



The Paw Print

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mwdhm.org

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Military Working Dog
Heritage Museum



Frank Wehner, former dog handler and instrumental leader of the “Feed The Dawgs” projects, participated in the parade.

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USAF Dog Team at Tan Son Nhut
Photo: M Sgt. Manuel A. Collaso

Upcoming Events



Our Kokomo display pulls in visitor.
Photo courtesy: John Homa.



Date: TBD
University of Tennessee
Open House

Date: TBD
Kokomo



President, Albert Johnson

“

With the new year comes fresh opportunities to volunteer or join us for an interview.

”



From the President's Desk

We are excited to unveil the new format for the Paw Print newsletter! Our team has poured countless hours into crafting, formatting, and refining this beautiful new communication piece. We can't wait for you to experience the hard work and passion that went into its creation! Many thanks to our volunteer, Jen Atkins, for her clear vision on this new initiative.

With the new year comes fresh opportunities to volunteer or join us for an interview. Embrace the chance to make a difference! If you're interested in volunteering, please reach out to one of our volunteer coordinators at volunteer@mwdhm.org, or you can schedule an interview with a member of our interview team at info@mwdhm.org.

As we roll into the new year, I want to take a moment to reflect on our growth. In the past year, we have re-dedicated the war dog monument in South Carolina, bringing together 30 handlers from Vietnam through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as active-duty handlers. Connecting across generations is a significant part of our mission, and sharing stories and lessons from every era helps us identify both similarities and differences in the handlers' experiences and personal histories. I have experienced substantial growth in sharing my own history and the history of the dog program. As evidence of this, the Upcountry History Museum invited me to speak at their venue to reflect on my own service, as well as that of the dogs and handlers who answered the call. I prefaced my speech by stating, "I'm not a

museum professional, just a handler at the right place and time, but remember, I'm just that—a handler first and foremost." The speech was streamed live on our Facebook page if you'd like to watch me share an hour of history and anecdotes from my time in service.

Earlier in the year, we also attended some powerful events, from our annual trip to Kokomo, Indiana, to an event we had never done before: traveling to Anaheim, California, for a Police K9 training seminar and a National Association of Canine Scent Work seminar. The support we got from these two groups was outstanding.

The donation of artifacts over the last year has been significant. We have added patches, uniforms, dog gear, photos, and stories from the dog programs' inception to the current day.

Looking forward to 2026, we continue to work towards our museum goals with strategic planning and fundraising. This plan will begin narrowing down brick-and-mortar locations, costs, support, volunteers, employees, and funding avenues. I hope to have some exciting news in 2026 that will be a game-changer for interviews and artifact collections. So here is to our amazing year in 2025, now on to 2026, so we can do more and collect more "dog stuff". 

As always, K9 leads the way!

Albert Johnson



Dog handlers and dogs from Fort Jackson, near Columbia, South Carolina, and Fort Gordon, near Augusta, Georgia, produced an exciting dog demo for the handlers and guests attending the 2025 SC War Dog Memorial event. Photo courtesy: Andy Hauser

“
For the Vietnam veterans, this parade might have been a first. ”



Johnny Mayo, Vietnam era Scout Dog handler and inspiration for the monument, stops by to greet Duke, one of the handler's dogs. Photo courtesy: Dixie Whitman

A Parade For Heroes

By Dixie Gilmore Whitman

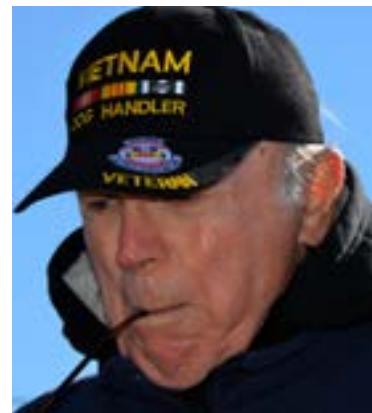
Among the throngs of people lining the parade route through the heart of Columbia, South Carolina, one man stood tall and proud, delivering a crisp, heartfelt salute. Beside him, someone called out, "Thank you for your service," their voice filled with gratitude. Another attendee shouted, "Welcome Home," echoing the warmth and appreciation shared by many in that moment.

Riding in a Veterans Day Parade is always an incredible honor. Parades go beyond simple gatherings of people marching down streets; they create a rich experience that unites participants and spectators alike. As a parade participant, there's something truly special about scanning the crowd, making eye contact with someone, waving the flag, and forging a genuine connection.

A group of Vietnam War dog handler veterans, their wives, alongside War on Terror handlers and active-duty personnel, proudly rode on a float adorned with identifying banners. The War on Terror and active-duty handlers may have expected the crowd's enthusiastic response, but for the Vietnam veterans, this parade might have been a first. They did not receive such recognition or gratitude

when they returned home from the Vietnam War.

Among the vehicles used by the Museum team were a Humvee, a Deuce-and-a-Half, and a long parade float. The museum was honored to host handlers



Ken Smerecki, USAF Dog Handler, Vietnam era. Photo courtesy: Dixie Whitman

from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. Active-duty handlers from Fort Jackson and Fort Gordon took part in the event, alongside our Army Coordinator, Johnny Mayo, and SGM Viridiana Lavalle, the Army's Dog Program Manager at the Pentagon.

We had a total of five Navy handlers participating. Given their smaller presence in the military's handler constellation, their involvement was significant. The Air Force handlers who attended were all from the

Vietnam War era, and there was representation from both the Vietnam War and Global War on Terror eras among the Marine Corps attendees.

The participation of the Military Working Dog Heritage Museum and our guests was the result of hard work and coordination. We owe a great deal of thanks to our dedicated Events Coordinator, John Homa, and the event team for their tireless efforts. We also acknowledge the significant contributions of the Military Vehicle Collectors of South Carolina, who provided the float, a Humvee, and other military vehicles to transport our museum representation.

And, a special shout-out to the patriotic, caring citizens of Columbia, South Carolina, who put a smile on many hearts on Veterans Day. 



Above: Doug Toomey, US Navy, Sentry Dog Handler
 Top right Robert Konarske, US Army, Combat Tracker
 Bottom right: John Harvey, US Marine Corps, Scout Dog Handler. Photos courtesy: Dixie Whitman



Defender to the End | By Meghan Howard and Ashley Richards

Military Working Dog Misha, officially retired June 10 after more than eight years of distinguished service with the 88th Security Forces Squadron.

Born Feb. 28, 2016, Misha entered the Air Force's MWD program at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas, where she completed detection and patrol training. She arrived at Wright-Patt in February 2019 and quickly became a key member of the installation's K9 team.



Above: SrA Kyle Runk, 88th SFS military working dog handler, and Misha. Photo by: R. J. Oriez

Throughout her career, Misha supported more than 3,000 anti-terrorism foot patrols, logged approximately 5,000 hours in ex-

plosive detection, and participated in 86 US Secret Service missions. Her deployments included support to Kuwait in 2020 and operations in India. She also contributed to more than 100 K9 demonstrations, building trust with local communities and showcasing the Air Force's security mission.

"Misha conducted more than 100 canine demonstrations for military members, families and the local community," said Lt. Col. Thomas Uhl, 88 SFS commander. "She served

as an ambassador for the security forces mission and strengthened public trust."

Misha was often described as a "push-button" dog, obedient, focused and precise, making her one of the most skilled dogs in the kennel. Whether responding to a bomb threat, patrolling the flightline, or engaging in community demos, Misha worked with heart.

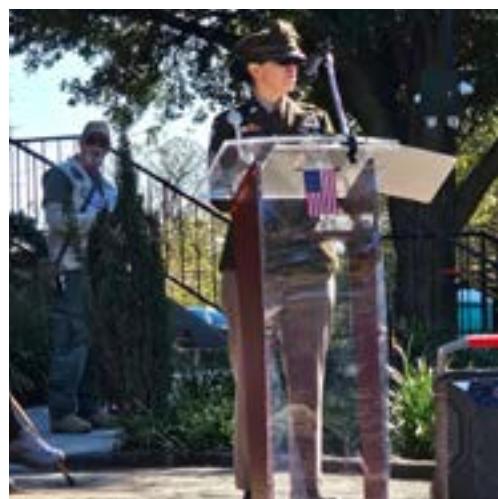
"She took my heart when I was her handler," Runk said. "I knew I wanted to adopt her when it came time." 



Two of our board members, Johnny Mayo on left, and Albert Johnson on the right, place a memorial wreath at the South Carolina War Dog Memorial, Columbia, South Carolina. All photos courtesy: Andy Hauser

10th Anniversary Rededication | By Dixie Gilmore Whitman

The weather proved challenging, yet handlers and guests braved the harsh November temperatures to honor the 10th Anniversary Rededication of the South Carolina War Dog



SGM Viridiana Lavalle

Memorial on November 11, 2025, underscoring the event's significance in our community.

Handlers from various backgrounds, including Vietnam-era, Global War on Terror-era, and active duty, along with guests and locals, gathered to honor and celebrate this beautiful and unique sculpture.

Although the sculptress and renowned artist Renee Bemis could not join us in person due to the government shutdown, which canceled flights, her work and vision remained central to the memorial's significance.

Other contributors to the day's speaking events included Al Dodds, our Board Member and Master of Ceremonies, Albert Johnson, the Museum president, Johnny Mayo, the

inspiration and workhorse behind the memorial, active duty handlers from Army installations, and SGM Viridiana Lavalle.



(L to R): Johnny Mayo, SGM Lavalle, and Krystal Tronboll.

Presenters spoke on the monument, the history behind it, what has changed in the K9 community in the ten years since its initial installation, and the importance of a Military Working Dog Heritage Museum.

The day ended with a recitation of the emotional poem, "Guardians of the Night," and an invitation to handlers present to approach the monument to lay a rose in memory and honor of America's MWDs.

Behind the scenes, our dedicated Events Coordinator, John Homa, made things happen - everywhere and all at once. We couldn't be prouder of the job he did to pull everything together. None of this weekend would have been possible without his hard work.

If you would like to visit the South Carolina War Dog Memorial, it is located in downtown Columbia. It sits in Memorial Park, at the corner of Hampton and Gadsden streets, just a few blocks away from the South Carolina Capitol building. 



Active duty personnel pose with the South Carolina War Dog Memorial.

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When Wood Speaks

By Dixie Gilmore Whitman

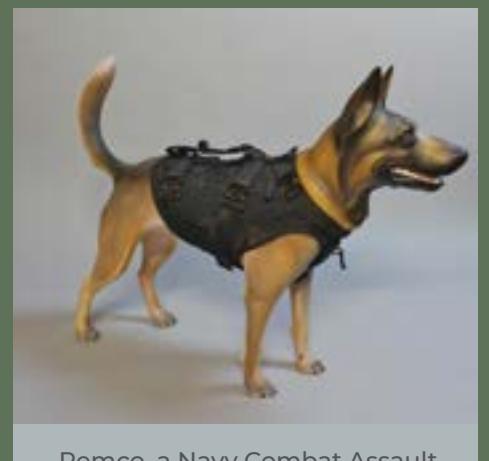


Sculptor, James Mellick, stands between two of his pieces, Lucca K458, on our left, and Cooper K154 on the right. All photos courtesy James Mellick.

Greenville, South Carolina's Up-country History Museum is currently showcasing an exhibition honoring the vital role of America's Military Working Dog. Along with art and memorabilia on loan from some of America's mightiest military museums, sculptor James Mellick's work steals the spotlight.

James Mellick attended college, earned a Master of Fine Arts degree, taught at several universities across the country, and has received accolades and recognition from museums, private collectors, and the general public. In 1985, he began creating stories through the form of dog sculptures, many of which are allegorical.

About ten years ago, he began presenting his work featuring Military Working Dogs. This growing collection of carefully crafted wooden dogs, known as the "Wounded Warrior Project," took America's



Remco, a Navy Combat Assault Dog.



Sculpture above: Robson



Sculpture above: Nemo

breath away and immediately connected with the K9 community. Some of this collection has been exhibited in the best of America's military museums, including the Airborne and Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville, NC; the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, VA; and the National Museum of the USAF in Dayton, OH.

Now, a subset of these masterpieces is available for viewing through the end of January 2026 in Greenville, South Carolina. The dogs on loan from Mr. Mellick include some of America's best-known K9 heroes: Lucca, Robson, and the SEAL Team dog, Remco.

Each of these K9s has a unique story to share. The theme through all of them is duty, devotion to partner, and a bond that surpasses the bounds of time or space.

Remco served as a Combat Assault Dog alongside the Navy SEALs, and

his heroic life was tragically cut short during the search for Bowe Bergdahl. Bergdahl chose to leave his post, which ultimately led to his facing a general court-martial. On October 16, 2017, he accepted a guilty plea before a military judge at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Following this, on November 3, 2017, he received a sentence that included a dishonorable discharge, a rank reduction to private, and a fine of \$1,000 per month for ten

months—without any time in prison. While Bergdahl seemed to pay little for the consequences of his actions, it's heart-wrenching to think that Remco, serving with such courage and dedication, paid the ultimate price, with his life.

The story of Robson is equally heartbreakng. His handler, David Simpson, ultimately took his own life. James Mellick captures Robson lying on David's uniform, waiting for his return.

Lucca's story is intertwined with Cooper, a yellow Labrador with a sincere love for a deflated football. Cooper is crafted with angel wings, holding his football, waiting for his best friend, Lucca, to join him in Heaven so they can continue to chase and play tag.

The MWDHM team received an invitation to have one of our volunteers speak at the Upcountry History Museum on November 12. Albert Johnson accepted the request.

While Albert professes to be "just a dog handler," when he starts talking about his favorite subject, Johnny, his K9 partner, he shares a deep and personal relationship that touches everyone's heart.

Please check out the Upcountry History Museum's website for more information on James Mellick's Wounded War Dogs and the exhibit. 



Sculpture above: Tosca

We Own A Bunker!

By Greg Dunlap



Marine sentries were surprised by Blackie.

After a whole night of walking post, I'm bored, tired, sweaty, and hungry. About six months have passed since arriving in Vietnam, and I'm expecting the next six to drag just like the first. Probably worse if that were possible. My Sentry Dog, Blackie, is walking ahead of me, carrying my helmet with his teeth as usual, when we turn the corner and head southwards on the final leg back to the kennels.

This morning, we are walking back from Charlie Company on the North side of the line, and as we pass by a Marine bunker on our right, we hear a challenge.

"HALT, Who goes there?"

Now Blackie and I are thinking that either the Captain or the Lieutenant is out checking the lines, or we have a newbie here. I answer back, "K9, Blackie!"

"Blackie!! That SOB is afraid of his own shadow, eats his own crap, and you're wearing a bucket of dog slobber, Dunlap!"

Blackie, on hearing his name called, pauses and looks up into the shadows created by the bunker above us. The insults continue, hurled at us, in full swing. A second voice joins the instigator, and we are getting the brunt of two bad-mouthed Marines yelling down at us. Momentarily stopped, I listen to the abusive slurs when I notice that this is the Rolls-Royce of Marine bunkers. Most bunkers have a ladder leading to the top level; this one is equipped with stairs.

Stairs that a person, or a dog, can easily negotiate.

I tell Blackie to put down the helmet, and after he does, I tell the Marines that they have hurt my dog's feelings and that they have to offer apologies to him. In fact, they have to do it personally, and to help them accomplish that, Blackie and I are coming up to see that it gets done properly.

With that, I charge up the stairs with Blackie following me. I catch a glimpse of two wide-eyed individuals diving headfirst out of the front of the bunker towards the ground ahead of our arrival upstairs. When we reach the top and go inside, there is no one there to greet us. However, in their haste to get out, the Marines have left us with everything! Guns, helmets, one pair of boots, and half a sandwich from mid-rats. Blackie says grace, and the hoagie is gone. Moreover, we now own the bunker! However, now there are two pissed-off Marines on the ground in front of us—pissed-off and a little scared.

Blackie and I take up a position at the front, looking out at them and

listening to them for a moment, telling us how they are going to catch hell if the Captain or the Lieutenant comes by and catches them outside, like they are, and us in their bunker. I let them know they are free to come back up. I do not harbor any grudges, but that Blackie has taken it personally that they do not seem to like him and that they spoke unkindly towards him. Now they are starting to feel really foolish. Here they are on the ground, unarmed, looking up at us in their bunker, one with no boots on, telling Blackie that they didn't mean it when they said he was dumb, ugly, chicken, etc, so that they can get back up inside.

I make a big deal about letting them know that he has accepted their apology and that we are now coming back down so they can go back up. Also, I figure that we had better put some ground between them and us when one discovers that half of his sandwich is gone. They back off, and Blackie and I climb down the stairs, pick up the helmet, and off we go, at a little faster pace now. After a minute or so, I hear some noise in the background, but we are further down the road now and out of sight for the moment.

Nevertheless, for a brief moment in time, we owned a bunker! 



Smartphones and Dogs

By Curtis Hendel



Smartphone cameras could have captured moments like these, when handlers dress up their partners. Sketches inspired by Curtis Hendel.

I have been referred to as a "tweener" by a prominent handler from the Vietnam era. This term signifies that I served between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terror. My time in the United States Air Force, from 1985 to 1991, was unfortunately cut short due to an injury. Although I served during a period without major conflicts, my experience was still interesting and unique. I continue to learn more about this in my role as a Veterans Services Officer. I have the great fortune of working with veterans of all ages, and every day I am reminded of how lucky I am to have this job, especially given my experience as a Military Working Dog Handler, where I served with all four branches in the Dog Training Section and Patrol.

When I attended Patrol Dog School, the concept of the perimeter was still very relevant. Many older handlers viewed being a

"perimeter rat" as essential for truly understanding the job. By the time I left the military, however, my first base, Osan, had already begun to reduce perimeter postings, while Clark Air Base was completely eliminating them. Pure perimeter patrol dogs were becoming a thing of the past, and the future belonged to dual-purpose dogs. Time marches on.

During basic training, we still relied on outdated methods of





Smartphones can capture the special times when it's just you and your partner spending time together - bonding.

communication with people back home. For the younger generation, let me explain: we used "pay phones," where you could insert quarters to make calls. While talking, you might hear a recorded voice, prompting you to add more coins or get cut off. If you didn't have enough change, you could make what we called a "collect call." This required dialing a "0" before the area code, at which point a human operator would ask for your name and then try to get the recipient to "accept" the charges. I know, it sounds crazy now, but things were about to get even crazier.

The internet didn't exist, and having a computer at home, let alone in your hand, felt like a distant dream. At Osan, we had the MARS Station, which allowed us to make free calls back home, but time constraints limited our conversations to just a few minutes. You

had to wait in line to make the call, all while navigating time zones and co-ordinating with Daylight Saving Time, depending on when your family would be home. I never used the MARS Station. Shortly before leaving the military, home computers were beginning to appear, and "dial-up" Internet connections started bringing all kinds of information into homes across the country and eventually the world. For younger readers, you might not want to learn about the horrors of dial-up Internet.

Another revelation of the time was when a young lady I spent time with explained that you could visit "chat rooms" to discuss, well, adult topics. How could anyone trust the identity of someone on the other end of the connection? Creepy chat room participants aside, the advances made during my time in the military laid the groundwork for the next generation of

warriors, many of whom have their own computers or smartphones, allowing for real-time communication with loved ones back home.

When talking to veterans and sharing service stories, we often reflect on everything that has changed since our time. One common phrase we share is, "I wish I had this when I was in!" The object of that desire is, of course, the smartphone—mainly for its camera. I can't imagine the library of photos I would have captured of both humans and dogs alike: training videos, memorable moments—the works.

I remember a Dutch Shepherd named Carlo, who tested my patience every day leading up to my certification. He was sixty-seven pounds of tiger-striped muscle, a potential candidate for an early exit from the program. However, an unconventional "come to Jesus" meeting led to a more harmonious handler/

dog relationship. Carlo was a physical specimen, with each muscle group visible as he stood proudly, ready for a challenge. He was just one of many unique and memorable dogs I encountered in the Dog Training Section and overseas.

Looking back, I regret the photo and video opportunities I missed. I also recall moments when I wasn't at my most mature, exhibiting behavior that's best left forgotten. And that's when I finish the phrase: "Man, I wish I had one of these back in the day, but I'm glad that I didn't have one of these back then!" Great dog photos would be mixed with pictures that could be considered 'evidence'... Some thoughts are better left as memories. 



Smartphones can also capture those "unscripted" moments when your dog is being a dog.

A Return Trip Home

By Albert Johnson

At the South Carolina War Dog Monument rededication, many stories were shared by the handlers in attendance. One story I was reminded of was in 2007, when three other handlers and I found out there were no military flights from Dover to San Diego, so we had to catch a civilian flight.

The office that arranges flights for military members riding civilian airlines booked our flight but forgot to inform the airline that we were flying with our military working dogs. This created quite a situation where the gate attendant wouldn't let us on the flight because it was booked solid, with nowhere for the dogs to ride. We ended up being bumped from that flight and put on standby for another flight into San Diego. We tried sleeping in the terminal with our dogs, but it was a waste of time because the dogs wouldn't relax.

After several hours waiting for our next flight, we were the last four people on the plane, and because I was a low man on the totem pole, I was left in the last row in the right corner of the aircraft. The seats didn't recline at all, and there was no room for my dog, Rexi, to lie down. He was stuck sitting between my legs, but kept trying to jump up in my lap.

The individuals in our row were pretty awesome. The woman who sat next to me looked like a supermodel, with blond hair, thin, tall, and just beautiful. The man who sat next to her was an AA baseball

player traveling to San Diego for tryouts. He didn't care much for dogs, but the beautiful woman sitting next to me loved them. And as the saying goes, "Happy wife, happy life."

I soon found myself with Rexi sprawled across all three of us, the woman in heaven and the man acting like he was in hell, hiding his disdain from his partner. By the end of the flight, the three of us were covered in dog hair and slobber.

When it was time to part ways off the aircraft, the gorgeous woman gave me a huge hug and thanked me for letting her love my dog, and I got a rough handshake from the AA baseball player and a "stay safe." After speaking to the other handlers on the flight I would say that Rexi and I had the best trip out of everyone in the group. ♣



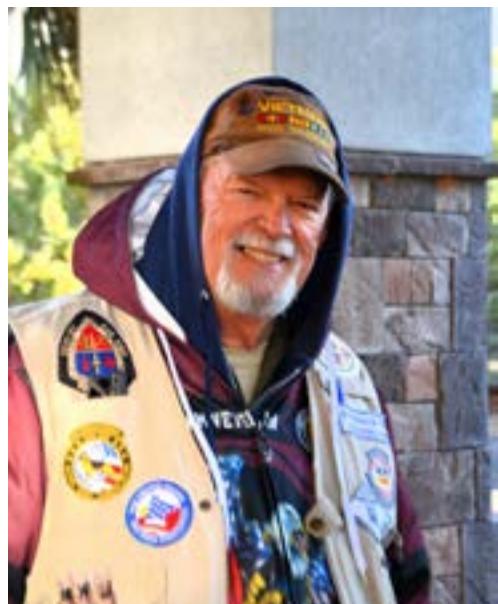
One woman's Heaven is another man's Hell.

“

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”

Candid Photos from Rededication





Military Working Dog Heritage Museum & Handler Center

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our newsletter.

Paw Print of the Month

Hey there, Handlers!

Got any adorable snapshots of your pup's paw prints? Whether they're stamped in sand, snow, mud, or even on paper, we'd love to see them!

We're cooking up a fun new feature, and your furry friend's prints could be the star of the show.

No rush or pressure—just if you happen to have some paw print pics handy!

After all, this is The Paw Print, so show us those inspirational images.

Thanks a bunch!

The Paw Print Team



UPDATE: K9 Ultra USCG (from November 2025 Issue)



ME1 Whitaker and K9 Ultra. (US Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Breanna Boardman)

For the past 15 years, the American Humane Society has presented the Hero Dog Award. The nationwide competition has invited dog owners across America to nominate their canine heroes. Whether they're service dogs helping people with disabilities, therapy dogs bringing comfort to those in need, or family pets who have shown unexpected bravery- all are welcome to enter the competition.

While K9 Ultra of the USCG did not win the overall award, she was one of the five finalists (Military Category) chosen from an extraordinary group of 25 courageous canines representing the heart of the Hero Dog Awards — bravery in action, healing paws that bring comfort, and second-chance stories that prove hope is never lost. View the quick five-minute story – and see K9 Ultra and ME1 Whitaker standing still for a few moments in the spotlight. Hero Dog Awards® - American Humane Society.

We are proud to have had the privilege of profiling K9 Ultra and her handler, ME1 Whitaker, in the Paw Print November 2025 issue.

Help connect us to more stories like K9 Ultra- if you know of former and/or current US Military Working Dog teams that would be willing to share their stories, please contact us at info@mwdhm.org.