

Dog Named Jeff *By Wayne H. McDowell*

Like a lot of the young men of my generation, I spent time in the Army and slightly less than a year of that time was spent in the Vietnam War.

For part of that period I was stationed a small "firecamp," roughly 200 of us or so, and there was also a "camp mutt" called Jeff. Jeff was of indeterminate breed, a medium sized dog, about 30 to 40 pounds or so. He was a black and white dog that always put me in mind of a miniature Border Collie, but with floppy hound dog ears. He had a single toy, a tennis ball, the old off-white kind. When he wanted to play fetch, he would carry the ball around until he found his chosen playmate, then drop the ball at the person's feet and bark until these slow-witted humans got the idea to throw it for him.

Jeff was sort of a camp mascot for us. It was good luck to give Jeff a quick pet before heading out on a patrol, and he seemed to understand that, and to understand what was going on around him. If things went badly "out there" (as they sometimes did,) he would meet you as you came back, running from one soldier to another as if checking, and if someone wasn't there, he would go up to one of his special "friends" (of which I was one) and nudge them worriedly, as if asking "What happened out there? Where's _____?"

We took good care of Jeff. Someone had made him a collar out of an old army belt and we managed to get him a rabies shot and at least twice saved him from being dinner for some poor Vietnamese family. (When "dirt poor" is a step up, concepts like "pet" mean very little.)

One night, the "other team" hit us and they hit hard. Rockets and mortars were coming down on the camp like a hard rain. I can remember feeling the ground shake as if it was an earthquake from their impact. I was

running for my assigned position when a shell (or a rocket, I never found out exactly) knocked me head over heels, leaving me unhurt, but curiously blowing my boots off, but when I got over the dazed "anybody get the license of that truck" feeling, I dove into the closest bunker. It wasn't where I was supposed to be, but I figured I had spent as much time out in the open as I planned on.

In the bunker, was the commanding officer, 4 or 5 other guys and Jeff. Jeff noticed it first. The barrage was falling everywhere but over the wire at the eastern part of the camp. Jeff alerted us to it by running off in that direction, barking crazily and then dashing back to us, as if he was trying to tell us something. We couldn't hear him of course, but you could tell that was what he was doing. Finally the CO ordered some illumination rounds fired over the area.

The North Vietnamese had cut through the wire and were inside the camp. And there were a lot of them. One of the guys in the bunker, a Texan, muttered "Christ, its Alamo time."

A couple of us, including me, were dispatched over to the area to set up a machine gun to try to plug the hole. I didn't see Jeff come with us, but he apparently did. Things got really ugly after that.

But by morning, when the helicopters and reinforcements came, the camp was ours again. It wasn't without cost though. Most of those still standing had a wound of some sort and of course, there were quite a few who were laying silently, without moving at all...and one of those was Jeff, who was laying near the flagstaff, looking as if he had simply laid down for a nap.

There were those who swore they saw Jeff fall while doing some heroic. I never really believed them. And it didn't matter, anyway. We knew that it was Jeff who had alerted us to the camp being penetrated and that was heroism enough for one person...or one dog.

We held a brief conference, (just the enlisted men, no officers were invited) and decided by unanimous vote that Jeff was as much a soldier that night as anyone of us. He deserved military honors as much as anyone.

So someone took a pair of metal snips and cut a "silver star" out of a piece of tin and attached it to a bit of ribbon, which was draped around Jeff's neck. We also attached a genuine Purple Heart to the ribbon. I wrapped Jeff's body in the flag that had flown that night, (this has always seemed very important to me...) and we buried him deep while a recording of "Taps" played and a volley was fired over his grave.

Nearly thirty years later, several of us, who had been there that night, gathered at Washington's Vietnam Memorial. We talked a while, remembering old friends and Jeff's name came up. It occurred to us that we had been young men then, and now middle-aged men, in our 40s and 50s, and that except for us, no one would remember Jeff, or even know he had existed.

That is why I wrote this, and that's why, if you had been at "The Wall" that afternoon, you would have seen a bunch of middle-aged men standing there quietly, with heads bowed, and then slowly walk away, leaving behind them at the base of the Memorial, an old dog collar made from an Army belt, and a battered tennis ball..the old off-white kind.