

War Dogs of the Pacific

By Kerri Danskin

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September 11 is a day when one's mind might naturally turn to thoughts of sacrifice and bravery. What better day, then, for me to blog about a documentary I recently watched that chronicled the faithfulness and sacrifice of the 2nd and 3rd Marine platoons who fought in the Pacific during World War II with their incredible trained war dogs.

War Dogs of the Pacific, directed by Academy Award-winner Harris Done, who has worked with the likes of Steven Spielberg, tells the story of over 500 family dogs that were donated to the military during the war for use in combat. The men who trained and handled some of the dogs tell their touching stories and Done fills in the blanks with historical narrative and stock footage from the war.

You may have missed the word "family" above. Let me just call attention to that again. Most of the dogs in the program were donated by American families who wanted to give something for the war effort. They were sent to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and trained by the men who would take them into combat to serve as messengers, scouts and guards. Can you imagine even for one minute sending your dog off to serve in combat? Do you think he would cut it in basic training? After watching this film, I think we all might be surprised by how much our "babies" are capable of doing.

These dogs, many of them Doberman Pinschers, shepherd mixes, Labs and basic pedigree-free mutts, became just as valuable to their handlers and platoons as their human comrades. At first their handlers were mocked by other Marines who would howl at them or bark when they walked past. But before too long, the dogs were a highly-respected commodity that every division wanted.

The first battle for the war dog platoons was in Guam, where the dogs were lowered into boats with their handlers, swam to shore with them and helped to take the island from 20,000 deeply embedded Japanese troops, according to the film. They also helped in jungle warfare—a then-unfamiliar type of battle—on the island of Saipan in the Mariana Islands. They guarded their men overnight so they could sleep in their foxholes and alerted the Marines when they heard or smelled danger.

Of course by the end of the war the men and their dogs had bonded very strongly. The stories of their return home are incredibly touching. A man who is likely in his 80s holding back tears for the dog he knew more than 60 years ago makes quite a statement about the loyalty and quality of that dog. "I still miss him," says one of the veterans in the film of his war dog.

In the press packet that came along with the screener DVD, director Harris Done says that one of his goals in making the film was to preserve the stories of these veterans and their canine comrades, which I think is such a worthy endeavor as so many of our World War II veterans pass away (my grandfathers, Roy Hugh Walker—a Navy man—and James Clyde Danskin—an Army Signal Corps veteran—among them).

When I say that as a dog lover and an enthusiast of history—personal histories in particular—this film touched my heart, I that is an understatement. Through it I learned so much about the character of our country at that time and the intense fidelity of our service members of all species.

More information about War Dogs of the Pacific can be found at www.wardogsmovie.com.