

## MWD TSA KENNEL TALK

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## *Joys & Challenges of Being Female K9*



**Having trained dogs and been around excellent animal trainers for many years, it did not surprise me that some of the most dedicated dog handlers that I've met are female.**

**Please note our new general information contact email. If you have any questions, please email us at: [info@mwdtsa.org](mailto:info@mwdtsa.org) and a member of our Board of Directors will respond to you. Of course, if you have any urgent issues, you may still contact us at 404-451-2539.**

By Dixie Whitman

Once upon a time in a land far, far away I ran into an Air Force dog handler at an event. As we talked, the handler shared something personal with me. I cannot recall word for word what she said, but it stunned me. It went something akin to the fact that she liked to attend public events because she wanted to represent that she could do the job. I was actually a little confused as to what "population" she was "representing" because it never dawned on me that

anyone would ever suggest that a female could not be a dog handler.

As a long time trainer of German shepherd dogs in obedience and tracking and a frequent attendee at many animal training seminars, many of the best trainers/handlers that I encountered were women. With great communication skills, endless patience and less machismo "women could quietly stand their own in any training scenario, quite often substituting communication for force: positive

reinforcement for compulsion training.

While the majority of handlers are men, the women that choose to take on the triple challenge of military, police and dog handler are sort of unique breed of their own. It seems as a sort of a high wire walk: delicately balancing being female in a mostly male arena. In talking with some of the female handlers that we know, we got their viewpoints as they share the joys and challenges of being a female handler.

## Joys & Challenges of Being Female K9



"If you do not truly love dogs then this is not a job for you. The K-9 world is the best and once you become a handler you have joined a family like no other!! We are a very tight knit family, it doesn't matter what language you speak, walk of life you came from, color of your skin, sex or what part of the world is home, once the word "K-9" is said you are family and will be taken care of. It is a lot of hard work and a self rewarding job, but it is by far the best job to have!!!!"

The women that I spoke with all had a few characteristics in common. Love for their job and their K9 partner and the feeling that they would like to do more. Here are some of the responses that we received to our questions on being female and being K9 from three different handlers, both active duty and retired.

*Kenel Talk: What do you think are pluses and/or minuses to working with dogs as a female? Why?*

Handler:1 "As a plus I get to work with my best friend everyday and help prevent further injury to our fellows Soldiers in Combat. As a minus my work is not always recognized. Being a Soldier is tough enough as a female but being a Military Police Officer and then a female dog handler is even tougher.

A lot of the times our accomplishments are over looked because we are females. Even as a civilian dog handler now my experience and job training are overlooked. Myself and

another female handler have been passed up for promotions because we are females. At this point I'm kind of used to it. I just have to work harder. More often than not, my work ethic proves itself. Maybe not right away, but it does."

Handler 2: "I think the biggest plus is you become part of the K-9 family! Another plus is instant respect after you have been in the program for a couple of years, you don't have to reinvent the wheel at each command. When I was just a straight stick cop, the guys didn't want me to go to certain situations, after I went to school and became a dog handler that changed immediately. My dog and I were first in the unsecured building, and first called for other situations. I believe the minuses have changed over the years in the beginning, for me, I had to prove I could do the job, where as men just said they wanted K-9 and got it. Today men have to prove they can do the job. Of course

there is always the standard - women should make the coffee, do the majority of the cleaning and let's not forget about the dreaded paperwork!!!!!! HA!"

H3: "I would say advantages would be having a partner who is able to protect me. Working in law enforcement that is a big advantage, whether the suspect was male or more than one suspect I always felt more secure. One of the disadvantages would be the "perception" of female handlers being weak. I have personally seen numerous female handlers either outperform or match other "male" MWD teams. I believe your success is based on your MWD team not whether or not the handler is male or female."

KT: Did you have any second thoughts when you requested K9 because you were female?

H1: "Not at all.. I didn't look at it as a "holdback", I looked at it as a challenge."

H2: "Absolutely not!!!!!! I wanted K-9 before I became active duty."



Dog handlers, past and present assemble at Fort Benning.

" We are a very tight knit family, it doesn't matter what language you speak, walk of life you came from, color of your skin, sex or what part of the world is home, once the word "K-9" is said, you are family and will be taken care of. It is a lot of hard work and a self rewarding job, but it is by far the best job to have!!!! "

Millie Canipe USN (Retired)

H3: "At first I had my doubts, only seeing a very few female handlers in a mostly male job. But, those few females were always sharp and on point. I was just hoping I could be able to adapt. I actually met a female k9 handler from the Air Force in Germany during a Customs sweep. I asked her about her job, and she responded, "It's one of the best jobs I've had." I then responded "I wish I could do something cool like that." She then looked surprised and said "There are female dog handlers in the army." At that point in time I was asking to go K9 school."

KT: *What made you choose K9?*

H1: "I chose K9 because it's the best job to have as a Police officer. Again you're working with your best friend everyday for a positive outcome. Plus, they don't talk back. LOL!"

H2: "My father was in the Air Force and just about every place he was stationed they had the Military Working Dogs (MWD). My father said I had a special way with animals and growing up we always had a dog. When I went to the Navy recruiter in Sept of 1981 and he asked what I wanted to do I said K-9!!! He informed me I had to be an E-5 to get into that program. I asked for a job that worked outdoors and within 4 years I was an E-5, however I didn't get to K-9 school until Sept of 1990. The

only other school the Navy had that I wanted was Kennel Master and it took another 9 years to get. I was never discouraged by the years, I feel they made me a better handler and a stronger Kennel Master."

KT: *Are there some handlers (male or female) who have particularly encouraged or mentored you? And if so, how*

H1: "Absolutely. Jodi Stone. She was a peer I had when I was in the Army. I think we motivated each other. It was like a competitive thing. If we keep trying to be better, then we are constantly progressing forward. She's a Drill SGT now. That just goes to show you her character as a person."

H2: "There are many females and males whom have encouraged and mentored me over the years. They gave guidance and direction on the entire MWD program and the Master At Arms (MA) rating (cop in civilian life). Mainly they gave me knowledge and I was like a sponge sucking up every bit I could get my hands on."

H3: "There are a lot of male and female handlers who have motivated me. I would have to say the female handlers I had deployed with: SGT Heather Stephens, SGT Elisa De Valle, MA2 Maria Garcia, SSG Michelle Colon and a female handler I had spoken to in Germany, and years later met her in Iraq as a MWD handler, SSGT Stacy Pulu. From Army to Navy to Air Force, they all



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Brandi Throgmorton, a 379th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron military working dog handler, conducts an explosives sweep on a vehicle at an undisclosed Southwest Asia location March 18, 2010. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Michelle Larche/Released)



Former Army Dog Handler, Heather Stephens, and her MWD Sonny attend one of the events with Governor Sonny Perdue on the steps at the Capitol. The Governor wanted his photo taken with an MWD with whom he shared his name.



### Female handlers deployed to Iraq:

**"There is nothing better than a group of female handlers that supported each other the whole time! All time best part of my dog handler career!"**

**The handlers participating in our article are both retired and active duty: Elisa del Valle, Gloria Molina and Millie Canipe.**

were so different but the values remained the same, your MWD is your partner. And they loved and treated their partners with the most respect."

*KT: What are some of the specific challenges or concerns to working in Iraq or Afghanistan (other cultures other than US) as a female handler?*

H1: "My biggest issue was working as an augment. When a dog team deploys its just you and your dog not a whole unit for support. You have to have good networking skills. Also, when I'm augmented out to a specific unit, which most of time was an infantry unit, not that I minded, but getting them to have available living space was hard. I would often stay with these units for weeks at a time on a small COP.

They barely have room for themselves much less a private room for me and my dog.

H2: I was never deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. I did deploy females to Iraq and I was never informed of any issues because they were female. They were treated as equal as the men."

H3: "We were told that certain cultures had issues to females and our MWDs. There were some instances while in Iraq, a few home owners did not want me or my MWD searching their property, or even entering their house or meeting hall."

*KT: Can you outline missions and results?*

H1: "Often missions included being 'lent out' to units who had Intel and were on search for something specific. It often included long hours of walking long distances and searching areas.

Sometimes though, with an "over-concerned", unit I would get stuck in a truck all day without leaving. There have been a few times where I would get to a unit and they were surprised I was a female and too concerned for my safety. The commander would have me sit in a trail vehicle that followed and I wasn't allowed to dismount unless I was absolutely needed. That's annoying. I liked for people to keep in mind that this was my choice and I signed the dotted line for a reason. To serve my country in absolute not partials."

H2: "I did go on a drug tasking to San Juan, Puerto Rico for 3 months with US Customs and my dog had several finds." (Handler became a Kennelmaster prior to Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts.)

H3: "I cannot comment specifically on this. But we have done VIP missions, time sensitive missions, raids, looking for weapon caches and a lot of vehicle sweeps."

**Sadly, as this article was being written, we received word that Sgt. Zainah C. Creamer, an Army dog handler from Ft. Belvoir, was Killed In Action in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. This is the first female handler ever KIA.**

**We join the rest of the MWD extended family in praying that her family and friends are comforted and that she may rest in peace.**

## Tampa Area Supporters Provide Needed Supplies

A big thank you once again to our great supporters in the Tampa area for donations of needed supplies that will be sent to Military Working Dogs (MWD) who are working in harm's way. Additional thanks to Anna Cooke, Richard Starks and Patt Glenn who coordinated the supply drive and housed the donations for us. We appreciate all of you.

The biggest donation came in the form of KONGs, Grooming Wipes and Doggles. We love these. Why? Because we always get requests for these items. Resilient, KONG toys are the toy of choice for most working dogs. They love the endless hours of play and chewing they get from this classic toy. The dogs are always working their way through their KONG toys. KONGs are sturdy and meant for serious dogs; a big safety plus.

Another favorite of many veterinarians and MWDs is the eye protective gear known as

"Doggles". Doggles are exactly what they sound like, goggles for dogs. While you may see many photos taken of MWDs in their Doggles that are cute, they serve a greater need. In the sand and wind, these are great protectors of eyes, especially for dogs that may develop Pannus or another eye health issue.

Over the course of our trip to various bases last fall, we made it a point to talk to previously deployed handlers to see which items were a home run in their books. One item that got a huge positive response was the grooming wipe. For dogs that are deployed in the field these are a lifesaver. It's not quite the same as giving their dogs a bath, but the handlers say they seem to make the dogs feel better, get some of the dirt and grim away from the dogs face and generally make life easier.

To all of our wonderful Tampa area friends, thanks again for your support!



## Nominate MWDs Who Go Above & Beyond

MWD TSA is looking for MWDs to nominate for the honor of Hero Dog.

Hero Dogs are military working dogs that have gone above and beyond their training, and provided inspirational work ethic in grueling circumstances with amazing outcomes.

If you know of a dog that you think meets these demanding requirements, please send us the name and contact informa-

tion of the dog handler involved. We will contact the handler.

Once we contact the handler, we will be asking for additional details on the dog and the actions that place this dog in a category beyond the norm.

To see previous nominations, please check out the Heroes tab on our main page. That will link you to stories of the four dogs that have been designated Hero Dogs.

We are honored as all three dogs that we nominated to the AKC previously have been recognized in the Honorable Mention, while our first nomination, Rex, was honored as Hero Dog of the Year in 2005 by the German Shepherd Dog Club of America at that national specialty in St. Louis, Missouri.

Please contact us no later than April 30th at

president@mwdtsa.com

### For Smart Phone Users:

The MWD TSA blog may be also read (or followed) on your smart phone by pointing your mobile browser to <http://mblog.mwdtsa.org> Thanks to our great tech guru, Jonathan Wahl.

www.mwdtsa.org

KT: *Any changes that you think happen because you are female?*

H1: "MMM... Changes... no I think it depends on the person themselves to ensure that change happens it doesn't happen on its own."

H2: "Not big changes, just believe other females were encouraged by me to become handlers."

KT: *Do you take the same kinds of missions as males? Are there any Special Ops female handlers, for example?*

H1: "I tried to. Like I said earlier it doesn't always work

out that way. Do what your rank can handle I've always been taught. I ask for them if they give them to me then I need to prove myself so they know I'm capable, if not I won't be given the opportunity again.

Regarding special operations, absolutely not, which is unfortunate. There was a handler who were selected because he was male. He received a mission that I could not work. It was working with Special Forces in Afghanistan. As a female we would never even be given the opportunity to try something like that."

KT: *Do you know of any plus or minuses for other female handlers? Any harassment?*

H1: "Again harassment is a personal thing I believe, as is with anything else., if you lead the males that you work with to believe that they can treat you a certain way, then they will. If there's another thing I've learned since being in the military its not for the weak- hearted. You have to have thick skin, adapt to your surroundings but, if you have respect for yourself, then other people will too. Best I can say as a female handler, I had fun with my job. I wouldn't have traded the opportunity, no matter how challenging it was. It's those challenges that have made me the handler that I am today."

H2: "When I was active duty, (I am not sure about the West Coast) on the East Coast most of the major Inspectors, Pro-

gram Manager and a few Kennel Masters were females. I am sure there has been harassment to some level, but none of which I have full knowledge."

H3: "I haven't dealt with any harassment as a handler, I actually have experienced more as a regular MP. I guess having a 90 plus pound German shepherd looking alert sitting next to you, kinda prevents that!"



## MWDTSA Board of Directors for 2011

President: Dixie Whitman	Contact info: president@ mwdtsa.org 404-451-2539	General management of board with active participation in variety of events and functions. Coordinates communication pieces such as <u>Kennel Talk</u> Newsletter, online Blog at MWDTSA.org and Press Releases.
1st Vice President:: Ann Wilkerson	info@ mwdtsa.org	Events coordinator. Would seek events for fundraising and public education and coordinate our participation. Responsible for tent, tables and other event materials.
2nd Vice President:: Susan Carr	2ndvp@ mwdtsa.org	Responsible for coordinating fundraising, including grant writing and planned giving. Responsible for coordinating publicity and marketing.
Secretary: Rita Richardson	info@ mwdtsa.org	Responsible for official record keeping. Calendar review. Ensures that donors have been officially thanked. Drafts letters & thanks you notes to bases/commands.
Treasurer: Dick Leonard	info@ mwdtsa.org	Primary financial record keeper. Accesses bank account makes payments, pays state taxes monthly, balances account and advises on financial operations.
Member At Large: Veronica Dollar	info@ mwdtsa.org	Care Package coordinator. Responsible for coordination of packages being shipped and the solicitation of in-kind donations for these packages.
Webmaster and Online Store: Manager: Jonathan Wahl	webmaster@ mwdtsa.org	Responsible for management, maintenance of website and online presence.

## *Certificate of Appreciation to all of you!*



## *Thanks to Our T-Shirt Vendors For Their Efforts*

We send a profound thank you to our T-shirt vendors, Isaac and Irene of Christian Print Shop. (Isaac is a Navy veteran from Vietnam.)

We had been in contact with a large group of Marines who were returning back to Camp Pendleton after a particularly hard deployment and had volunteered to send some support for their Homecoming, especially since they had not re-

ceived any packages during their time in Afghanistan.

With the determined efforts of this amazing team, we were able to uphold our support on a timely basis. And, I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

If you have any t-shirt needs, or other printing needs, please check out Christian Print Shop in Alpharetta, GA. They are amazing!

[www.cpsscreenprint.com](http://www.cpsscreenprint.com)



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**We are on the web!!**

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**Follow our Blog for more photos.**

**Sit. Stay. Support.**



PLEASE RECYCLE  
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A FRIEND



## *A Dog Named Ali*



Ali, a U.S. Air Force military working dog, runs to the next obstacle on a training course at Asad Air Base, Iraq, on July 25, 2010. The obstacle course provides exercise and obedience training for military dogs. DoD photo by Perry Aston, U.S. Air Force. (Released)



Ali, a military working dog, takes a break in the shade after conducting a "show of force" patrol July 24, 2010, at Asad Air Base, Iraq. Ali is trained in explosives detection and patrol. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Perry Aston/Released)