

Soldier Dogs

Author: Maria Goodavage

Extract

Regular, Everyday Heroes

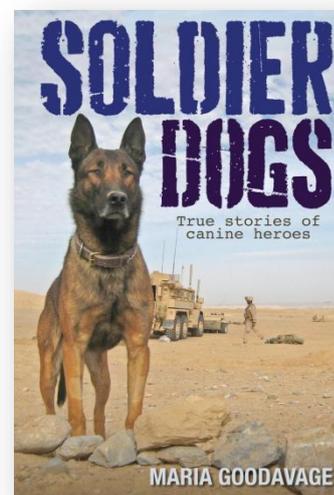
Cairo, reportedly a Belgian Malinois, was part of the SEAL Team Six raid that led to the demise of Osama bin Laden. You don't have to be a dog lover to be fascinated by the idea that a dog – the cousin of that furry guy begging for scraps under your table – could be one of the heroes who helped execute the most vital and high-tech military mission of the new millennium.

As the first details about the operation emerged, it sometimes seemed as though the dog was more the star of the story than the Al Qaeda leader: 'Enough with the discussion of the photos of Osama's corpse,' rallied a blog on the Web site Gothamist, 'we want to see photos of the war dog who helped take him out!'

Though the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group (known as DEVGRU, the more recent name for SEAL Team Six) and the Department of Defense were tight-lipped about the dog's involvement in the raid, the stories poured forth. Most were conjecture presented as fact. According to some accounts, the dog sported night-vision goggles, bullet-resistant body armor, a live-action camera between his shoulders, earbuds to hear whispered commands, and rappelling gear. Not to mention four deadly titanium teeth. Holy canine superhero! Cairo's image made Batman look like a gadget-impooverished Spartan.

Night-vision goggles for an animal who already sees pretty well at night? Fake teeth? Titanium teeth are never preferable to healthy, unbroken dog teeth. They are sometimes used to replace teeth that get broken, as patrol dog teeth sometimes do. But no self-respecting veterinarian would ever yank a dog's teeth to replace them with titanium for no reason, regardless of how durable the metal is.

Concerned that some of this gear might be at least slightly exaggerated, I tried to find out the truth about Cairo, or any of his elite Special Operations multipurpose canine (MPC) brethren working dramatic missions. How hard could that be? They're just dogs, after all. We aren't talking about the Manhattan Project.



While I was visiting Joint Expeditionary Base, Little Creek, near Norfolk, Virginia, my escort pointed at the obstacle course used by the SEALs and showed me the beach where they swim. 'They don't talk to *anyone* about this stuff,' he told me.

These Special Ops dogs are so secret that they aren't there at all – at least some of the time. A former veterinary technician at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, discovered this a couple of years ago when an Army Special Forces dog came in for treatment of some ailment. The staff treated the dog without doing the usual paperwork, and when the tech asked about some forms that were supposed to be filled out, the dog's handler told her, 'This dog was never here.' 'From his tone, it was pretty clear. I never questioned it,' she told me. 'The dog didn't exist.'

Oh well, never mind.

There are real canine heroes—the ones walking point, leading soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines safely through some of the most dangerous parts of the world every day—who definitely do exist, do their jobs in harm's way without fanfare, and expect in return only a bit of praise, a chonk on a ball. They may not jump out of airplanes or fast-rope from helicopters or be rumored to have titanium teeth, but as I've come to find, the jobs they do save real lives and play an increasingly crucial role in real battlefield situations.

Throughout history, dogs have been used for attacking (disemboweling the opposition was once a favorite technique), protection, and sentry duty—alerting soldiers to danger well before they could sense it themselves. They've been trackers, messengers, sled pullers, and first-aid deliverers. As scouts, they've excelled at sniffing the air and alerting their handlers to snipers and other hidden enemies. But there may be no other time in history when their olfactory abilities have been so essential.

'My life is in my dog's nose,' many handlers have told me.

In Afghanistan, where IEDs are the biggest killer, a dog's most important sense is being used more than ever: The most common job of today's military working dog (MWD) is sniffing out explosives. A trained dog can detect and alert to dozens of explosives scents. No mechanical sensor can even come close. CIA director David Petraeus praised their service when he was a four-star general: 'The capability they bring to the fight cannot be replicated by man or machine.'

Air Force Master Sergeant Antonio 'Arod' Rodriguez, who's in charge of advising more than one hundred military working dog teams assigned to twelve air force bases, puts it this way: 'The working dog is a weapons system that is resilient, compact, easily deployable, and can move fast when needed. Nothing compares.'

That's part of the reason dog teams are targets. Not only do these dogs help save lives, but the information that's gathered from their finds can lead – via a very long and involved path – to locating the bigger operatives behind a device. It's not something the Taliban relishes.

Most of the traditional soldier dogs serving in Afghanistan are patrol and explosives detection dogs like Fenji. The 'patrol' part means they're tough when they need to be and can put the bite on someone. I witnessed this rather personally during my research. Most patrol and explosives detection dogs in Afghanistan rarely if ever have to actively use their patrol skills, but their explosives sniffing abilities are constantly in demand.

The lives they're saving are not just those of the troops; IEDs are not choosy about their victims. Children, families, the elderly – no one is immune to their disfiguring, deadly effects. Locals in IED-infested areas are often prisoners in their own small, mud-walled homes. Venturing outside to meet with a neighbor or get some food is fraught with danger. Whole villages have stopped functioning because no one dares to go anywhere.

There's a news video online that really brings the tragedy of the situation home for me. It shows a seven-year-old girl in Safar being rushed on a stretcher to a waiting military helicopter. She had been playing outside with her younger brother when someone stepped in the wrong place. The brother had not yet been found. His body was probably recovered later, far from the blast.

Dogs help normalize life where it has been overshadowed by constant threat of Taliban violence. These everyday paws-on-the-ground heroes and their human partners help clear villages and towns of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of explosive devices. Safar, for instance, had become a ghost town. People would not venture out. The once-thriving Safar Bazaar marketplace had been shut for months; there were so many IEDs that someone would be injured or killed there nearly every day. With all the people virtually trapped in their homes, commerce almost entirely ceased.

The dog teams came in and changed all that. In an operation that took several weeks, the village was cleared, the market declared safe. 'It gives me goose bumps to think about the change. It went from dead to alive,' says Corporal Idriceanu, who spent weeks helping clear the Safar Bazaar with his dog. 'People could live again. I'm honored my dog and I could be part of that.'

It is hard to quantify how many lives deployed soldier dog teams save by way of their detection skills. Figures range from 150 to 1,800 lives per dog. A dog who finds a bomb just as a squad is about to pass by could save several lives, depending on the bomb's strength. Maybe there would have been no lives lost, just a slight injury. Or not even that. It's impossible to count exactly how many people did not get hurt by a bomb that a dog discovered.

In any case, military working dog teams in Afghanistan were credited with finding more than 12,500 pounds of explosives in 2010. The number is probably at least slightly higher, officials say, since dogs are not always given credit for finds. Still, when you think of the damage even ten pounds of explosives in an IED can do, you can get a sense of the importance of these dogs to our military capability.

The Department of Defense has some 2,700 U.S. military working dogs in service worldwide and about six hundred serving in war zones. Another two hundred are contract dogs. Contract working dogs are trained by contractors, and their handlers work for the contractor, not the military. Most handlers in this world are former military handlers. Many got out of the military because the money is purported to be better on the contract side. Others just wanted a little more control of their jobs. If they don't want to go into a war zone, they don't have to. That's not something they could pull off when working for Uncle Sam. The Department of Defense maintains these contracts because the Military Working Dog Program can't supply enough dogs for the current need.

Even as troops start to draw down in Afghanistan, the dog teams don't show any signs of staying home for long. Because of their vital role there, many in the military dog world think the dog teams could keep deploying steadily to the end of U.S. involvement. This could put them at higher risk. Already, seventeen handlers have been killed in action since 2001, and forty-four military working dogs have died in war zones since 2005, the first year for which figures are available. (The number of dog deaths includes dogs killed in action and dogs who have died from heat injuries and other causes. The Department of Defense does not yet have a full report of causes of death.)

Military working dogs are incomparable troops, superbly well suited for their tasks. But there's something else that draws us to these dogs and their stories: For all their remarkable feats, they're not only our heroes, they're our pals. We share our homes and lives with their cousins, whose loyalty, intelligence, and unconditional love make them part of the family. When we see or read about how they're involved in war, the war becomes a little closer. It gives us a little more skin in the game. The irony is that soldier dogs make war a little more human.