

Waiting for the Dogs

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The following three-part story is a real life accounting of how “waiting for the dogs” to arrive touched our three lives while we were stationed at U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Base. We were all assigned to the 635th SPS at U-Tapao and all three of our real life stories touched each others.

Part 1

by Ben Cox

On August 6, 1967, I was re-assigned from Ton Son Nhut AB, (RVN) to U-Tapao, (Royal Thai Air Base) Thailand for the task of assisting in the construction of a temporary K-9 kennel. Upon my arrival at U-Tapao Air Base (635th SPS), I was advised that the Kennel Project was on hold until further notice. It was strange, arriving at U-Tapao and thinking, “Where's the dogs?” I know this is history and I do not blame the 635th Commander but I think it was like this all over South East Asia according to the K-9 handlers I have talked to from the Air Force, Army, & Marines.

Because of this, I was assigned to Flight Line Duties, during the interim, for approximately four months until I had to take an emergency leave home because my wife had become ill and had been hospitalized. Sometime during that 4 months, I was also assisting a MSgt. in writing SOP's (Standard Operating Procedures) for Expanded Security.

In January of 1968, I was returning to South East Asia and the aircraft I was on, landed at Ton Son Nhut with in-coming troops. At Ton Son Nhut, a Security Policeman boarded the aircraft and instructed all Security Police personnel to depart the aircraft. After four days at Ton Son Nhut, I got everything straightened out and I was placed on another aircraft and sent to U-Tapao. Upon my return to U-Tapao, I served a few more weeks on the Flight Line and then was instructed by the Operations Sergeant to report to the Civil Engineer Officer, pertaining to the construction of the temporary Kennel. The Sergeant further stated that the K-9 Group, handlers, and dogs, would be arriving in just 30 days.

I still cannot figure out why it took the Air Force eight months to form a K-9 Section to be sent to U-Tapao. I almost gave up on ever seeing a kennel constructed at U-Tapao, and then all of a sudden we have to go like Hell to put up a temporary Kennel.

On March 24, 1968, TSgt. Tom Swartz, 15 handlers and 20 dogs arrived at U-Tapao at approximately 2300 hours. At this time I became the 635th SPS K-9 Training NCO and remained so until I rotated home in May of 1968 for retirement.

The 635th SPS K-9 Section was my last K-9 unit in the Air Force. The K-9 handlers were outstanding troops along with their first Kennel Master, TSgt. Tom Swartz.

I also worked with A1C Dave Broeker who served as TSgt. Swartz's Kennel Clerk and Dave's assistants A1C Jim Dorris and A1C Recenes. When I first worked on the Flight Line with Dave and Jim, I did not realize that they were Dog Handlers waiting for the kennels to be built, just as I was, until later on. On the other hand, they probably did not know immediately that I was going to be the K-9 Training NCOIC, either. The Troops of the 635th Security Police K-9 Section were always Top Notch! They worked hard to live up to the reputation they so surely deserved.

Part 2 **by Dave Broeker**

I was 19 years old when I arrived at U-Tapao, and only 4 days later I turned 20. It was a long tour, which was strung out even longer by the waiting and the anticipation of the day I would eventually be united with my K-9 Group.

Unlike many of the other dog handlers, who arrived in teams, I arrived by myself. I expected to be met on the tarmac by the Kennel Master, holding my newly assigned four-legged companion by the leash in the left hand and pointing the direction to the kennels with his right.

Instead, I arrived at U-Tapao and was told that there was no K-9 Facility, handlers, or dogs, because construction on the K-9 facility had not even begun. My orders stated that I was to report, immediately, to the K-9 section at U-Tapao and be assigned a Sentry Dog. I had my heart set on quickly adapting to a new four-legged friend and I was ready, willing, and able! But this was not to be....yet!

The nine months to follow, were pure Hell, waiting, and waiting, and waiting, for the inevitable to happen. I got sick of writing in my daily diary "K-9 teams and dogs have still not arrived". Meanwhile, I would have to be content to bide my time. But I wasn't content! I hated the whole stinkin' idea of being sent over to 'God Knows Where', and then having to wait for 'God Knows How Long', to connect up with the K-9 Unit that I was so excited to be a part of.

I was assigned Flight Line duties for the first few months and eventually progressed to work Central Security Control, Alternate Central Security Control, and a few other pretty decent posts while waiting for the dogs to arrive.

One of my very best friends, that I could confide in, was TSgt. Benjamin Cox. Ben always treated me with such respect and always coaxed me to better myself and made me feel proud of my accomplishments no matter how small they were. I always felt comfortable working with him and spending off duty time with him. Ben knew my circumstances and that I had also been a dog handler at Westover AFB, Massachusetts. I found out that he was

also waiting for the dogs to arrive and that he was supposed to be setting up the kennels. I think there was some politics going on because he was also getting tired of waiting for permission to get started.

Finally, on March 24th, 1968, 'our unit' arrived, as they touched down on Thai soil at 2300 hours. I finally was able to make the diary entry that I had been waiting to enter. March 25th: "Today we processed in 15 troops who had arrived at 2300 hours on March 24th."

I had been transferred from Flight Line duties to K-9 and then, on March 26th, it all came together for me. TSgt. Tom Swartz, the Kennel Master who had arrived with the 'First Wave' of dog handlers, assigned ARA (9M72) to me and I felt complete again. Ara was one of the five female dogs that had been sent over to U-Tapao for the U.S. Government to eventually give to the King of Thailand. She was a playful dog and was quick to obey hand and verbal signals. She new the difference between training and playtime and it was always a pleasure to play with her because this was a time when I could actually forget about the stress and the tremendous heat and the loneliness for my family.

I knew that Ara was not completely trained as a 'scout dog' because she was breeding stock that the United States Air Force would eventually give to Thailand to start their K-9. I also knew that I was getting 'short' with less than 90 days to complete my tour in Thailand. I was more than content to work with the dogs and be the Kennel Clerk because I could be where I wanted to work.

Ara made me feel whole because she became the other half our 'team'. I think she was born with a "wooden leg" because she was always hungry and wanted to eat almost anything, that sensitive nose of hers could detect. One of the funniest incidences was when she tried to eat one of the "mangdahs" (a very large flying water bug) and it grasped on to her lower lip. She fought that bug, which wasn't going to be eaten without a fight, until I could pry it loose from her mouth. Her actions were almost like when a dog tries to get peanut butter off the roof of their mouths. It was hilarious! Thinking back, I miss her so.

Later, on May 5th, 1968, A1C Jim Dorris and A1C Robert Recenes joined me at the Kennels to help out. We became quite a team because we worked so well together. The 15 dogs and handlers were now being posted full time and were no longer available to help out with kennel duties. Keeping the kennel, area, and equipment, clean and secure was a full time task for all three of us. Jim and Robert took over when I left for the states and I heard they made the transition to the new Kennels very successful.

TSgt. Tom Swartz, the Kennel Master, made my K-9 tour at U-Tapao very easy and enjoyable. He trusted me and complimented me on work well done which only made me work harder for him. Both, TSgt. Swartz and TSgt. Cox, played major parts in getting me through a rough time in my life.

I helped many of the newly arriving K-9 Airmen to learn a lot of the “Basic” words, money exchange (Baht), and customs. Unlike the English alphabet of 26 characters, the Thai alphabet has 44 characters.

I’m probably always going to be remembered for the time I lost the deuce and a half and I swear that some “camoy”, (thief), relocated it from where I parked it. Fortunately, we recovered it or I’d probably still be paying for it today!

Another dog handler, Harold L. Horn, and I were both from Iowa. In fact we were from towns within 20 miles of each other. I remember writing to my Congressman and asking for an Iowa State flag. I passed that flag on to Harold and always felt good that he would be there to represent Iowa after I had left to go back to the states. A few years later, he showed up working at the same business I worked at. He came walking down the aisle one day and I was amazed to see him there. He had been discharged and was working 3rd shift in the fabrication area. I worked days and lost track of him. I’ve tried repeatedly to locate him but have been completely unsuccessful.

The K-9 group was tightly knit and we took care of most problems internally. We tried hard to support and cover for each other during times of stress, divorce, or loneliness. All in all, U-Tapao was a learning experience that taught most of us how to handle stress and gave us the ability to learn how to make new friends that would last a lifetime. I met a lot of friends and grew up an awful lot in that year and it was a time well spent that I wouldn’t give up for anything.

Part 3

by Jim Dorris

I arrived at U-Tapao in early February of 1968. They assigned me to "A" Flight and sent me to every post on the base to work. That's when I met TSgt. Ben Cox and I think it was over a cool one downtown. I found out he was K-9 and was getting everything ready for the "First Wave". I mentioned the fact I had worked at the Dog School on the AZR course (Medina @ San Antonio) and we knew some of the same people. I told him I wanted a dog. Ben thought there might be some extra or replacement dogs not going to the Thai's.

I'm not sure of the date but, I met with TSgt. Tom Swartz and Ben after the Dogs arrived and they were going to request I be assigned to K-9. I was told after the dust settled and everything was going right, I'd be assigned "Skipper" or one of the others not assigned and in the mean time I would work at the kennel and train with the unassigned dogs.

I found out later A1C Robert Recenes was also assigned. We reported to duty to assist A1C Dave Broeker, the Kennel Clerk, on May 5th, 1968. I remember Dave and the fact that he had been stationed at Westover AFB.

I remember the Earth Mover in the jungle cutting trails for the Dog Post. I believe Tom and Ben took part in that adventure. No offense but, I think a one armed monkey high on Thunderbird would have done a better job. Come to think off it, I think Adolph Coors had a lot to do with that operation.

As most of us know the price of having dogs in Thailand was to give the Thai's, Dogs and breeding stock. I hated to see them go to the Thai's because I heard they ate dogs. I remember the plywood bunker filled with sand and stacking sand bags around it. Robert Recenes and I put that piece of work together in two days with the help of five cases of beer.

I remember the original K-9 building was a wood hootch. We stapled rolls of plastic to the inside walls to seal the heat and moisture out and then we transferred the Base Commander's new window Air Conditioner from Supply to the K-9 section.

Then, there was the time Harold Horn and I borrowed the Base Commander's jeep, which was parked at the main gate while he visited his girlfriend downtown.

My Dad had sent me "Blue Bonnets" seeds (Texas State Flower) just as his Dad, had sent to him in the South Pacific. So, one night while taking rations out, I spread seeds all over the trails and in the jungle. I wonder if they ever bloomed?

A1C Recenes and I would raid Supply every time there was an alert. Then the Supply Depot figured out they was missing things. So, they requested K-9 dogs be posted inside of the Supply. (Let the Fox in the Hen house.) The Depot was guarded by one of us in K-9 like "Woody & Navigator". We would wave as we drove past them or whoever might be pulling duty.

I can't remember when, but they moved K-9 down in the "Red Horse" area. We were next to the Navy "P-3" crews. I loved breakfast. (I remember a cook with a stainless steel pitcher in his hand asking how you wanted your eggs.)

Then there was the evening the Bomb Dump was hit. (I'll have to find something with dates to remember when.) As I was walking from the perimeter into the revetments, I watched and filmed Mortar rounds. I fell from the water tower where I had been watching and filming, and broke my 8 mm movie camera. Somewhere I still have the film.

After making it to the ground, all Hell broke loose. All I saw was a fireball go up, fire and bombs above me, and then the concussion hit me and the back of the kennel.

I went about three feet in the air and the end of the kennel building was blown out.

After it was all over we lost one dog. I can't remember his name but he was half St. Bernard and half Shepherd. He had been tossed in the air so hard it twisted his intestines and he had to be put down.

December 11th 1968, I think it was Harold Horn and I went on R&R to Bangkok. We both survived and returned to U-Tapao.

I remember in early January, Bob Hope was there for two Christmas Shows. K-9 stood post for Security so some of them could see one of the Christmas Shows. I thought this is strange, Christmas in January. Well it didn't matter because it was Bob Hope.

In February I had a going away party in the fishing village next to the base. They say the village had communist in it. But, we drank beer and ate canned fish from the cannery. I packed my leash and choke chain and some other leather gear with the hope of going back to K-9 in the States.

In March 1969 I reported for duty to the 351st SPS at Whiteman AFB, MO. (SAC) I was assigned as a Flight Security Controller "Kilo" Flight. I received a letter from Harold Horn and talked to him a couple of times but haven't heard from him since.

Tom brought Gillette razors over from the States to trade. They gathered dust and I don't remember anyone wanting a close shave!

Looking back, What a great adventure for all of us! The friendships and unquestioned dedication of our dogs!

The common experience of War forges timeless bonds and we are experiencing that now, Thirty years after the fact.