "unofficial start of summer," typically spent with family get-togethers, parades, and cookouts, the real meaning of Memorial Day reflects a more solemn occasion. It is a time to pay tribute to our fallen heroes and recognize the sacrifice, selflessness, and valor these more than one million men and women have made while serving in wars and missions since the American Revolution.

### Origins

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is steeped in a rich history. After the Civil War, an organization of Union soldiers, The Grand Army of the Republic, approved the day to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers with freshly blooming spring flowers. As the 20th century dawned, it evolved into Memorial Day, a solemn remembrance that honors all Americans who have made the ultimate sacrifice in military service.

### Ways to Honor

Here are some ways that individuals can honor our fallen:

Volunteer to lay flowers or set flags at your local Veterans' Cemetery. Each VA cemetery places an American flag next to every veteran's gravesite. Visit the government's VA website <https://www.cem.va.gov/> and find the volunteer tab for information on your local VA Cemetery's schedule.

Fly the American flag using proper mourning protocol. The American flag symbolizes our nation's resilience and continued fight for freedom. It flies at half-staff until noon, a solemn gesture honoring the fallen, then rises to full staff until sunset, symbolizing our unwavering commitment to the values of those we have lost in the battle fought to defend.

Plan a visit to a VA cemetery or memorial to pay respects to those who have died in military service. Place flags and wreaths on the gravesites.

Contact your local government or check online to find a Memorial Day parade or ceremony in your area. Participating in these events is a meaningful way to show your



A graphic drawing of a 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Soldier holding a folded flag in observance of Memorial Day and to honor fallen servicemembers. US Army graphic by Staff Sgt. Daniel Lee

support and respect for our fallen heroes.

Observe the National Moment of Remembrance, which, nationwide, coordinates one minute of silence at 3:00 PM local time every Memorial Day.

### Join Us on Memorial Day

We encourage you to share your experiences and reflections on Memorial Day. Our Social Media pages will allow you to share your thoughts and memories.

To remember those KIA and those connected to K9, the Military Working Dog Heritage Museum will again host a day-long

event where dog handlers from across the military spectrum will read and honor the fallen.

Each year, we reach out to friends and fellow military members who read a list of names each half hour. Our program begins at 6:00 AM with an introduction from our President, Albert Johnson. It will feature individuals reading the names of fallen handlers every half hour until 5:00 PM when "Taps" is played.

Please join us on Memorial Day to honor these American heroes.



## Remembering David Sonka

The package in the mail would bring joy to the father, the intended recipient. Inside, he found a simple baseball cap. The black cap displayed the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor emblem of the United States Marine Corps on the front. However, the cap carried an even more significant message: not only was it a USMC hat, but it was also a K9 cap. Kevin Sonka immediately realized that his son, David, had achieved his goal of joining the Military Working Dog Program.

"David was in his final training to pass the tests to become a USMC K9 Handler," Kevin recalled. "Upon graduation, he and a friend went to design this hat for me. Having no idea he did this, I received it in the mail and immediately knew what it meant. I called him to confirm, and, sure enough, he was now a USMC K9 Handler. The hat quickly became the official hat when we formed our non-profit in David's honor."

### A Determined Path

The tragedy of September 11th had a profound impact on 12-year-old David Sonka. From his home in Parker, Colorado, he donated \$200 of his own money to a relief fund for the victims.

As David grew older, his determination became evident. He excelled in both track and wrestling at Chaparral High School, where

one of his coaches described him as a dedicated teammate who was always willing to step up when needed. From his athletic abilities to his understanding of teamwork, the lessons he learned early in life and his fierce desire to serve would point him in his life's direction.

David's unwavering commitment to the United States Marine Corps was evident throughout his high school years. He joined the delayed enlistment program at 18, with his sights set on the infantry to fulfill his primary goal of serving his country. However, his journey took an unexpected turn after he graduated from Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Camp Pendleton, San Diego, in November 2008. David found himself at Fort Leonard Wood's Military Police school, a path that started just after New Year's 2009 and led to his graduation later that spring.

### Loving Support

While David was at Fort Leonard Wood, his high school sweetheart and long-time love, Torey, moved relatively close while she attended college.

"David and I were very lucky in the spring to be living only about four and a half hours apart while he was in Fort Leonard Wood," Torey explained. "I was in college in a small town outside of Kansas City and made the

By Curtis Hendel

All photos courtesy Torey Sonka



Christmas in 29 Palms, CA with Sonka's three personal dogs. From left to right, Beahr, Asch (a retired MWD from III MEF), and Mollie.  
Photo: Courtesy Torey Sonka.



David Sonka and MWD Falco during a training exercise in 29 Palms. MWD Falco loved to carry the Wrap around in his mouth.  
Photo: Torey Sonka



drive to visit him every other weekend. I remember when he started talking about K9 being an option and how interested he was in that. He was honored to be selected to attend K9 school in the summer of 2009. Although he didn't much enjoy the heat and humidity of a Texas summer, he was enthralled with the K9 world."

Torey spoke of the transformation she witnessed as David learned the skills of the human end of the leash. "He grew close with a few of the other handlers there and soaked in the knowledge the instructors poured into them. I think this is when he started feeling like a Marine."

"He was stationed in Twentynine Palms in the early fall of 2010, and we were married by the end of that year. He felt his purpose falling into place at his new duty station and very quickly created a reputation for himself at III MEF as a quiet but passionate and hard-working Marine."

David also quickly proved his prowess and skill at his new home. He received a new K9 partner, Falco, a Belgian Malinois with whom he would eventually deploy.

Torey fondly remembers this time in their lives. "David and MWD Falco bonded right away. He spent many nights sleeping in his (Falco's) kennel and taking him for walks outside

of training to build rapport. His passion for the K9 world grew every day he worked with Falco. When they set off on their first deployment to Afghanistan in the spring of 2011, he was confident in their ability to successfully fulfill their mission with the MARSOC unit they attached to."

David and Falco completed this deployment successfully and returned to Torey and the United States. His first enlistment ended at this point in his career, but Torey understood that his enthusiasm for K9 still burned.

#### More to Give

"This deployment only furthered his passion for his career and a feeling of 'my job isn't done yet' that led him to a second enlistment with MARSOC at Camp Lejeune, NC." David was assigned to the 2nd Marine Special Operations Battalion of MARSOC in North Carolina.

"He was paired with Multi-Purpose Canine Flex and quickly whisked off to many trainings to prepare for a second deployment to Afghanistan in March 2013. He was killed alongside Flex on May 4th, 2013, less than one year into his second enlistment."

The Marine Corps and the broader military K9 community mourned the loss of 23-year-old Marine Corps Corporal David Michael Sonka and his K9 partner, Flex.

Their sacrifice, along with Marine Corps Sgt Eric D Christian, 39, of Warwick, New York, in the line of duty, working with Afghan security forces, is a stark reminder of the risks our servicemen and women face. The Marines were training the Afghan military to defend their country when one of the Afghans opened fire on the Marines and the entire class in an insider attack. The Marines had removed their body armor to show trust in their students.

Torey shared more about her Marine and husband. "Working with dogs brought David so much joy. He spent lots of time teaching our own dogs how to do agility courses and even sniff out gunpowder. He volunteered at local shelters, training dogs to make them better adoption candidates and even just taking them on walks."

"Being a K9 handler meant so much to him, and in his honor, the MARSOC kennels at Camp Lejeune were named after him, as well as a dog park in our hometown of Parker, Colorado."

When David died, the loss was a huge hole in the Marine Corps K9 program for those who were close to him. His absence was deeply felt, and his unique skills and passion were irreplaceable. A Marine who worked alongside David noted that dog handlers divide into two groups: those who require skills training and those



**David Sonka with MPC Flex taking a quick break during a training mission.**  
Photo: Courtesy Torey Sonka.

who are natural. Others saw David Sonka as a naturally gifted handler with a great passion for his profession.

David's legacy continues to live on when his dad, Kevin, launched the Rocky Mountain Dawgs Project. Kevin had connected with Jon Hemp, a Vietnam-era dog handler from California. Jon helped found the original Dawgs Project, and Kevin was determined to honor his son by serving the military K9 community. He also built a traveling memorial to all the K9 handlers killed in the Global War on Terror, a testament to his commitment to preserving the memory of those who, like David, made the ultimate sacrifice.

The Greek writer and historian Herodotus said, "In peace, sons bury their fathers. In war, fathers bury their sons."

May we never forget their stories and their sacrifice.





## Sweet Little SSheila: When Mother's Day and K9 Collide

by Dixie Whitman

"There is no greater good in all the world than motherhood. The influence of a mother in the lives of her children is beyond calculation." — James E. Faust

While this wonderful quote centers around Faust's mother, we could easily translate it into the world of K9s. The importance of a good mother cannot be overstated. This statement is as true in canines as it is in humans. The mother dog, or dam, nourishes and keeps her puppies clean and safe, providing a nurturing environment.

When dealing with whip-smart Department of Defense (DoD)-bred super puppies, the impact of a great dam will reflect in her offspring's success. As the puppies begin to stand and interact with her and each other, she teaches them how to play, practice good manners, and learn their place in the family pack.

In the early weeks of a puppy's life, an intriguing and natural process occurs where a strong bond forms between the puppy and its mother. This connection is essential for the puppies' survival. The mother fosters a deep attachment with her puppies through various activities, including breastfeeding, keeping them warm, grooming, playtime, and teaching them how to "dog."

In this issue, we will focus on one remarkable DoD

dam, SSheila, who was once a DoD puppy herself.

### A Match Made in Heaven

To borrow a line from Tommy Roe: "*Sweet little SSheila, you'll know her if you see her...*"

As a DoD foster puppy, SSheila spent several months with a dedicated family who taught her how to engage with the world until she reached seven months of age. During this time, she participated in monthly sessions with other foster puppies at Lackland's Puppy Program, where all the puppies underwent regular testing and follow-ups.

By the age of six months, SSheila demonstrated impressive patrol and detection skills, which led to the decision to retain her for the breeding program before she had even finished her time in foster care.

### Being a PPuppy

Before becoming a dog, puppies—even the most disciplined Department of Defense dogs—are still just puppies. They explore their world, confront new obstacles, and learn about life.

One of SSheila's only embarrassing moments as a puppy happened during a visit to the Base Exchange (BX). When nature called, SSheila answered right there as she walked into the store. The announcement came over the loud speaker, "Clean up at the entrance."



**Above: SSheila as a puppy.**

**Below: SSheila boing-boing-ing as a young Malinois.**

**Both photos courtesy Lora Harrist**



### Makings of A Diva

SSheila's foster family, the Harrists, took her on her first road trip. During the journey, she fully embraced her puppyhood, relishing the one-on-one time and enjoying cozy naps on hotel beds. These experiences may have contributed to her growing self-image as a diva.

### What a Dam!

SSheila's record as a brood bitch is astonishing. Over her breeding career, she had six litters, producing a total of 50 puppies, each family with a different stud dog. Her first litter became known as the "FF-bombs," and all the puppies became active-duty military working dogs.

The kennel techs who worked with her while she was in the whelping box mentioned numerous times what an easy girl she was and what a fantastic mother she was, taking the greatest care of her babies.

Many of her sons and daughters became breeding stock for the DoD, ensuring that her genetic makeup, work ethic, and ability to produce successful puppies flowed on to future generations.

Eighteen offspring were certified for work in the field. Two became training aids at the Dog School House, and three K9s were sent to local law enforcement agencies. Nineteen were adopted, and one was stillborn.

When she wasn't raising puppies, she was helping teach new students how to be handlers. Quite a few students commented on their amazing K9 experiences while holding SSheila's lead.

### KONG is Life

Playing with her KONG toys is still her favorite activity. Life is good when she has a fully drooled-on red classic KONG in her mouth. If she doesn't have one, she will seek it until she finds it.

Lora Harrist assures us that SSheila would have become a movie star if she had been a human -- not just any movie star but someone along the lines of divas like Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner, and Elizabeth Taylor. She is the bomb, and she knows it.

SSheila has received admiration from numerous NHL players, high-ranking military officials, and even Taylor Swift. She's a diva's diva, but she still finds her KONGs more interesting.

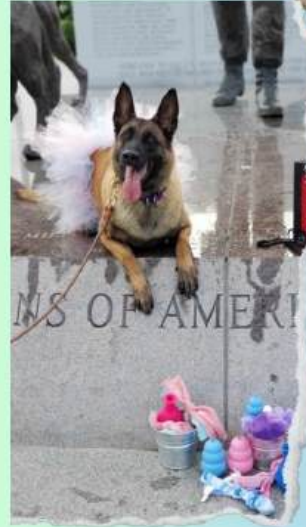
### Her Legacy Continues

SSheila was the Harrist family's first foster puppy, making their experience both rewarding and memorable. As their first military working dog foster, she laid the foundation for the training of all the foster puppies that followed her.

The Harrist family has raised 25 foster puppies, and SSheila remains their first and most impactful puppy.

To again quote Tommy Roe:

*"Man, this little girl is fine "*



**Above: SSheila in whelp, awaiting the birth of future heroes.**



**Right: SSheila with one of her litters.**

**Below right: SSheila at 7 months with Allie Woods.**

**All photos courtesy Lora Harrist**





## Turn! Turn! Turn!

"How many of you have had a dog turn on you without warning?"

How is it that a simple question like that brought about a giggle from me?

It makes perfect sense. My experience from my era was unique compared to a lot of handlers in the 1980s and early 1990s. The use of patrol-only dogs was declining. Clark in the Philippine Islands closed while I was in, and Osan was looking to scale back the perimeter presence. Drug and bomb dogs were on the way in, and single-purpose patrol dogs were falling by the wayside. Times they were a-changin'.

From Osan, I went to DTS Patrol (Dog Training Section-Patrol). At that time, we were still sourcing dogs from Europe. Some were not bad and could be certified quickly; others required rebuilding and encouragement. The rest were ornery. Of those, several could fall into the category of "turn on you without warning."

My most memorable was a chunky monkey of a Mal who seemed completely unmotivated by life. He didn't react when I put a choke chain on him and showed even less interest when I gave him a couple of commands, followed by corrections for refusals to comply. I took the pudge to the training area, but even the

sight of other dogs training in bite work didn't fire him up.

I did some basic obedience and went right into the first bite. The doughboy waddled to the decoy on the length of the six-foot leash and nibbled at it, not really locking down. Then, I must have really insulted him when I gave him the "out" command. Instead of returning to the heel position, he suddenly flipped the switch and took an absolutely full-mouth bite on the wrap, which shocked the holy heck out of both the decoy and me.

I shifted my position, hoping to make him cease this sudden outburst of hatred. When he finally let go of the bite, the once fat boy suddenly exhibited the agility and grace of a Romanian gymnast as he sprang up from the ground with remarkable speed.

After the initial outburst of hate and my defense of it, my left shoulder went belly-up from a recent injury, and I needed the help of another trainer to keep the snapping teeth from my own hide.

In the mid-80s, we certainly didn't have Sentry Dogs anymore. We did have the occasional hard case, though. Osan featured the likes of Mentor, Elmer, Nike, and a few others who challenged their handlers. We saw a few in DTS, with Carlo

being my favorite problem child.

He was a 67-pound Dutch Shepherd who despised taking direction during bite work. He loved the fight and hated the end of it. He never gave me a problem getting him out of the kennel, but there were days when his time up-leash was more than his time on the ground! Fortunately, his smaller size made him easy to handle when he wanted to say "hi."

Yes, he certified and performed very well in explosive school! Good boy, Carlo!

Another nugget was a Rottweiler named Comanche. He was a narcotics-training aid dog with one little flaw: he hated receiving commands inside his kennel. The head instructor assigned him a new handler for training. This directive included detailed instructions on how to get Comanche out of the kennel. It was simple: "Do not give him commands in the kennel."

We heard the handler walk into the kennel, struggling as Comanche eagerly tried to exit. Then came two of the dumbest words the handler could say with Comanche loose in the kennel.

"Comanche, SIT!!"

A growl and quick squeal from the handler denoted the stocky pup had taken a chunk out of a human

By Curtis Hendel



bicep. The incident was over as quickly as it started; the Rottie only wanted one quick bite. Comanche stood back and admired his work, allowing the handler to retreat from the kennel.

You can't say they didn't warn you.

A couple of years ago, I was reminiscing with a current DTS trainer about the dogs of my day. He told me that if any dog showed handler aggression in today's DTS, he would immediately remove that dog from training.

From Sentry Dogs to ornery Patrol Dogs to today's high-speed/low-drag multi-purpose canines, time does keep moving along, and our outstanding program continues to thrive.

Oh, yes! I have had a dog come up leash at me unexpectedly.

K9 Leads the Way!!







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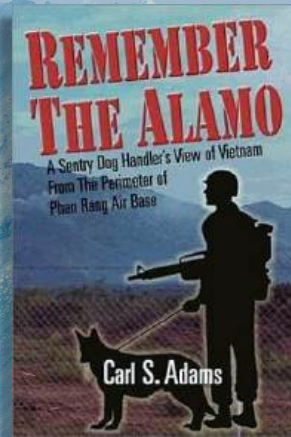
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## Book of the Month



**Remember the Alamo** by Carl S. Adams (2003) was my first K9 book written by an actual K9 handler. This one stuck because I did a speech on Carl in 2005 while attending the USAF NCO Academy. Chronicling his Sentry Dog Course graduation in Texas and a quick trip to Saigon six days later (with a detour back to his humble Air Force beginnings), he moves to two meaty chapters detailing his Phan Rang Air Base tour before returning home and filling us in on his life through the 2000 Vietnam Dog Handlers Association reunion. Check this one out, folks! By Joel Burton — Get yours [here!](#)

## Submitted Photo of the Month



**Lora Harrist submitted this recent photo of retired DoD mama dog, SSheila.**

**She's earned every single grey hair on that beautiful face.**