Dogs in the Military

By Toni M.

The use of dogs in military operations dates to World War I. Formal recognition of military working dogs was established in 1942 through the Dogs for Defense program. This initiative aimed to recruit dogs for the U.S. military's War Dog Program, also known as the K9 Corps. Over time, the roles and training methods for these dogs have continued to evolve, but their importance in military operations remains significant.



Throughout history, dogs have played a unique and valuable role in the Navy; even serving as mascots aboard ships. Dogs provide companionship and improve morale for sailors during long deployments. As cherished members of naval crews, their presence has been a source of comfort and support. In addition to offering emotional support, certain breeds have been trained for specific tasks such as detecting explosives, narcotics, and other threats. Patrol dogs assist with routine security operations, intruder detection, and tracking. Their keen senses and loyalty make them ideal partners for naval personnel.

Dogs undergo extensive training to develop their skills in various environments, including combat zones, and are evaluated on their performance. The program ensures that the dogs are well-prepared to assist in the protection of military installations and personnel. Training for Military Working Dog handlers is comprehensive, too. It covers key areas such as safety procedures, health checks, first aid, and legal considerations.



The bond between handlers and their dogs is vital for successful operations, as the dogs often rely on their handlers for guidance and support.



German shepherds and Belgian Malinois are the primary breeds trained for military service, although Labrador retrievers and German shorthaired pointers are occasionally used as well.

Dogs continue to be an important part of the Navy's legacy and daily life at sea. Thanks to Robby's Law, they are no longer considered equipment to be euthanized or abandoned, but are valued as highly trained and skilled members of the military. The 2016 National Defense Authorization Act mandates returning retiring dogs to the U.S. at government expense.

When a military working dog retires, first priority for adoption is given to their former handler or the handler's family (90% of dogs). The process involves evaluating the dog's health and temperament to ensure it can transition comfortably into civilian life. Many retired military dogs go on to live as family pets, enjoying well-deserved rest and companionship after their years of service. If they aren't adopted the dogs are offered to law enforcement.