

A Soldier's Best Friend: Dogs in the United States Military

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The seven fundamental values of the United States military are loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage (U.S. Army). These values are demonstrated daily not only by soldiers but their furry companions as well. From mammals and birds such as pigeons, donkeys, and horses, to aquatic animals like dolphins and sea lions, many species of animals have served a purpose in the United States military since its beginning (U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center). However, it is the most beloved animal of all that continues to perform life-saving tasks to modern day, and remains a shining example of the military's values: dogs—man's loyal best friend.

Since the dawn of human civilization, humans and domesticated dogs have needed each other for survival, especially in hunting. A dog's excellent sense of smell and tracking abilities paired with a human's intelligence form an unstoppable partnership. Even with rapidly developing technological advancements within the last century, the U.S. military still requires canine services to carry out particular tasks. These tasks typically focus on the dog's olfactory sense for bomb and drug detection, search and rescue, patrol, or even for moral support. The Belgian Malinois is a favorite among the military due to their agility, high energy, and work ethic. Select dogs of this breed are born to be aspiring military working dogs, with training beginning at six months old and ending when they reach about 1 year old (Four-Legged Fighters). They must graduate from the training phase with excellent obedience, the ability to handle various environments, and recognize certain smells to work in the military. Air Force Staff Sgt. Steven Watkins, a military working dog handler, said in an interview that "the dogs are here to find explosives and act as a psychological deterrent. I have personally seen the result of good training save a member's life from an explosive" (Innocenti). Military working dogs serve as both loyal companions to soldiers as well as valuable assets in life-saving tasks.

Cairo was an exceptional and well-recognized Belgian Malinois who played a critical role in the capture of Osama bin Laden during the 2011 raid. Cairo was considered a “one percenter” among his fellow canine graduates during training due to his outstanding work ethic and athleticism (Spyscape). His job was to alert SEAL members of nearby explosives and stand guard towards any targets as members gathered intel. Thanks to Cairo’s work, the mission was successful, and some time after the raid, former President Barack Obama wished to personally meet “Famous Cairo,” as he called him. Cairo’s handler, Will Chesney, later wrote a book that tells Cairo’s story, called *No Ordinary Dog*.



Cairo.

Conan was another famous working dog who served in 50 combat missions, including the 2019 Barisha raid in Syria. During this raid, Conan chased Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a previous leader of ISIS, down a tunnel where he tried to escape before detonating a suicide vest, resulting in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s death (Isaac-Jimenez). Conan survived, but sustained injuries from contact with live electrical wires during the mission. Conan received treatment and was back on duty, and even received a dog version of the Medal of Honor at the White House (Taylor).



Conan being awarded a Medal of Honor.

Cairo and Conan were just two examples of 1,600 extraordinary military working dogs that are in service. Time and time again, these dogs prove to be highly valuable assets to the military both in and outside of combat missions, yet there is controversy on whether animals should be used in the military at all, due to the high risks involved. Air Force Senior Airman Noah Medor, a dog handler with the 379th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron, said in an interview, “Not everyone realizes that the dogs we train are not our pets. They are government assets, just like airmen. And because they are government assets, they are exposed to the same dangers we are, if not more” (Innocenti). One of the most common jobs of military working dogs is the detection of hidden weaponry and enemies, in addition to the exposure of potentially dangerous substances, which places these dogs in dangerous positions. In addition, some people argue that dogs have no choice as to whether they enlist or not; they may be injured or killed as a result of being commanded to do risky tasks. It is important to note that working military dogs are given fair treatment while in and out of the military. They share close bonds with their handlers, fulfilling emotional needs, as well as specialized medical care, nutrition, and equipment, such as bulletproof vests. When these dogs retire, it is ensured that they are properly

honored, and most are adopted by welcoming homes or their handlers. In addition, dogs' enhanced senses and tracking abilities have proven to save countless lives and change the outcome of several missions. Dogs are seen as heroes to the military, just as soldiers are.

While military working dogs may not always receive recognition, their contributions can be just as valuable as any soldier's. There is no other animal that demonstrates the key values of the military like dogs do. They are driven not by reward or honor, but by love, selflessness, and loyalty to their handlers, making them true heroes at heart. Just as a soldier is loyal to their country, a dog is just as loyal to its handler.

Sources

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