

Military Working Dogs

Then and **NOW**

By Ms. Kristie Jeannette Walker

Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom have prompted the United States to develop and procure many types of gear to detect improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Most of the development has centered on advanced technology and sophisticated equipment, but one resource that has existed in our inventory for years—and has often been overlooked as an effective IED-defeat device—is the military working dog (MWD).

MWD History

Although the U.S. military has had MWDs since 1942, they have been largely underutilized in combat operations. MWDs have a distinguished place in our history, and their contributions to past and present conflicts have proven invaluable. Despite devoting every available resource to the effort, we have yet to duplicate

the canine's keen sense of smell, hearing, and sight through modern technology. The basic abilities of MWDs have remained consistent, and recent training enhancements have helped develop and maintain their effectiveness. Today's MWDs closely resemble those of the past, and we find ourselves facing the same challenges as our honored veterans. A brief look into our history will show how we can take lessons learned to effectively integrate this battle-proven technology into today's contemporary operating environment.

World War II Roots

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army's so-called K-9 Corps began with the Quartermaster Corps in March 1942. The Quartermaster Corps trained dogs and the Soldiers who were their handlers and was responsible for the first Army doctrine



Left: A military working dog and his handler in Vietnam.

Above: The combat tracker team works in II Corps during the Vietnam War in 1967.

on MWDs—Technical Manual 10-396, *War Dogs*, published on 1 July 1943. This doctrine primarily addressed the basic care and training of war dogs and did little to outline limitations in areas of employment. By 1946, more than 10,000 dogs had been trained for duties including mine detection, messenger, and scout/patrol, though it is estimated that 9,300 of these dogs were trained for sentry duty. In 1943, the use of MWDs shifted from sentry use in a garrison environment to tactical use in combat. The first experiment conducted by Army ground forces was in the South Pacific. Eventually, 15 war dog platoons were stood up, and more than 400 dogs saw duty in the Pacific and in Europe. At the end of World War II, training of all MWDs ceased, with the exception of sentry dogs.

Vietnam Lessons Learned

In 1961, the capabilities of dogs in tactical operations was explored again and the Vietnam War became (and remains) the largest deployment of MWDs. It is estimated that more than 4,000 dogs and 10,000 handlers across the Services were employed. The lessons learned from these MWDs and their employment could prove significant in avoiding similar obstacles and maximizing the effectiveness of this resource as once again the U.S. military shifts to the tactical use of dogs.

Sentry dogs provided a great psychological deterrent and were extremely effective in military police operations. However, one of the most important lessons learned was that the effectiveness of the sentry dogs was greatly affected by the length of time that a handler was assigned to the same dog. The performance of a sentry dog was impaired immediately when reassigned to a new handler. Also, many dogs died from heat stroke due to lack of proper acclimatization to their new environment. All four Services employed sentry dogs throughout the conflict, but their capabilities were not clearly understood and their employment considerations were never clearly defined. Too often this led to breaches in security and left bases open to attacks.



Photo by Specialist Aubree Rundie

A Soldier hooks the hoist harness to another Soldier and his military working dog.

The first major tactical deployment of scout dogs in Vietnam provides lessons learned that—if applied today—could still prove valuable to today’s MWD program. The lack of doctrine outlining the effective employment of this new combat capability proved to be significant. The commanders’ lack of understanding of the proper employment of the scout dog teams and their capabilities and limitations limited the effectiveness of the teams. Because the 21 scout dog platoons deployed to Vietnam were assigned on an “as needed” basis, the teams were unable to train with the organizations they were assigned to. Lead time was minimal, which made effective support of these units difficult at best.

Training was modified throughout the war to minimize some of the anticipated difficulties dogs would face in combat. A simulated Vietnamese village was built at the training center and populated with small farm animals and artillery simulators to mimic the distractions the dogs would face in combat.

The dog program was strictly voluntary and the Army faced many personnel challenges throughout the conflict. It was difficult for the limited number of handlers to meet the



Soldiers lower a military working dog from a medical evacuation helicopter.

increasing demand for dog team support. It was imperative that the volunteers have an appreciation and affection for the dogs if the teams were to maximize effectiveness. An additional personnel issue was the lack of experienced instructors. The program grew at an accelerated rate, which made it difficult to ensure quality instruction. It was also noted that the most effective handlers and instructors were those who either had previous combat experience or had been in a military occupational specialty (MOS) that directly supported combat tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Dog team performance was also directly related to the ability of the handler to interpret every nuance of his dog's behavior. If a new handler was assigned to a dog, this lessened the team's performance and reliability. You could teach an old dog new tricks, but could not teach a new handler old behaviors. The importance of determining the type of dog needed to meet mission requirements was also a valuable lesson. It was imperative to select the proper breed for the training it would receive and the environment where it would be deployed.

DOTMLPF Issues Today

Many of the lessons learned noted above have been identified as doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) concerns in the ongoing assessment of today's program. From the Gulf War to the present, we have not strayed far from history. Our combatant commanders are requesting the acute capabilities of today's MWD teams to serve various roles to support the full spectrum

of operations. We have continued to develop "new" dogs whose abilities closely resemble those that have been useful throughout history. Several problems encountered across the DOTMLPF spectrum during the Vietnam War have also been identified today. The United States Army Maneuver Support Center (MANSCEN) at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, is currently working on a capabilities-based assessment of the MWD program, addressing many of these concerns and looking for enduring solutions.

Doctrine. The current doctrine that addresses the capabilities and management of this valuable asset resides with the Military Police Corps. Our current operational tempo (OPTEMPO) has led many units throughout the Army to evaluate the MWD capability and determine their requirements based on individual mission sets. Doctrine needs a revision to provide an enduring solution for all facets of MWD employment. Doctrine is being reviewed to address the expanded list of capabilities, as well as employment across the full spectrum of operations, because teams will work in many environments outside of garrison.

Organization. Organization has multiple facets that need to be explored, and the policy on the assignment of handlers to the units they support should be revised. Military police teams should be deployed as detachments with either a kennel master, training noncommissioned officer, or senior MWD handler. The MWD leaders and handlers understand the capabilities, limitations, and requirements for all facets of employment. Deploying MWD assets in small groups or organizations would enable the teams to be better supported by the assigned unit and help them be

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maintained and used to their maximum potential. There is also an increasing demand for dog teams from engineer, infantry, and special operations forces, which are beginning to see the added value that this capability brings.

One could argue that Soldiers who work with MWDs should have their own MOS. Another lesson learned from our past clearly demonstrates the special skills a handler must possess and the benefits that the handler's experience brings to ensure mission effectiveness and proper employment. One possible solution would be to convert dog handler positions to warrant officer slots. This could also keep experienced handlers in their positions and retain valuable institutional memory.

Training. Training today is constantly being adjusted, as it was during the Vietnam War. However, today's problems are much the same, as we once again deploy teams for tactical use. MWDs still face the challenge of becoming acclimated to their environment and ignoring the distractions of a combat zone. The current OPTEMPO is also placing significant strains on personnel when trying to identify qualified handlers and instructors with theater experience. The immediate fielding of new canine capabilities has also led to larger gaps in experience between senior handlers and kennel masters and newly certified handlers. A longer period of time between initial certification and deployment could help new handlers become more familiar with the nuances and change-of-behavior patterns of their assigned dog, which could improve team effectiveness. This knowledge and advanced handling skill is imperative in combat operations. Deployed handlers should be able to reach back to a more experienced Soldier in order to identify performance problems or training solutions to maintain the team at a high level of performance.

Materiel. Materiel issues that are significant in today's MWD program do not come as a surprise. The procurement and acquisition of the right breed of canine still remains an issue. The dogs undergo rigorous training and must have an innate ability to learn the tasks at hand. These are abilities found only in dogs of the highest breed standard and genetic makeup. Today's operational environment is much different from that of the past, which has led to equipment shortfalls and the need to develop new scent kits. The equipment is necessary for optimum care and maintenance of this capability, and the scent kits are imperative to maintain the reliability of the MWDs. MANSCEN is pursuing the acquisition of such kits, as well as other equipment to enhance the deployment and execution of the team's mission. The United States Army Veterinary Service is also working closely with MANSCEN

to identify and equip teams with much-needed chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear protective measures and expanded first-aid kits for the operational environment.

Leadership and Education/Personnel. Today's leaders and handlers face the same challenges as their predecessors. Handlers must be able to brief commanders on the capabilities and limitations of the team. Leaders at all levels in the Army should be better educated about the availability of MWD teams and the benefits this additional resource provides. They should also be educated on a team's capabilities and limitations, and it is imperative that they are understood before employment. This could be accomplished either by embedding teams into the predeployment training of units, or through the Noncommissioned Officer Education System and advanced officer training course programs of instruction.

Facilities. Some may consider facilities to be a less critical issue in today's program. However, for the handlers and trainers who are dedicated to their canine partners, the quality of facilities ranks among the top concerns. Due to rapid fielding of MWD teams and the ramp-up in production of these teams, some facilities worldwide need improvement. The living and training environment of the dogs is important to their success. These facilities are in immediate need of modernization, upgrade, and expansion.

Summary

At the close of the Vietnam War, it was noted by many that the Army should maintain an active MWD program during peacetime. Many of the capabilities that we seek today have been used in different capacities throughout history. Many of the problems identified in the DOTMLPF domains in Vietnam are still prevalent today. The urgent requests for MWDs then and now have once again brought to the forefront familiar challenges and concerns. MANSCEN is analyzing ways to improve this obviously enduring program, hoping to ensure that future generations of MWDs and their handlers are not faced with the same obstacles. The end result will be the sustainment and improvement of this much-needed capability.

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