U.S. Army Engineer Specialized Search Dogs

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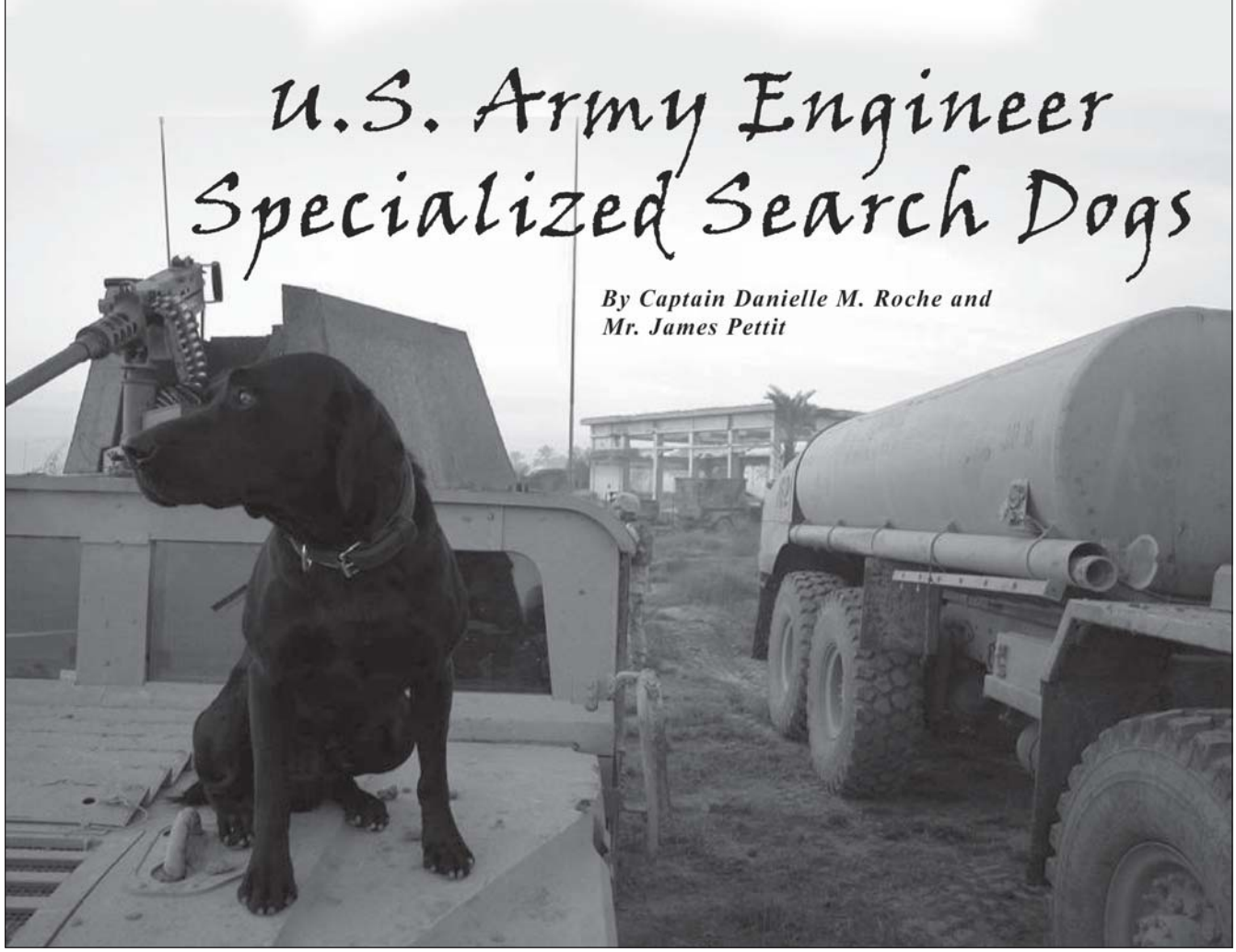

In 2002, the United States Army Engineer Regiment was directed by the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army to establish a unique dog detachment at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Training for two types of engineer detection dogs was specified—mine detection dogs (MDDs) and specialized search dogs (SSDs). Each type of dog would have different capabilities and operational uses but would share the same mission: minimizing the threat to Soldiers from explosive hazards. Since 2003, trained teams consisting of a handler and a military working dog have been continuously deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, served in National Training Center rotations, and provided countless demonstrations and briefings to educate the U.S. military about the capabilities, limitations, and employment techniques of MDD and SSD teams. In 2005, the detachment reorganized and grew to three detachments. More growth of the engineer dog teams is planned to occur in 2008.

While MDDs are trained to find land mines and buried unexploded ordnance, SSDs are trained to find firearms, ammunition, and explosives during route searches, building searches, open areas, and vehicle searches at all threat levels. SSDs always work under the direct control of their handler. The SSD concept is based on the firearms, ammunition, explosive detection dogs developed by the British Army for use in counterterrorist operations. The United Kingdom (UK) is currently the world leader in training explosive detection dogs and produces some of the highest quality dogs available. Using the knowledge base and experience from the UK, the U.S. Army hired several retired UK dog trainers to serve as instructors for the United States Air Force SSD course at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, and the United States Army Engineer School MDD course at Fort Leonard Wood.

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The four-month SSD course trains combat engineers along with Marines, Airmen, and military police Soldiers. Before the training moved to Lackland Air Force Base, the training was performed at Fort Leonard Wood, where three graduating classes trained a total of 21 Soldiers to be SSD handlers.

To obtain the maximum value from the services of trained MDD and SSD teams, it is essential to have a sound understanding of the capabilities and conditions for their employment. Both types of dogs provide a fast and efficient detection capability that can save lives. They have excellent mobility and utility over ground that is not accessible to vehicles and other mechanical clearance and detection

A handler and his SSD search an area for suspicious devices.

equipment. They can detect a device without touching the device itself, providing safety to the handler and those around them. The dogs can recognize mines, unexploded ordnance, explosives, firearms, and ammunition by the distinctive odor of the explosives or other components of the devices. The dogs then show a change in behavior, recognizable by the handler, indicating that they have discovered a scent they have been trained to locate.

Using dogs is much faster than using mechanical or manual searches and reduces the time spent on searches. However, the actual continuous working time and the number of tasks that the teams can perform will depend on the ability and character of the individual dog. Engineer dogs are trained to be bold, to be steady under gunfire, and not to be distracted by other animals. They can work in areas and situations where personnel, movement, and noises are present. It is imperative to note that dog teams are not a stand-alone system for conducting detection operations. The teams require security at all times, and may often require an escort to assist in maneuvering through areas. If the mission dictates that an obstacle or threat must be cleared, engineers or explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) personnel will be required. Dog handlers are not trained for deactivating, destroying, or clearing obstacles or threats.

One challenge to the use of dogs in detection operations is the fact that a dog can only be handled by one Soldier at a time. Because of the extensive training and the rapport that the team must develop, there is only one handler per dog and one dog per handler. Dogs may suffer a lowering of performance if excessive distracting elements are present, may be reluctant to negotiate areas that may prove physically harmful, and may be of little value for searching persons. The dogs are trained to work with Soldiers who always carry weapons and explosives, so using the dogs to search persons could confuse the dogs.

Commanders are encouraged to request SSD teams before entering areas with a high probability of encountering improvised explosive devices (IEDs), weapon caches, or explosives. Once a team is assigned to support a mission and the handler is briefed, the commander should obtain the handler's recommendations for the most effective employment of the team and the best working positions, consistent with the factors that influence the dog's detection capabilities. The dog team should participate in any mission rehearsals. The commander must ensure that security and safety are provided for the team at all times. For extended missions, dog teams require administrative, logistical, and operational support. They also require veterinary support throughout a deployment, but the United States Army Veterinary Command handles this at most deployment locations. The engineer dog detachments have assigned veterinary technicians that deploy with the dog teams. The teams deploy with field expedient kennel facilities sufficient for short-term operations but require semipermanent facilities for long-term operations.

Based on the support requirements detailed above, SSD teams usually are based at forward operating bases. This allows SSD handlers to conduct the required realistic training and gives them access to theater-specific firearms, ammunition, and explosives to maintain the proficiency of the dog teams for maximum mission effectiveness. It is in the commander's interest that the dogs be familiar with every known explosive and other casualty-producing device that the unit may encounter. Although the dogs receive continuation training when not on missions, the handlers' access to the latest items is limited. When possible, supported units should provide samples of any new or different devices encountered in the field so the dogs can become familiar and proficient with finding them. EOD units can best assist the dog teams with specific training aids.

Lastly, before a dog is introduced to a new operational environment, the team should be given the time and resources to practice searching under appropriate conditions. This ensures that the dog is physically capable of locating explosives and other casualty-producing devices in the specific theater of operation.

A handler displays buried explosives found by his SSD.

Before a dog team goes operational, several accreditation tests are conducted. Testing of SSDs and handlers is mandatory and occurs in three phases:

- Predeployment confirmation testing in the United States.
- In-theater testing at the base camp or in an established training area.
- On-site confirmation testing before any live operations.

The dog teams have a strict standard of performance and rigorous testing procedures. These can be compared with a driver's license test, which aims to establish confidence in the ability to perform under some conditions without testing against all possible conditions. The same principle applies for a dog's operational accreditation test. Its purpose is to provide confidence in a basic capability to detect explosives. Passing an operational accreditation test is evidence of confidence and trust.

The greater complexity and danger of explosives detection requires that the proficiency standards for SSD teams be significantly higher than for any other type of dog team. Therefore, certification depends on the demonstrated knowledge and handling skill of the handler and the explosives detection rate of the SSD. Handler proficiency is evaluated by having the handler demonstrate detailed knowledge of the characteristics of each of the explosives the team is trained to detect, how these explosives may be used in explosive devices, and specific operational techniques used in the theater of operation.

Captain Roche is the commander of the 94th Engineer Detachment (Canine), Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and is an SSD supervisor. Her previous assignment was support platoon leader for Headquarters, Headquarters Company, 2d Engineer Battalion, 2d Infantry Division, Camp Castle, Korea. She is a graduate of George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, with a bachelor's in health and fitness.

Mr. Pettit developed and stood up the Engineer Detection Dog Program starting in 2001 and is the technical advisor to the Engineer Regiment on the use of detection dogs. He works for the Counter Explosive Hazards Center at the United States Army Engineer School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.