

Let Slip the Dogs of War

Military working dogs serving on the front lines of the global war on terror truly are man's best friends.

By Jennifer Peters

At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there were approximately 2,500 military working dogs (MWDs) serving the U.S. armed forces. These dogs and their handlers helped change battlefield dynamics so much that in 2004, there were bounties of upward of \$10,000 on the dogs' heads. In fact, it's estimated that the average MWD saves between 150 and 200 lives during its career. The dogs are classified as "equipment" by the U.S. military, however, and thus ineligible for the health care granted to their human handlers.

The benefits of the animals' abilities weren't always so well-known. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Marine Corps requested 30 MWD teams, and it took almost a year for them to be delivered. At the time, dogs had not served in a

combat zone since the Vietnam War, and it wasn't fully understood how much they'd be able to contribute on the new urban battlefield. Once the dog teams ventured outside the wire, however, it was clear that they were a force to be reckoned with.

Mike Dowling, a former Marine Corps dog handler and author of *Sergeant Rex: The Unbreakable Bond Between a Marine and His Military Working Dog*, was one of the first dog handlers deployed to Iraq in 2004. He and Rex were shipped to Iraq's infamous Triangle of Death, one of the most volatile regions in the country. Initially assigned to gate duty, Dowling and his dog were soon invited to join patrols through the city, where Rex was able to really show his skills. "The marines absolutely knew how important a role Rex played," Dowling says. "They accepted us very, very quickly because the majority of people are dog people, so they just liked having a dog around, even before we'd ever been on a mission.



Mike Dowling and Rex on deployment in Iraq, 2004



Mike Dowling and Rex



SERGEANT REX
THE UNBREAKABLE BOND BETWEEN A MARINE AND HIS MILITARY WORKING DOG
MIKE DOWLING



Lisa Phillips and Rambo in February 2014

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (TOP) MIKE DOWLING, (MIDDLE, LEFT TO RIGHT) MONIQUE FEILL PHOTOGRAPHY, (RIGHT) ATRIA BOOKS, (BOTTOM) ROBIN RISEMAS

Once I'd gone on patrols with them and they saw how well Rex performed, information got passed down to the other marines in the unit, so they were confident that we could perform."

Rex and the other dogs serving in Iraq had been trained to sniff out bombs, and because of their powerful olfactory sense, they could find improvised explosive devices that were buried in the road, as well as individual components in the bomb makers' workshops. Former Army animal-care specialist Lisa Phillips explains, "While you and I can smell a pizza, the dogs can smell each individual component. They can smell the crust and the spices in the sauce and the pepperoni, and they can pick out each scent."

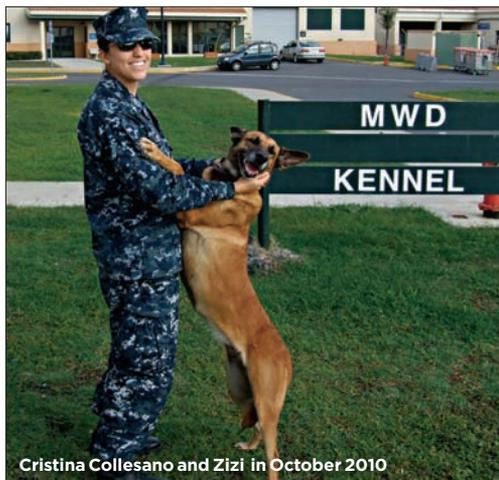
While dogs like Rex were the grunts of the MWD program, venturing out into hostile territory to bring the fight to the insurgents, going into the field isn't the only way MWDs protect their human counterparts. Zizi, a former working dog partnered with Navy dog handler Cristina Collesano, provided base security in Sicily and Kuwait by searching vehicles at the gate. "At home and abroad, dogs are absolutely essential to base security," Collesano says. "Without them, we'd be putting our EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] technicians at risk because they'd have to respond to every possible explosive hazard.

These dogs can tell that a car driving through our gate—one that looks very normal—could have C-4 on it, but you as a human being, if you don't open that trunk and see that, you wouldn't be able to tell. The dogs definitely have the edge when it comes to detecting these odors and finding this contraband."

When Zizi was medically retired, Collesano jumped at the chance to adopt her former partner, and now is a fierce proponent for awarding benefits to retired MWDs. Because working dogs are typically retired only when necessary due to failing health or advanced age, it is often very expensive to care for the animals. "As the owner of a retired MWD, I'm willing to pay whatever it takes to make Zizi comfortable," Collesano says. "But a lot of times the adoptive families aren't prepared or can't afford the medical expenses."

To fill the gap, a handful of nonprofits have sprung up to help cover the costs of the animals' medical care. One such organization is Gizmo's Gift, run by Lisa Phillips. After treating MWDs during her time in the Army, she fell in love with the hardworking animals and adopted Gizmo, a retired working dog, in 2005. To provide for Gizmo's health care, Phillips had to take on a second job, but the extra work and expenses were worth it. "These dogs are just so happy to be alive

"The handlers always joke that we're just treat dispensers and leash holders—the dogs do all the work."



Cristina Collesano and Zizi in October 2010



Collesano and Zizi being honored as Veterans of the Game during the L.A. Dodgers game on August 24, 2014



Sgt Rambo

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (TOP LEFT) CRISTINA COLLESANO, (BOTTOM LEFT) JON SOHOO/JILL WEISLEDER/LOS ANGELES DODGERS

and to live with you," she says. "They're so special I can't even express it. They're such wonderful additions to the family." Gizmo passed away in 2006, but Phillips's desire to help other MWDs didn't diminish. She later adopted Bianca, caring for her through her last days, and then got her current dog, Rambo.

Because of her extra income and her experience as a veterinarian's assistant, Phillips has been able to give her dogs the kind of comfortable retirement they deserve, but she realized that she was a unique case. She wanted others to experience the joy she gets from her canine companions, so she started Gizmo's Gift. "Because they retire with medical issues, it kind of limits who can adopt these dogs," she explains. "For instance, my dog Rambo, in the first month having him, I spent over \$1,000 for medical procedures and dog food and medication. I think it's worth every penny, but I don't think you should have to be a billionaire to adopt a dog. By offering financial aid, I'm hoping that more and more loving families will be able to open up their homes to these dogs."

Phillips worked with Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) and Congressman Walter Jones (R-NC) to draft the Canine Members of the Armed Services Act, hoping to change the dogs' classification and qualify them for benefits, but when it passed in 2013, the language had been changed, leaving the dogs and their advocates little to be excited about. While the dogs are now more likely to be provided with transportation back to the States after overseas retirement, and enough care to get them into shape to be adopted, they are not guaranteed anything, and are still considered equipment instead of canine service members.

Denying health benefits to the dogs is akin to denying human vets access to health care, Collesano believes. "These dogs served during war just like their human counterparts," she says. "They get the same service-related injuries as people, so they should also get the same care."

Dowling, whose *Sergeant Rex* drew attention to the MWD story in 2011, believes that the tide is finally changing. Last October, a monument was built at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio to honor MWD teams, while in the past year books, magazine articles, and documentaries have brought some much-needed press to the plight of the retired working dog. "I think people are really beginning to understand how important these dogs are," Dowling says. "They're no longer the unsung heroes."

"Every American should know what they are and what they do," Collesano adds. "The handlers always joke that we're just treat dispensers and leash holders—the dogs do all the work." But the recognition from the public doesn't interest their partners, she says. "Dogs don't know about medals or danger," she explains. "They want to please their handler. They love to work and serve. If they sniff out drugs or explosives and they get a reward from their handler, that's what they love. That's why they do it." —

Dog Tales

We're not the only ones drawing attention to military working dogs.



A military-police-dog training demonstration in December 2012

War Dogs: Tales of Canine Heroism, History, and Love

Author Rebecca Frankel, who brought the dogs of war to prominence with her "War Dog of the Week" column for *Foreign Policy*, delves deep into the history of U.S. soldiers' reliance on their canine counterparts, as well as recounting fresh heroic tales of man's best friend. It's everything you've ever wanted to know—and then some—about military working dogs.

Sergeant Rex: The Unbreakable Bond Between a Marine and His Military Working Dog

Handler Mike Dowling's partner was one of the first MWDs deployed to Iraq, in 2004. Rex helped prove the usefulness of the military's canine teams on the twenty-first-century battlefield. Dowling makes Rex seem almost human in his retelling, and the man-and-his-dog camaraderie makes this a must-read for dog lovers.

Trident K9 Warriors: My Tale From the Training Ground to the Battlefield With Elite Navy SEAL Canines

Navy SEAL Mike Ritland, who trained dogs for SEAL service, and cowriter Gary Brozek take readers behind the scenes of how Special Forces canines are selected, trained, and put to work. Less than one percent of MWDs have what it takes to join the elite forces, but for those that make the cut, much is expected—and much is achieved.

Always Faithful

This documentary from director Harris Done follows five Marine Corps dog teams from the training grounds to the battlegrounds, giving viewers a front-row seat to the high jinks and heroics of some of the military's bravest members—and the dog handlers who lead and care for them.

Dogs of War

A&E's new docu-series follows returning veterans with PTSD as they are partnered with service dogs that have been trained to help them adjust to civilian life. Although it's not focused on MWDs, the series shows viewers how service dogs can help soldiers off the battlefield as well. —