



Randy Kimler



Randy and Prinz

SCOUT DOGS IN THE VIETNAM WAR ERA

Randy Kilmer

I dropped out of OCS after week 14, and, along with some others from the 50th, went to Scout Dog School at Ft. Benning. It was a three-month class, including two-and-one-half weeks living out in the woods with two men to a tent. I served as a scout dog handler in the 41st Scout Dog Platoon, 1st Infantry Division and the 42nd Scout Dog Platoon, 101st Airborne Division. Down south with the 41st wasn't so bad, but up north with the 42nd was hell. Walking point for a year wasn't a lot of fun. I returned to the US in July 1970. I've been asked by several classmates for more information about the scout dog program and how they were used in the field. Here are my thoughts.

The Army established the Scout Dog Training Detachment at Ft Benning, Georgia in September 1965. (In 1962-1964, the Army had sent advisors to Vietnam to train Vietnamese scout dog handlers for the South Vietnamese Army.) The Scout Dog Training Detachment was the size of a small battalion and was commanded by a major. A total of 22 Army and 4 Marine Scout Dog Platoons were trained there before deployment to Vietnam. Several thousand replacement handlers were also trained at the school. All Marine scout dog handlers were trained at Ft Benning along with some Navy Seals.

The Army first used scout dogs in World War II in both Europe and the Pacific. They were also used during the Korean War. During the Vietnam War, sentry dogs, tracker dogs, and specialty dogs (such as mine dogs, tunnel dogs and booby-trap dogs) were used. All were German Shepherds except tracker dogs, who were black Labrador Retrievers. Scout dogs had to be a least 50% German Shepard, minimum weight of 65 pounds, and at least 23 inches tall. All dogs were purchased by the Air Force and started their military careers at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Approximately 80% of the dogs were purchased in Germany. The military considered dogs from the US less fit for military service and more susceptible to hip dysplasia than dogs from Europe. Over 4,000 dogs served in the Vietnam War, over 90% as scout dogs. Only 190 dogs were sent back to the US. Dogs remaining at the end of US involvement were either given to the South Vietnamese or euthanized.

In the beginning, the trainees for the scout dog school were all volunteers. Later, the Army assigned men to the dog school program who had been discharged or quit OCS and NCO school. Everyone's 201 (personnel file) was evaluated and only those deemed suitable for training as a dog handler were selected. Some men just could not meet training standards and were kicked out of the school. No one was recycled.

Training was for three months. The first two weeks was basic obedience for dogs and handlers. The last two- and one-half months was field training. Handlers and dogs lived in the woods during that time. Handlers lived in two-man tents. One shower per week,

good training for our time in Viet Nam. The basic obedience phase consisted of teaching handlers how to communicate with their dogs using physical, verbal and hand signals. It was emphasized how important it was to give feedback to our dogs, praise for doing what was expected and correction for not following commands. Some methods used during training would not be acceptable today because they could be deemed brutal. I would not agree with that assessment. Trained dogs and handlers were needed to save American lives. The Army used the best most efficient methods to train our men and dogs. Time was of the essence because there were never enough handlers or dogs to serve in Vietnam.

The last ten weeks of field training were divided into three phases. First were short patrols with decoys; second, intermediate patrols with decoys along with mine, and booby-trap detection; and the last phase involved long range patrols and the integration of everything learned. Time was also spent in simulated villages with live animals and searching barnyards and pig pens for hidden weapons or explosives. It was a good thing that I grew up semi-rural with lots of animals....some of the guys from large cities did not like pig pens.

We were trained to read our dog's alerts. Ears raised, hair on back standing up, position and action of the dog's tail, etc. All dogs did not alert the same way, so a handler had to learn how his dog alerted. We learned to tell strength and direction of alerts. We learned the importance of wind direction and weather conditions that could affect our dogs' performance. The dogs' job was to give early silent warning of danger, either human or mechanical. Our dogs were not trained to attack like sentry dogs. Scout dogs had to work with a group of men so they could not be aggressive. This was not always the case. My dog Prinz became very protective of me at night out in the jungle. A grunt who had petted him during the day would be attacked if he got near me at night. Most scout dogs had a strong dislike for any Vietnamese, and we had to be incredibly careful around them. Once early warning was given, our job as a scout dog team was over. We were to alert the patrol leader and take no further action. This was drilled into us in training. It did not matter if the patrol commander was a SGT, LT, CPT, or higher, we were to refuse to take part in further action. We always joked that the Army was more concerned about taking care of a valuable scout dog than a handler, and I think there was some truth to that.

Our training was very intense in scout dog school. In fact, it was the best training I received in the Army as far as preparing me for Vietnam and the job I was to do. Fundamentals were stressed...no harassment or Mickey Mouse crap. I later learned that the LTs who went through scout dog school were specially selected by the Army. (Future scout dog platoon sergeants also went through the first two weeks of training; they were all E7s.) The officers were all Airborne Rangers and were selected because the Army wanted them on the fast track for promotion to general rank. Each LT of a scout dog platoon was a commander. There were few positions in the Army where a

2LT was a commander. Of the approximately 130 scout dog platoon commanders, only one made general officer rank, Major General Robert Menist.

It has been conservatively estimated that our dogs saved over 10,000 American lives by giving early silent warning of danger. Approximately 250 scout dog handlers and over 350 dogs were KIA in the war. Many dogs were lost to heat stroke, disease, and snake bites, and at least two were killed by water buffalos. Another fact is that scout dogs and handlers had a bounty on them because they were so effective against the enemy. For those who are interested, Operation Texas Star April 1970-July 1970 was an operation by the 101st Airborne Division; the 42nd scout dog platoon was heavily involved. It was around the A Shau Valley, and eight of our twenty dogs were KIA saving American lives. I am proud to have served in this platoon during this engagement. I am proud for my service as a scout dog handler and for the American lives Prinz and I helped save.

The reason dogs were so effective walking point was because their sense of smell and hearing was thousands of times better than humans. Dogs literally live in a world of smells. It is impossible for us to understand the way a dog operates in its world of smell. I have spent a lot of time trying to understand how a dogs brain operates with this hypersensitivity to smell but it is still a mystery to me. I do know these heightened senses saved countless Americans from death or injury.

If you are interested in learning more, two websites that I recommend are for the Vietnam Dog Handler Association, vdha.us and one for one of the scout dog platoons I served with in Vietnam, the 42nd IPSP, website 42ipsd.com In addition, Major George Massey (a Special Forces Officer who retired as an LTC) was the CO of the dog school when I was there. I asked him for some of his personal recollections, which he provided. They are included as a second document.

Take care, Randy Kimler



Randy and Prinz





Scout dog memorial dedication

Scout Dog Training Detachment, Fort Benning, Georgia

The complete name of the scout dog training unit was the *United States Army Infantry Center, Headquarters Detachment - Scout Dog*. As far as I know, at the time it was the only unit of its type in the world. The Detachment was unique, but it was also a "step child" unit attached to the 197th Infantry Brigade, Training. The Brigade was the umbrella command unit for a number of training units/schools at Fort Benning. Logistical and Transportation Support were two of the main elements, which sometimes created problems for the Detachment. Dog food and training equipment such as leashes and dog muzzles were not standard items of equipment. Plus there was no motor pool for the Detachment's vehicles since the detachment was located on Main Post a few miles away from the Brigade.

We actually set up the Motor Pool and repair/maintenance facilities in an empty building, with parking, on Main Post. I guess this could be called "squatting," but the NCOs and 2nd LT made it work. With increased requirement to train more replacement dogs and handlers for the 26 scout dog platoons in Vietnam, overcrowding became a big problem in the barracks. One of the young 2nd LTs in training stumbled across an interesting fact: the item of square footage living space for the prisoners in the post stockade was *twice* the size of the space for our students. Once I informed my chain of command of the crowding and square footage problems, an empty barracks located close by was assigned to the Detachment. Post engineers had the building ready in no time once the Brigade commander, COL Streever, bounced the problem up his chain of command to the Post Commander.

The Detachment 1st SGT had a direct link to the Fort Benning personnel office and was able to get students and support personnel for the Detachment. Most of the soldiers who had left OCS were 11-B (eleven bravo) infantrymen. That was the required MOS for scout dog students/handlers. Not only did they make good students/handlers but, based on needs of the Detachment, could become support personnel. At one time during my tour of command, the Detachment had 8 college graduates as clerks in the orderly room, personnel and supply slots. They didn't require much supervision or extra training and most just wanted to finish their time in service and get out.

The training cadre decided that the Detachment needed a Vietnamese village to train teams how to search one. They came up with an interesting solution: Lo and behold! The problem was solved when they found a Vietnamese village which had been built at Benning during the filming of the John Wayne movie "Green Beret." It was used to simulate searching a village. As a side note, while I was in the career course just before taking command of the Detachment, my wife met John Wayne going into the officer's club one day at noon and told him her husband was a Green Beret and had just served in VN with the 5th Special Forces. He took her hand and said he was proud to meet the wife of a real Green Beret. Not sure if she has ever washed that hand!

While in command of the Detachment, and based on cadre and student recommendations, we submitted the paperwork and background information to the Military Institute of Heraldry for Scout Dog tab similar to the Ranger tab. I never knew how it ended up. Some students had "Ranger Joe's" in Columbus make their own version of a Scout Dog tab but it was not authorized for official wear. Along with the Airborne School and Ranger School at Benning, the Scout Dog Detachment demonstration area received many visits from groups (foreigners, ROTC cadets, civilians, and a number of local school and children's groups). The demo team performed obedience skills demonstrations and simulated patrol situations. These were always well received.

The German shepherds trained as scout dogs were, for the most part, procured for the military by the Air Force from civilian sources. Based on an assessment by the Air Force, the less aggressive dogs became scout dog candidates. The Detachment received many letters from owners who wanted to know status of their dogs, if possible. I always answered those letters by giving the type of training we put the dogs through as well as information of how the dogs were to be used in combat operations in VN. Of course, I couldn't give them the final results of where the dogs were deployed or what happened to them once in-country. Hopefully, they appreciated what information I could give them. The off-leash equipment fiasco is covered in the book "GI". Suffice it to say, the military procurement system didn't work well in this situation. As with a lot of items of equipment, the end user, the soldier, was never consulted or had any input in the development. In many cases, some pencil neck geek sitting in an office with no windows dreamed up how an item of equipment should work.

The Detachment was the only unit in the military which had animal AWOLs. The dogs had serial numbers tattooed in their left ears for ID purposes. The locals around Ft Benning knew to call the MP's if a stray German Shepherd showed up in their front yard. The AWOL was usually caused by an "in-heat" bitch running through the dog's bivouac area. I was the only commander who reported AWOL dogs in the Brigade CO's briefing. This always drew some comments from other commanders.

On a personal note, the Scout Dog command tour was the most rewarding and best I had. It certainly was the most unique assignment I had while on active duty. I regret, in 20/20 hindsight, that I didn't follow up or keep up with the success Scout Dog teams had in Vietnam. Obviously, the handlers and dogs are a group who deserve special recognition for a job well done. I'm honored to have had a small part in their training.

George M. Massey, LTC (RET) USARMY