



The Hyrst family and MWD Sandra, a 3 yr old Belgian Malinois they adopted

IMAGE: courtesy U.S. War Dogs Association, Chapter 1



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MILITARY WORKING DOGS NEED OUR SUPPORT

By Gail Snyder

No matter how you feel about the wars in the Middle East, one thing is certain: American sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers are putting their lives on the line 24 hours a day and 7 days a week in service to their country. Every one of those men and women are heroes deserving of our support and prayers.

Fortunately, they do not serve alone and unprotected. They are part of tightly knit groups that watch each others' backs. And there is one class of soldier that has been responsible for saving the lives of more fellow service members than any other: specially trained Military Working Dogs (MWD).

It has been estimated that each MWD saves the lives of 150 soldiers during his or her career and is generally accepted that MWD saved more than 10,000 soldiers during the Vietnam War. Put another way, without MWD there would be another 10,000 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

Yes, the soldier's best friend is man's best friend - the dog. MWD have served as sentries, scouts, explosive detectors, and search and rescue workers in every U.S. war for the past 90 years, as well as in the Secret Service to protect the President.

In World War I, when dogs were not allowed in the military, soldiers smuggled their own dogs into combat. In World War II, Americans were asked to donate their family pets to the war effort. Now the U.S. Military has a special breeding and training program at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, where Belgian Malinois, German Shepherds, and Dutch Shepherds are prepared to be partnered with service members. MWD teams are deployed to every detail in war zones, including extremely remote, isolated, and dangerous front line positions.

However, the sad truth is that the military provides only the bare essentials for MWD and their handlers. It falls to organizations like the one I head - The U.S. War Dogs Association, Chapter 1 Western Region - to pick up the slack by sending care packages consisting of both treats and necessities to the handlers and dogs. Our provisions include a wide variety of essentials, including cooling jackets for greater comfort in extreme heat, booties and doggles, chew toys, and knuckle bones for the dogs; and candy, powdered Gatorade, and moisturizers for the handlers.

The appreciation displayed by the human recipients is overwhelming. They send letters, emails, and sometimes photos, astounded that people here in the states who do not even



Above: Handler Bio and MWD Amber, a Dutch Shepherd deployed in Iraq

Below: Handler Lyman and MWD Grek, a German Shepherd deployed in Afghanistan



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know them would take the time to send care packages. It's a great feeling to know we are making life better for deserving human and canine soldiers.

At the end of the Vietnam War, soldiers were not allowed to bring their MWD home. Those courageous dogs were euthanized or turned over to the South Vietnamese government. In 2000, Congress passed a law (H.R. 5314) requiring the Secretary of Defense to develop an MWD adoption program. Now, when these very special veterans have completed their service, they can be adopted by their handlers, by law enforcement agencies, or by suitable American families. (Information on adoption is available on our website.)

One challenge to adopting an MWD is the cost of transporting retired dogs back to the U.S. If the military declares dogs retired while they are in this country, they become available for adoption. However, when dogs happen to be deployed overseas when they are retired, their adoptive families are responsible for all transportation costs to fly them home. This additional cost can be a barrier to adoption. The U.S. War Dogs Association and Military Working Dog Adoptions (www.militaryworkingdogadoptions.com) are currently in negotiation with Congress to add provisions to H.R. 5314 requiring the military to pay airfare fees for returning MWD from overseas.

If you would like to help Chapter 1 in our mission to support the MWD teams, you can do so by making monetary donations, donating your vehicle, or by providing specific items the dogs and handlers need. The list of needed supplies is available under "Operation Military K9 Care" on our website.

Gail Snyder is Executive Director of U.S. War Dogs Association, Chapter 1 - Western Region (www.chapter1.uswardogs.org). In 2010, the group sent more than 1,300 care packages to MWD/handler teams stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. She can be reached at thebushwoman@comcast.net.

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