



Along Ancient Smuggling Routes

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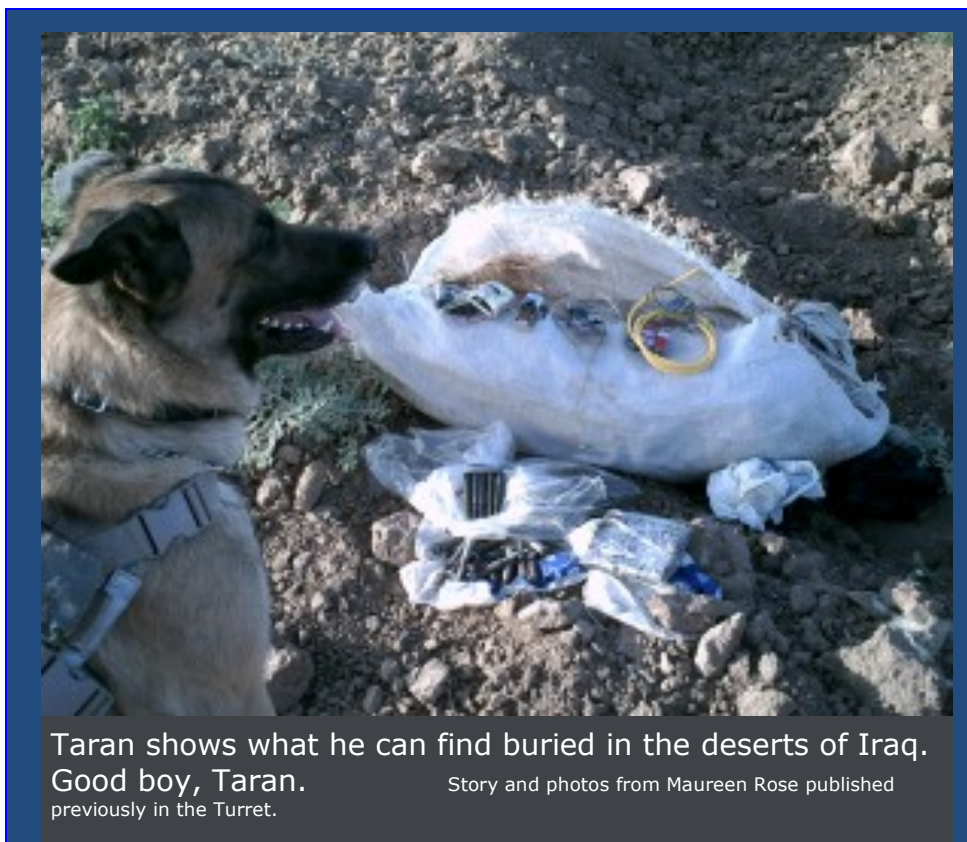
Marine Dog Handlers 8

Thanks to all of our supporters who worked so hard to ensure that our handlers had a Merry Christmas.

We sent packages to handlers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Please know that your donations made all of the difference. From the \$5 monthly donation up to the \$500 donation. All were needed and appreciated.

We thank you!



Taran shows what he can find buried in the deserts of Iraq. Good boy, Taran. Story and photos from Maureen Rose published previously in the Turret.

by Dixie Whitman

I first met Taran and his handler, John Mras, via their wonderful kennelmaster at Fort Knox. Every time the kennelmaster had a new dog team deploy, he would email me their address and tell me they were deployed and would certainly enjoy one of our MWD TSA packages, "if we were still sending them".

I introduced myself to John and asked about where he was, what type of dog he worked and what he needed. His response came back, in part, "Thank you

so much for the support. I am in a tiny, tiny post on the Syrian border (could throw a rock into Syria), northwest of Mosul by a town called Rabiya. I still haven't been able to find the town on any online maps."

Not one to back down from a geographically thrown gauntlet, I finally tracked down the remote spot on a map that he called "home".

Home being a relative term, as we learned that this location was based at a centuries old smuggling route where bad things could, and often did,

happen. We also knew that this team was literally at the end of the supply chain and probably in greater need than others at the larger bases. So we sent a lot of support for both Taran and John, along with some other dog teams that rotated through this remote location with them.

Please enjoy the story and photos of John and Taran provided by Maureen Rose of the Turret Newspaper at Fort Knox. The photos of Taran searching on a CSX train were fascinating and I felt sure our supporters would enjoy learning more about this amazing team.

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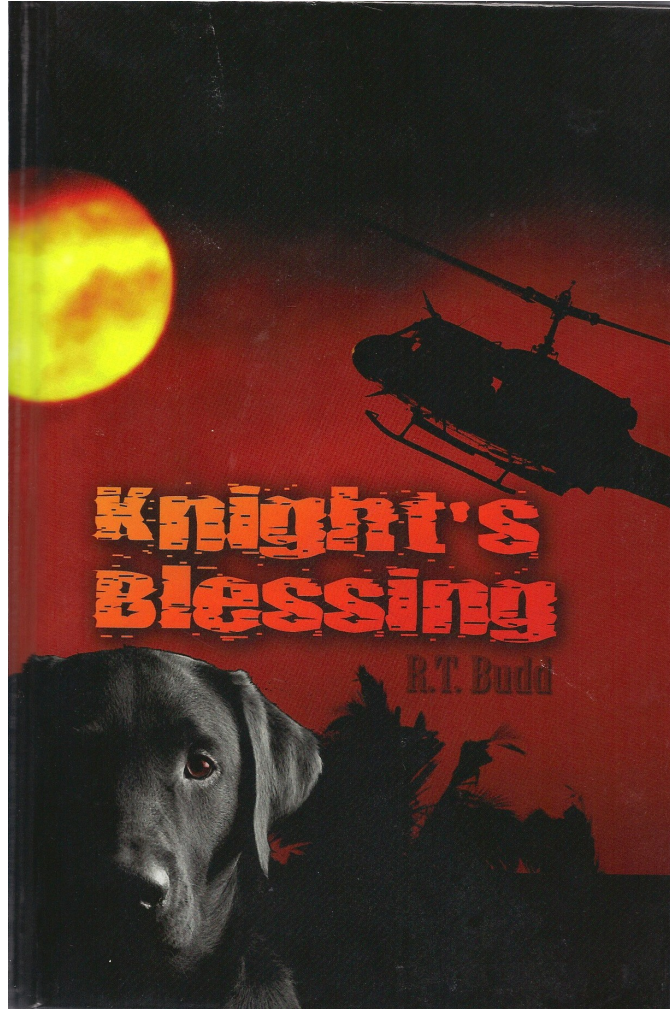
R. T. Budd Entertains



Author R.T. Budd began his military career as a veterinary technician and volunteered to join the 62nd Combat Tracker Team in Vietnam. His book, [Knight's Blessing](#), uses experiences with his Combat Tracker Platoon as an inspiration so realistic dialog and situations are addressed in this work. Below are two chapters edited to a "G" rating. [Knight's Blessing](#) is available at www.amazon.com

37-The Marrakesh Express

The jeep pulled up beside a huge hanger on the flight line. A short distance away sat a helicopter, its whirling blades beating the air into a frenzy. MARRAKESH EXPRESS was painted on the nose of the chopper, in bright yellow letters. For an instant, I thought I heard Crosby, Stills, and Nash, harmonizing in my head. *Don't you know we're riding on the Marrakesh Express...Don't you know we're*



riding on the Marrakesh Express... They're taking me to Marrakesh...All aboard... In spite of my geographical ignorance, I knew the helicopter wasn't bound for Marrakesh. I had no idea where Marrakesh was, at the time, but as a Guardian, I know everything now, geographically speaking, that is.

A door gunner from the noisy contraption leaned out from behind his M-60 machine gun mount, and signaled us to board.

"Hang on to your hat, Doc," Bass warned, "and

stay away from the rear rotor blade, if you want to keep your head connected to your shoulders!"

Cautiously, I followed the rest of the team to the chopper, and climbed aboard, only to discover, there were no seats. "I guess this is economy class," I yelled to Bass.

"What?" Bass replied. It was nearly impossible to hear anything.

"Never mind," I said, plopping down on the bare, aluminum floor.

The door gunner repositioned himself in the helicopter's starboard well, directly behind his machine gun, and spoke into the microphone attached to his flight helmet. A moment later, the blade pitch changed, and the machine lifted slowly upward, and forward.

Medina held Blackie's leash tightly as the dog lurched toward the open doorway, tail wagging and ears flapping in the breeze.

"The dogs really like these chopper rides," Medina said, over the rushing rotor wash.

"Yeah, I can see that," I replied, wondering if the dog would drag his handler right out the open doorway.

The helicopter glided down the airstrip, dipping its nose slightly downward, and gaining speed, and altitude. Up, up, we went, clearing the base perimeter, then, flying over the small village of Phouc Vinh itself. Higher and higher we rose, farther and farther from the safety of terra firma. As I ventured a glance over the edge of the doorway, I saw hundreds of small, water-filled craters, etched into the earth, by high-explosive, artillery rounds, fired from Camp Gorvad. For miles around, it looked like another world. If it weren't for the clear, blue, aquatic pools, and surrounding lush, jungle vegetation, the barren landscape might have been mistaken for the gray pocked surface of the moon.

Suddenly, the helicopter shook violently. It was a brief experience, and of no conse-

with Knight's Blessing

quence to a seasoned flyer, but it made my stomach churn, nonetheless. I swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the enormous lump in my throat.

"When do they close the doors?" I asked with some concern.

"Ain't no doors to close," Bass informed me.

"No doors, huh?"

"Not anymore," Bass elaborated. "These babies used to have doors, but a couple of them vibrated off some of the choppers, and messed up the rotor blades. Caused some pretty bad accidents from what I heard, so, they took the doors off, permanently."

"Oh, yeah?" I said, retreating toward the center of the helicopter.

"Not to worry, Doc," Bass smiled, confidently, "you can't fall out. The centrifugal force keeps you in." Bass stretched his arms high over his head like a dare devil on a roller coaster ride. "Look mom, no hands!"

"Right," I said skeptically, grabbing a firm hold on one of the tie-down rings bolted to the metal floor. Centrifugal force, or not, I wasn't about to test the laws of physics if it meant my being the central component of the experiment.

The craft veered again, as it encountered a strong, wind gust. While my wavering bowels headed for another time dimension, I closed my eyes tightly, hoping to regain my composure. Instead, I imagined

myself being sucked down inside the spinning funnel of a dark, endless, churning whirlpool as CS&N sang on. *Don't you know we're riding on the Marrakesh Express...Don't you know we're riding on the Marrakesh Express... They're taking me to Marrakesh...All aboard...*

38-Charlie Alpha!

Sometime later, the chopper began a slow descent. For the first time since arriving in Vietnam, I sensed the seriousness of the situation. This was no game. I was on board a combat aircraft, preparing to dive into a throng of enemy soldiers! They weren't waiting with open arms, a smile, a friendly handshake, a hug, and a kiss! They weren't the Welcome Wagon lady bearing fruit baskets, and discount coupons. They wanted my flesh and blood! In a few minutes, I might be lying on the ground, ten thousand miles from home, severely wounded or worse.

"What am I doing here?" I whispered, out loud.

Fear not, Steven, a mystical voice answered. I opened my eyes, and looked around. You must trust in me, Steven. I will protect you as a mother protects her children. Whoever was doing the talking, sure the heck wasn't on the helicopter! No harm will come to you. Believe in me, Steven. Believe.

Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by an invisible force,

as if some omnipotent power had placed an impenetrable shield around me. Moments earlier, I honestly feared my impending demise, but, now, I was strong, confident, and even euphoric about my future. Somehow, I felt secure from the clutches of the Grim Reaper. I guess it was what some people might call a religious experience. Guardians wouldn't call it that, but I wasn't a Guardian then. As I sat there, on the floor of the gyrating helicopter, surrounded by my teammates, yet, strangely alone, I began to ponder the notion of immortality.

"Butterflies?" someone inquired, from a distant world.

My trance was broken by Christian Bass, a mere mortal.

"No way," I replied stalwartly. To illustrate my conviction, I slid forward several feet, and perched boldly in the open doorway, between Medina, and the door gunner, just as the helicopter swung hard to starboard, beginning a sharp descent. I didn't fall out, and even if I had, I knew all I had to do was spread my arms wide, like a giant eagle soaring through the heavens, and glide, ever-so-gently, to the safety of the earth below. I was indestructible. From that point forward, I never again feared for my safety in Vietnam. That would, eventually, become my downfall.

The helicopter swooped down, toward an

open clearing. Moments later, the door gunner waved us out the door. I bailed out of the mechanical bird, landed upright on my feet, dropped to my knees, and lunged forward onto my belly. Low crawling at the speed of light, I found an accommodating clump of bamboo trees, and halted, swinging my CAR-15 into firing position. It was a letter perfect, combat assault, just like they taught in basic training. I was alive and ready to engage the enemy. As I lay on the L.Z., thoroughly prepared for the coming battle, it was strangely quiet. I peeked around the small thicket of bamboo trees, hoping for a better view of the battlefield. There wasn't any movement in my field of vision; no Viet Cong soldiers popping up and down like the green, plastic targets on the firing range back in basic training. There were no signs of confrontation anywhere. I was puzzled by the silent reception. Where were the thundering mortars, the flying shrapnel, the cracking rifles, the whizzing bullets, the blood curdling screams of men applauding in agony?

"Applauding in agony?" I muttered to myself. Slowly, I looked back over my shoulder. Directly behind me stood Chapel, Burdon, Medina, and Bass, all clapping their hands together in hysterical approval. Blackie, our Labrador retriever, bounded over to me, and playfully licked my crimson face.

"Excellent technique, wouldn't you agree, gentlemen?" Medina teased.

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John and Taran Train

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Mras and Taran doing joint training with CSX S.W.A.T. members. Using a CSX train on Fort Knox last year.

By MAUREEN ROSE via The Turret

Just as military training has adapted to changes in warfare, military working dogs have also been adapted to the trends of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Staff Sgt. John Mras and his specialized search dog, Taran, returned to Fort Knox’s 513th Military Police company April 8 after a year-long tour in Iraq. Taran, an 85-pound Belgian Malinois and German shepherd mix, is a 4-year-old MWD. The specialized part of Taran’s moniker means he is very good at finding weapons, explosives and ammunition—and in general, the components of improvised explosive devices, the bane of GIs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Unlike most MWDs, however, Taran searches off-leash.

By searching off-leash, the dog covers more ground—literally—and he does it much

faster than a leashed dog could with a two-legged handler. He is often called upon to search an entire wadi, which has become a favorite spot for terrorists to hide their explosives, as well as a frequent choke point for traffic, creating the deadly recipe for an attack against American troops.

Not only does Taran have the training to understand what he’s searching for, he is at liberty to follow whatever scent trail he detects and he does it all 200 to 300 meters away from his handler. The only limitation is line of sight and range of voice commands.

An SSD’s ability to search without his handler on his tail, so to speak, gives the handler a wider margin of safety should the dog detonate an IED.

Mras controls Taran with voice commands and hand signals. If he wants Taran to search on the opposite side of a highway—a common sce-

nario in Iraq—he tells Taran to “move over” and then moves in the direction he wants Taran to mirror.

“In the states, it’s a point of pride among SSD handlers to see how far out the dog will work away from us,” said Mras. “But in theater, we keep (the dogs) closer due to the higher risk.”

Most MWDs are permanently assigned to a kennel and adjust to new handlers as they come and go with career assignments.

However, because Mras and Taran work so closely together, they need a stronger bond, so—like other SSD dog teams—they will stay together for the duration of their careers.

During their recent deployment, Mras and Taran were credited with two finds. The “best” cache was a nondescript sack buried on sandy farmland; the bag contained 50 pounds of explosives, six feet of detonation cord, 30 rounds of sniper ammunition, two homemade IED shells, four fake pass-

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Christmas Care Packs 2010



Angie Shiplett, center, spearheaded a product drive to get Starbucks coffees into the care packages. With the support of the store manager, Terry Moon, and the baristas from the Jonesboro Rd. Starbucks in McDonough, GA, many yummy cups of instant coffee were included in dog handlers' Christmas stockings this holiday season.



Brent McGlothlin, Ann Wilkerson and Jerry Whitman are as busy as Santa's elves preparing Christmas care packages which were shipped to dog teams in harm's way. Doggy grooming, dog gear, snacks, Starbucks coffees, games and t-shirts are all donations that were sent. Multiple trips were made to the Post Office to ship off all of the goodies.

We got notes of thanks back from the handlers as they received their boxes.....

I want to say thank you for the packages you sent. The items sent will be put into good use. I do appreciate how the MWD TSA continues to support the K9 mission, both home and abroad.
Tim

Hey there, just wanted to say thank you so much for the packages we received today, we really appreciate all the support you've given us and all MWD teams. Take care, Amy

Thank you for everything!!!! You have been wonderful to us and the others say thank you, as well.....
Travis

I have received the package and the dog loved it. I will keep in touch and let you know how things are going throughout the year.
Thank you once again, Justin

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ports and four detonators.

That significant find earned Taran his “reward” for the day—play time with his four-inch ball.

“If he finds anything in theater, he can have his ball all day as long as we don’t have any more work to do,” Mras said.

While dogs are not people, they share many qualities. Like people, Mras said, dogs don’t work well when they’re tired.

“When they’re totally rested, the dogs are 95 percent accurate,” Mras said. “But that rate drops with fatigue. It’s up to the handler to say when his dog is too tired to work. And you can’t reason with a dog like you can a Soldier and tell him ‘It’s just one more mile, we’re almost there.’ If you keep pushing a dog, you will miss something. Taran could walk over an atom bomb when he’s tired and he won’t care.”

Toward the end of his tour, Mras was asked to work with the Iraqi police, demonstrate his dog’s capabilities, and inspect the facilities they hope to use for a working dog program of their own.

“Units have lots of faith in the dog teams, and we don’t put teams out there if we’re not confident in their abilities,” said Sgt. 1st Class Barry Lenderman, the kennelmaster for the 513th MP group.

Units often wait for dog teams to tell them if an area is “clear,”

although Mras said he cannot actually say an area is “clear.”

“All I can say is that my dog didn’t find anything,” Mras said. “Even dogs are only 95 percent accurate.”

An update note from John:

“Taran and I have been together for about 3 1/2 years - starting in school when we were both learning the ropes on being K-9. We deployed to Iraq in the beginning of 2008 and moved all over northern Iraq - 1 month in Baghdad, couple months in Mosul, few months on COP Heider in Rabi-yah, and a few months on Sykes in Tal Afar.

Our mission load varied on the season and our location from a couple missions a day to a couple a week. I’m proud to say that we had several finds, but would honestly loved to have gotten more - that is why we were there after all. It gives such a huge feeling of satisfaction and feeling of worth when you find something that would have been used to harm others. It really makes the time over there seem worthwhile.

As far as the support we received from you and MWDTSA, I couldn’t have asked for more. Initially I didn’t really know anything about the organization, but through out the year and package after package, I was able to see just how dedicated you really are to supporting MWD teams and your passion really shines through.

I would have to say that your support helped the most while I was at Heider. We had very minimal

facilities there and your packages were lifesavers. I was so tired of MRE’s and local food that I don’t think the food you sent lasted more than a couple days at a time. It was like Christmas every time I got a package from you because I knew it would be filled with the goods. Oh, and I can’t forget to mention the Furminators. I believe our exact words were “Wow”....it’s like getting the unexpected really nice gift from a distant relative on Christmas. I’ll have to send in pics of me using mine while I was there once I find them.

Once we got back from Iraq, we had some downtime before our PCS here and once here I began preparing to go to annual Certification. The Friday before we left for Certification, I was giving Taran a bath in prep for our flight - don’t want a stinky dog on a plane - when I noticed a very small bump on his back leg. I took him to the vet expecting it to be nothing and we had a sample taken and sent off.

While at Certification however I got the call that it was actually a Mast Cell Tumor and had to be removed ASAP. Crap. I plan on adopting this dog and I do not need him getting cancer and ruining his chances of a couch filled retirement. Anyway, while he was in surgery I noticed another small bump on the inside of his other back leg. That too turned out to be cancer. He has been in recovery for about three weeks now and it’s looking good. Although I do have to come in every eight hours to give him injections;

but hey whatever I have to do to get him healthy. We are non-deployable for three months to see if the cancer returns, but hopefully in about another week I’ll be able to start working him again and getting him back up to par for our next deployment. Believe me when I say that I give him a thorough check everyday for anything out of the ordinary. I’m sure the vet is getting tired of the calls.”

With John’s help, we hope to keep everyone updated on Taran’s health and welfare. We pray they are healthy enough to go on another deployment together.



Thanks to Newnan Kennel Club for their generous donation. “You guys rock!!”

Last Days in "The Stan" ~ Camp Pendleton Dog Handlers Celebrate the End of Deployment

As this article is written, the Marine Dog Handlers from Camp Pendleton's 1st Marine Expeditionary Force are in the process of returning home from a deployment in Afghanistan. MWD TSA will be part of that homecoming celebration, whenever it happens.

This unit had a difficult deployment with significant losses. One of our

contacts emailed the following message "We have been through the highest of highs and the lowest of lows but all our experiences have pulled us together." Forged in fire.

As with any other stressful time, it is always important to blow off some steam together and to end their tour on a positive note.

We are grateful that one of the guys allowed us the opportunity, through his photos, to see this unit in their last days in Afghanistan, celebrating the end of their deployment.

Shown at right is a gas-masked master griller who was putting on the feedbag for others in his unit.

An opportunity to meet the CBS *Blue Bloods* series star, Mark Wahlberg, would have been a highlight in my book. How cool is that? Thanks to Mark Wahlberg and other stars like him who give of their time to support the military. The impact of their support is immeasurable.



Enjoying an end of tour BBQ, a gas masked Marine Handler cooks hearty. Below, Marine handler, James, meets Mark Wahlberg, star of the new series "Blue Bloods" in "The Stan"



A Marine's Message:

"We are looking to be home by Christmas and I cant wait. This has been an amazing opportunity to deploy with this group of Marines."

"We have been through the highest of highs and the lowest of lows but all our experiences have pulled us together."

"I wish I could go into the operations we have supported and I will be able once we are home.....but I'll tell you we have made history."

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Knight's Blessing

"Personally, I think Doc was dragging his butt on the low crawl," Burdon criticized.

"Doc, this is a secure L.Z.," Bass explained.

"Well, no one told me that," I said, wiping dog saliva from my cheeks.

Chapel walked over and stood above me as I lay there on the ground. "The rest of us are heading over there a ways, to find the CO of this outfit. Now, you can crawl

over there on your belly like a snake, or you can get up and walk over there like a human being. It's your choice, Doc, but I tell you from my own experience, that walking is a lot faster!" Chapel wheeled away shaking his head. "Newbies!" he grunted.

Thoroughly embarrassed, I stood up and brushed the dirt from my jungle fatigues. As the others followed Chapel across the field, Bass placed a sympathetic arm around my

shoulder. "You know, Doc, it's a darn good thing this wasn't a hot L.Z. after all."

"Why's that?"

"Look at your weapon," Bass pointed.

I inspected my CAR-15, and I realized my magazine well was empty. I felt like a total idiot. Had I pulled the trigger on my rifle, nothing would have hap-

pened anyway. In all the excitement of the combat assault, I had forgotten to load it. But, what the heck, I was immortal now!



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BY SENDING TO
A FRIEND



Welcome Home, Marines



Dog Handlers from Camp Pendleton arrive in Afghanistan for a deployment that just ended in December. MWD TSA sent a 'Welcome Home'.

Marine Dog Teams in Afghanistan



Marine K9 Teams pose for a group photo.