



In the past decade, each one of us has had the privilege of saluting an American soldier for his or her brave service. One unsuspecting woman had a brush with a hero she will never forget. Neither will you.

A Brief But  
**LUCKY**  
Encounter

By Christina Kelly  
Illustration by  
Jonathan Bartlett

I grew up in military towns as the child of a U.S. Marine officer. I know my men in uniform well and have heard nearly every line a soldier can give to a pretty girl.

Imagine my surprise then, when on a Southwest Airlines flight from Spokane, Washington, to Phoenix, in 2008, the soldier next to me gave me the once-over and thought about laying his paws on me. All four of them.

“Do you mind?” Sgt. Gerald Martinez asked quickly. “His name is Lucky. Southwest made an exception in allowing him in the cabin. I promise he won’t bother you.”

I reassured Martinez that I had three dogs of my own and had been an animal lover all of my life. But Lucky was a curiosity. I glanced sideways at him, a little intimidated by the knowledge that as a military working dog (MWD) he was trained to be aggressive on command. This wasn’t one of my goofy retrievers prone to chasing crows or rolling over for belly scratches. This wasn’t a *pet*. This was a soldier with a peerless nose for sniffing out explosive devices and ammunition and narcotics, who, after a brief training session in Arizona, would be deployed for a tour of duty in Afghanistan.

Lucky’s tan muzzle was peppered with gray, and his short hair even resembled the buzz cut of a serviceman. He had dark-brown eyes that reflected intelligence and wisdom—not just a smart dog, but one with a depth that surpassed anything I’d seen in an animal. He appeared to be a shepherd mix, but Martinez corrected me: Lucky was a Belgian Malinois, a cousin of sorts to the German shepherd, just smaller. I could see a scar on his rear leg and asked Martinez if it was a war wound.

“No ma’am,” he said. “Lucky’s been lucky. He had a cancerous tumor removed a few years back.”

Sensing my fascination, Lucky turned his head and serenely returned my gaze. With Martinez’s permission, I scratched the dog behind his ears and stroked the top of his head and neck. Like any hound would do, he closed his eyes and soaked up the TLC. Then, to the shock of his handler, Lucky leaned over and laid his head on me—in dog terms, the oldest pick-up line in the book.

Martinez looked on intently, then slowly relaxed.

“He’s never done that before,” he said, smiling.

Lucky leaned on me for 20 minutes or so, and the sensation was oddly gratifying. It dawned on me that, in my own way and for the first time in my life, I was giving a soldier comfort on the eve of going to war.

Martinez eventually snapped both of us out of our reverie by commanding Lucky to lay down at



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW (ABOVE), COURTESY OF U.S. WAR DOGS ASSOCIATION (BELOW)

his feet. Although the weather we left behind in Spokane was frigid, I was wearing sandals in anticipation of the warmer temperatures we were bound to find in Phoenix. But here, in mid-flight and at soaringly high altitude, my toes were freezing. With Lucky balled up nearby, I inched my digits toward him, hoping for a little reciprocal snuggling. The gentle nestling of my feet against his belly caused him to stir and fix me with a momentary look. The compassionate sigh and shrug that followed was all the permission I needed to indulge in his warmth for the remainder of the flight.

When we touched down in Phoenix, Lucky clambered to his feet, stood at alert, and never looked back. A flight attendant announced over the PA system that Martinez and Lucky would disembark first, and as they deplaned to the applause of a full flight of passengers, I felt my eyes well up with tears.

SINCE THE 9/11 ATTACKS, war dogs have been working harder than ever. The Pentagon reports that more than 2,700 of them—many purchased from breeders in Europe, most of them German shepherds and Belgian Malinois—are currently serving in the military. Quite famously, Navy SEAL Team Six, the covert force that took down Osama bin Laden in May, brought with them a highly trained MWD named Cairo, who, during the raid, helped secure the perimeter of the Saudi terrorist’s Abbottabad compound.

Because of our decade-long presence in Afghanistan and eight-year engagement in Iraq, military dogs routinely serve multiple tours of duty and often have more time in-country than their handlers. The payoff is tremendous, and their work, heroic. “The capability they bring to the fight cannot be replicated by man or machine,” Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander

**Wonder Dog**  
Lucky with Martinez (left) and Fall (right).



### Pound for Pound, the Best

Lucky’s lifesaving work in the Middle East extends a spectacular history of war dog heroics. Although tens of thousands of hounds have served in nearly a century of American war efforts, three rise to the rank of legend.

### Stubby WORLD WAR I

It’s not your everyday dog who “shakes” hands with President Woodrow Wilson. Stubby (pictured at left), a veteran of 17 battles in his 18 months served, earned that privilege with his brave and pioneering work on the Western Front. The bull terrier’s roots are unknown—he stumbled into his military career by stumbling into a training camp in New Haven, Connecticut. His war record, however, is anything but academic, having secured the title of “America’s first war dog” by, among other extraordinary feats, single-handedly capturing a German spy who had infiltrated U.S. trenches on Chemin des Dames, in France.

### Chips WORLD WAR II

You might have heard of Chips. Disney told his remarkable story in the 1993 TV-movie *Chips The War Dog*, which tracked the canine’s exploits in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany, as a member of the 3rd Infantry Division. In one extraordinary incident reported to have happened in Sicily, Chips bolted from his handler and attacked an embedded enemy machine gun crew, forcing it to surrender and saving many lives. For his illustrious and fearless war effort, Chips was awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart, both of which were stripped from him by the U.S. government when it was eventually determined that military war dogs would formally be designated as mere military “equipment.”

### Nemo THE VIETNAM WAR

Nemo secured his place in military lore on December 4, 1966, when he and his handler, Airman 2nd Class Bob Thorneburg, took ferocious Vietcong fire while patrolling a graveyard a quarter mile from the Tan Son Nhut Air Base. A bullet entered just below Nemo’s right eye; Thorneburg was clipped in the shoulder and knocked to the ground. As Thorneburg struggled to call in backup, the 85-pound dog, ignoring his own profound head injury, fought back the advancing guerrillas. Six months later he was bound for the States, where he became the first sentry dog ever to formally be granted retirement.

of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, told ABC News a few years ago. "By all measures of performance, their yield outperforms any asset we have in our inventory."

Canines have been used in U.S. military operations since World War I. According to the Department of Defense, 50,000 trained dogs were deployed as sentries, scouts, ammunition car-

riers, and messengers during that early-20th century conflict. In the 1930s, the German military opened a large training facility in Frankfurt and amassed a corps of

On a deployment in Iraq, Lucky and a squad of soldiers survived the detonation of an IED (improvised explosive device). The dog, again, lived up to his name.

more than 200,000 service dogs.

In the wake of the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States formally established its War Dog Program, which more recognizably came to be known as the "K-9 Corps."

Dogs were not only deployed in World War II, but in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well. Today, all branches of our Armed Forces are utilizing MWDs specialized in drug and bomb/explosive detection. On its website, the U.S. War Dogs Association (USWDA)—a nonprofit organization of former and current military dog handlers and supporting members—estimates that there are currently 600-700 dogs deployed throughout the Middle East.

"They guard and protect our military personnel as they were trained to do," says Ron Aiello, a Vietnam veteran and president of the USWDA, "with courage, loyalty, and honor."

THE AIR FORCE trains and oversees most of the dogs in the armed services at the 341st Training Squadron at Lackland Air Force Base, in San Antonio. That is where Lucky was trained before transferring to his permanent home at Spokane's Fairchild Air Force Base. On average, these dogs serve until the ages of 8 to 10, depending on their health and disposition.

Lucky is something of a legend among Air Force dog handlers for his longevity and multiple tours of duty. In the three years since my chance encounter with Lucky, I've kept track of his adventures with the help of the welcoming folks at Fairchild.



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Shortly after that day we met in 2008, Lucky set his paws on the ground in Afghanistan. It was his second tour of duty in the region. On a routine patrol of the base where he was stationed, Lucky signaled to Martinez that he'd detected something threatening. There, attached to one of the base's generators, was a cache of explosives. Lucky's reward for that

routine bit of lifesaving work? A steak dinner.

On a subsequent deployment, in Iraq, Lucky and a squad of soldiers survived the detonation of a

Between 1971 and 1973, approximately 2,700 military working dogs were either turned over to the South Vietnamese Army or let go. They never came home.

roadside IED (improvised explosive device). The dog, again, lived up to his name and escaped without a scratch.

When I called the 92nd Security Forces Squadron at Fairchild in the fall of 2010, I learned that Lucky's roll of the dice had hit seven once again. His skin cancer had returned—this time in his other rear leg—but he beat it with the help of a vet who delicately excised the malignant tumor. It was this second run-in with cancer that provoked talk among Fairchild's dog handlers of retirement for the then 10-year-old trooper.

Not surprisingly, Lucky bounced back and, in January of this year, received orders for his fifth deployment, this time to the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan, where he and his new handler, Sgt. Christopher Fall, would spend six months securing the U.S. compound at Manas.

After surviving two bouts of cancer and a remarkable number of perilous deployments, awards in Lucky's honor began stacking up this year. For their valor, he and Martinez were decorated by the American Red Cross with the Hometown Heroes Award. And in September, Lucky was named the Military Canine Hero of the Year.

Unfortunately, other brave military dogs haven't been so blessed in wartime.

**R**ON AIELLO still thinks about his dog, more than 40 years after leaving Vietnam. When he volunteered to be a handler in 1965, Aiello wanted to save lives. Day after day, he and his female German shepherd,

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Stormy, scouted for mines, snipers, and enemy ambushes. They worked closely as a team, bunking together, eating together, even spending their off time together. Their bond was powerful, and Aiello knew his dog would protect him at all costs.

When Aiello completed his military stint in 1967, a second handler took over the care of Stormy.

“Without Clipper and Timber,” says dog handler and Vietnam vet John Burnam, “I’d be another name on The Wall in Washington, D.C. I know that for a fact.”

By keeping in touch with fellow Marines, Aiello learned that a third, and a fourth, and a fifth handler had been assigned to Stormy. When he checked on her again, in

1970, the dog was still in-country, which struck Aiello as strange.

“I knew something was wrong,” he remembers, “so I wrote a letter to headquarters, asking when Stormy and the other dogs were scheduled to return. I wanted to adopt her.”

He never got a response. A second letter also went unanswered. In fact, it wasn’t until two decades later, at a 1992 reunion of Vietnam veterans who had served as dog handlers, that Aiello discovered what happened to many, if not most of the dogs who served in that historic quagmire.

With the war winding down, the U.S. government, in the early seventies, began assessing the cost of withdrawal and determined that MWDs would be classified as surplus “equipment.” Between 1971 and 1973, approximately 2,700 military working dogs were either turned over to the South Vietnamese Army or let go, according to Aiello. They never came home.

“I never knew what happened to Stormy,” Aiello says. “She protected me and saved the lives of so many Marines. Vietnam was a very unpopular war, and the government wanted to sweep everything under the rug, so they swept the dogs under the rug, too.”

In 2000, Aiello and four other dog handlers who had previously never met, joined forces to form the U.S. War Dogs Association and set about raising national awareness of the vital contributions of these heroic hounds. Among the USWDA’s goals was to lobby for legislation prohibiting the United States from ever again abandoning its military dogs after



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**RELAX.**

a war effort. In November 2000, President Bill Clinton signed legislation establishing retirement and adoption protocol for MWDs.

A decade later, John Burnam, a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War, began raising awareness and money for an appropriate memorial. Burnam's dogs, Clipper and Timber, were among those left behind. "When military working dogs were classified as equipment, we abandoned them, along with other equipment—desks and such," says Burnam, who,

Burnam has also used his influence to help secure early retirement for a dog whose handler, Cpl. Dustin J. Lee, was killed in Iraq. The 20-year-old Marine was deployed to the Middle East as part of an explosive detection team, along with Lex, a German shepherd on his second tour of duty. On March 21, 2007, Lee and Lex were victims of a rocket attack. Lee was mortally wounded, but Lex—who'd sustained numerous shrapnel hits in the assault—refused to leave his handler's side. Eventu-



**Rare Breed**  
Martinez paws  
a prize from  
the Red Cross

as a handler, served two tours of duty and was twice wounded in combat. "We were forced to leave those heroes behind. But without Clipper and Timber, I'd be another name on The Wall in Washington, D.C., and I know that for a fact."

The national monument Burnam would like to see built—budgeted at \$1.2 million and, hopefully, placed in the D.C. metropolitan area—depicts a military dog handler with the four kinds of canines most commonly used since WWII: a Doberman pinscher, German shepherd, Labrador retriever, and Belgian Malinois. To date, only \$120,000 has been raised, but Burnam is working with sponsors to stimulate funding. (To make a donation, go to [www.jbmf.us](http://www.jbmf.us))

ally, he had to be dragged away so corpsmen and medics could recover and care for Lee's body.

After 12 weeks of rehab, Lex returned to active duty at Marine Corps Logistics Base in Albany, Georgia. But Lee's parents made a special request: They asked to adopt Lex, something rarely permitted while a dog is considered still fit for service. In a moving military ceremony on December 21, 2007, Lex, age 8, was officially handed off to the Lee family—without a dry eye in the house.

"To us, Lex represents what my son died for, and adopting him was like having a part of Dustin," says Rachel Lee, four years after her son's death. "Having Lex has helped us

heal. He has brought us comfort. Lex was the last one with Dustin while he was alive—they would have died for each other. Dustin would have wanted Lex with us.”

**O**N JANUARY 14, 2011, with a clean bill of health and his new handler, Sgt. Christopher Fall, at his side, steadfast and ever-levelheaded

Lucky shipped out to Kyrgyzstan. The two already knew each other and bonded almost immediately. Lucky, by this time, had served nearly 10 years —three years lon-

ger than his handler.

In August, at the tail end of their tour, an Air Force writer in Kyrgyzstan asked Fall if there were drawbacks to working with older military dogs like Lucky. “I don’t think there are,” he told the reporter. “They aren’t as fast as younger dogs, but they are just as reliable .... The benefits are the experience they have. They have been doing the job for so long, it’s almost second nature to them.”

In October of this year, I once again called Fairchild Air Force Base to see how Lucky was doing. Unexpectedly, Sgt. Gerald Martinez answered the phone. I waxed on about our first encounter in 2008, babbling about my habit of tracking Lucky’s doings, and rhapsodizing about how proud I was to have met both of them. My gushing entirely drowned out the silence on the other end of the phone. I waited for Martinez to say something.

Lucky’s cancer had returned shortly after his stint in Kyrgyzstan, Martinez told me haltingly, and his health had rapidly declined. Lucky’s chest began filling up with fluids, making it increasingly difficult for him to breathe. He would not survive another showdown with cancer, his vet surmised, so Air Force officials decided the humane thing to do was to let their war hero go. On Sept. 30, Lucky died while still on active duty at Fairchild, doing exactly what he loved to do.

Sgt. Jesse Adams, Kennel Master, 92nd Security Forces Squadron, says the loss has been felt deeply in the unit: “We are such a tight-knit group that it’s like losing a family member. We are relying

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on each other to get through this.”

Among military dogs, Lucky was notable, Adams says, for how much he loved just being a pup when he wasn't expected to be at attention. “That probably explains his encounter with you—when he wasn't on duty, he loved to play and act like any dog would.”

Adams insists that the importance of military dogs and their handlers extends far beyond the work of locating explosives, munitions, and narcotics. “The team,” he says, “also acts as a combat stress reducer. Soldiers in deployed locations are reminded of home, and of a feeling of normality just from being around these dogs. You can see their faces light up. Lucky provided that, and so much more, for the troops.”

On the phone, Martinez was so aggrieved by the loss that he could not talk about Lucky's passing, and I felt my own throat close when I tried to tell him how sorry I was. Sitting at my feet was Metuka, one of my golden retrievers, wagging his tail and offering his always-present and unconditional love. To lose Metuka would devastate me. How painful, I wondered, must it be to lose a companion who has had your back in life-and-death circumstances on so many occasions?

When I reached out to extend my sympathies to Fall, he said he would miss one of the bravest beings he'd ever encountered.

“Lucky was an amazing dog, always eager to work, incredibly tough and extremely dedicated,” he said. “He was born to love, trained to serve, and loyal to the end.”

*Christina Kelly grew up in military towns from Florida to Washington state. A former journalist, she now works as a communications manager and writes a wine column for several publications. She can be reached at [winewriter@comcast.net](mailto:winewriter@comcast.net).*