



# K-9 COMBATANTS

*Military dogs, working for you!*

BY MATT LARSON

Being a wartime soldier is a hazardous occupation, especially—if you’re a dog. There are well over 5,000 military working dogs (MWDs) in the Middle East right now, each one partnered with a military handler. “These [handlers] are the front men and women, sent in before any other troops are allowed,” says Gail Snyder, Executive Director for the U.S. War Dogs Association Inc., Chapter 1 Western Region. It’s up to the dogs to clear designated areas by sniffing out explosive devices. Even with a 95% success rate, accidents do happen.

It is Snyder’s job to provide support for MWDs, primarily

by sending them care packages when overseas. “It’s about 130° during the day in Afghanistan and Iraq,” she explains. “We’re getting a lot of dogs that are burned from the heat or the sand; there’s no running water that doesn’t have E. Coli, the conditions are very deplorable.” These care packages include such amenities as protective gear, cooling vests, medical care and dog boots. It usually costs between \$100-400 just to send one package. “The government doesn’t do this anymore, so we do it.”

All MWDs are bred and raised at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. After two years of training they’re ready to serve their country and are usually deployed five



**ALLAIRE Jason & Bagira 3**



**LORAH April and ZORA**



**SURBER Shawn & Grek**

or six times before retirement. German Shepherds, Dutch Shepherds and Belgian Malinois are the most common MWDs. Upon retirement these dogs are brought back to Lackland AFB, retrained for domestic living and put up for adoption. A lot of them come back with post-traumatic stress disorder, just like humans, the only difference is these dogs don't have a home to go back to.

For anyone who adopts a retired military working dog, the War Dogs Association will cover food expenses for the first year. The government has already invested \$50-75,000 worth of training for these animals, "You'll have a dog that's got a lot of dollars wrapped up in it," Snyder says. "One that's really trained."

MWD adoption wasn't always an option. "All military working dogs were euthanized before the year 2000," Snyder laments. "It was a real unsettling feeling. There were no post-deployment services." That's what got her so involved. "What bothered me was these dogs being put to death every year, and it still does. It should bother everyone." The War Dogs Association, created in 1999, lobbied in Congress to pass a bill, H.R. 5314, stating that these dogs were not to be euthanized and must be facilitated for adoption. "Which was great," says Snyder. "What we didn't count on was paying to bring these dogs back. Right now we're picking up the tab." Costs typically run at about \$800-1200 per dog.

"This is 100% charity," Snyder explains. "We're a 501 (c) (3). No one takes one cent of anything that comes in—a monetary donation, item donation, anything like that—everything is used to either buy items that these teams need to get over to the Middle East, or to pay postage."

Support is the primary goal for Snyder's War Dogs chapter, but it's tough getting the word out. "Most people don't even know what a military working dog is," Snyder says. They try to get out into surrounding communities, speaking at local service clubs, "but it takes away valuable time of packing a box, getting supplies or helping with an adoption," she says. "There are not enough volunteers to go around. Believe me, we can use more."

The War Dogs Association is providing an important service for our country. They are understaffed and rely on the public for donations of both time and money to care for these MWDs the same as a human soldier. "A lot of people don't know or don't care; they think they're just dogs," Snyder says. "5,000 is a lot of teams to take care of, and it's done on a regular basis. We'd like to see more people step up to the plate."

For more information on volunteering or adopting one of these heroic animals, visit: [www.uswardogs.org/new\\_page\\_34.htm](http://www.uswardogs.org/new_page_34.htm)