



Jim Powrzasnas and Rebel, Feb. 1969

WALKING WHERE THE DOG WALKS

An Interspecies Odyssey in Vietnam, 1968-69

Toni Gardner

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**Walking Where the Dog Walks:
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For my father, Frank L. LaMotte, Jr.,
who read *Kinship with All Life* to me
at an impressionable age,

and for the dogs,
who made it all true

For my part, I must admit, the romantic and timeless aspects of a man and a dog seeking their sustenance together, relying on each other's special abilities for survival, and accompanied by the ghosts of all such pairs that have hunted together since man and wolf were first allied – that was not lost on me.

Lars Eighner, Travels with Lizbeth

Featured from 47th Infantry Platoon, Scout Dog

Handlers and their Dogs

Rusty Allen Saratoga, Texas	Sig KO36
Otis Johnson Columbus, Georgia	Rolf KO86
Chris Mercer San Francisco, California	Dusty (names fictitious)
Marvin Pearce Capitola, California	Prince 14M1
Jim Powrzasan Pleasant Grove, Alabama	Pal M596
Larry Proper Meadville, Pennsylvania	Fellow OK88

Staff

Stanley Stockdale, Platoon Commander
Atlanta, Georgia

John Carter, Veterinary Technician
Queens, New York

Jonathan Wahl, Platoon Clerk
Roosevelt, New York

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Preface

During the Vietnam war, as in all wars, dogs were used to support troops in various ways—as sentries, trackers, tunnel detectors, and mascots. But scout dogs, mostly German shepherds, performed the most daring work. These were lively, boisterous dogs in civilian life who found their destinies fulfilled leading infantry platoons on missions through the jungles, rice paddies, grassy lowlands, and burning beaches of Vietnam.

The dogs did not walk alone. At the end of the leash they were accompanied by trained handlers, reluctant soldiers for the most part, the oldest barely out of their teens. For them, “volunteering” to become scout dog handlers had meant a few extra months of training in the States. They hoped the war would end in that time. They were not thinking about dogs when they signed up to be handlers.

But the war did not end, and together they went to Vietnam and into a shared experience that would change everything.

Walking Where the Dog Walks: An Interspecies Odyssey in Vietnam, 1968-69 is the story of a group of men who found themselves in the U.S. Army, who trained together at Fort Benning, Georgia, and who, individually, found dogs in the kennels there that would make indelible impressions on their lives. It is the story of their year together, through the training they thought would prepare them for the war, and through the long months when they lived, and when some died, in that war.

For most dog handlers in the Vietnam era, training at

Fort Benning with one dog was followed by a voyage to Vietnam and the assignment of a new one. But for the handlers of the 47th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog, the dogs they trained with were the very ones they brought over. The dog-man teams were bonded, in sync, before the main event began. They were new together, and, as close friends, would face their most terrifying and visceral months at war together.

Many of the men in this particular unit had met in basic training. They'd been through basic, advanced, and, for some, parachute jump training. An unusually large number were officer school dropouts. It was a strong unit, built with confidence, trust, and fellowship.

The fellowship that existed among the men also came to life between the men and their dogs. This was not the case for every dog-man team, and this book does not falsely sentimentalize or gloss over the reality that some teams worked and some did not. Some dogs had great abilities, while others could not manage the crushing pressures of the job. Some men worked well with their dogs, but saw them only as a tool, no more valuable than their M-16s. Some could not reach inside their dog to understand that animal. But others could, and did. This relationship changed their war experience and transformed their inner lives as well.

This is the story of six men who developed, in their own ways, an intuitive communication with their dogs, and whose consciousness was expanded when they learned to open their minds to another species. Because it is a war story, it is about loneliness, fear, betrayal, and death. It is about being an American boy who suddenly finds himself halfway around the world in a strange place where nothing is as expected, where nothing unfolds according to plan, where you are hot and filthy, where people are trying

to kill you. Unlike other soldiers, these had a dog to consider through all of it.

The dogs were friends who kept them company and bolstered their confidence. They were specialized workers who gave them status and protection. Together they saved lives of whole platoons and companies. But they were also called on to walk point, the most dangerous position in the patrol, and the dogs also hindered the men's ability to defend themselves in firefights. And sometimes the dogs went crazy and put everyone in danger. Whatever happened, though, the men and dogs acted as one, literally and emotionally, changing the very fiber of their identities.

The book follows the development of these relationships, the gradual unfolding of friendships that took place over a year—as the men and dogs mature from green recruits to bewildered and then seasoned soldiers.

But the central character in this story is not necessarily any individual man or dog. It is the relationship between man and dog, the brotherhood that was born out of their connection, that grew, faced conflict, strengthened and deepened, and though separated by distance, death, and time, still lives inside those men. It is about the difference a dog can make while living through war. It is about how a dog can change a person.

What can a story about a boy and his dog tell us? It can talk about friendship, integrity, loyalty, endurance, and courage. It can speak of tenderness and humor, of fear, of a mutual refuge, and of private communication between two who are a species apart, but joined together in an indefinable, higher place. The story of this singular relationship points the way for us to experience in our own lives the extraordinary richness possible in the kinship between humans and dogs.

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They called because of the mines. They were in the field--moving out along this trail for three days, seeing what was there, just now entering into some brushy area on the side where there were some rice paddies and who knew what else or who else they might find.



They were part of operation Nevada Eagle, begun in May of 1968, and now, six months later, still going. They were walking out to find where the North Vietnamese Army was moving into the south and where they were hiding. They would find them, and their Viet Cong helpers, and engage them in combat when they could. It was a Cordon and Search operation, circle around and then close in, and it also entailed "rice destruction," the attempt

to cripple the enemy by destroying his weapons and supplies.

As farmers curved over the brown-green water, pulling out the slender strands of grasses, all appeared benign, timeless, orderly. But here nothing was ever

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completely routine or predictable. You could never truly relax. You never knew which kind of surprise you would get or where it would come from, and something nearly always waited for you. There were variables you could half-expect and that you developed an unconscious watch for. Sniper in a tree up ahead. VC under the brush poised for small arms strike-and-vanish act. Snakes—three hundred poisonous varieties here, including one that glided out of trees. Leeches dropping out of trees and into your shirt, sneaking into your armpits or up your legs. Well of water that might be poisoned. Or it could be the surprise of a patch of trail, smooth or sandy as the rest, that covered a pit of sharpened sticks--sticks carved with barbs, coated with human waste, and placed so that when you fell in you'd be impaled by them, but if you pulled out you'd be grabbed again. Then you wouldn't necessarily die, but more likely your body would rot away, in parts, with gangrenous infection. The other men wouldn't just lose you in an instant, but could also be wounded by proxy, knowing and even watching your agony and dismemberment. Those images could last longer and work into the psyche and maybe make you that much less interested in completing your mission, which already might not make that much sense to you.

Mines and booby traps worked on the same principle. They might be Chinese- or American-made (and VC-foraged) bombs attached to trip wires. These could also be command-detonated: NVA or VC would wait for you, watch you when you couldn't see them, and detonate them right on you. This was at the height of America's involvement in the war, when mines and booby traps accounted for nearly one quarter of

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American combat deaths. Overall, these devices caused seventeen percent of American casualties in Vietnam (and eleven percent of deaths) versus World War II's two percent of casualties caused by mines and booby traps.

The explosives ranged in size from full-sized Claymore mines or bombs all the way down to "toe poppers," fashioned from scrounged U.S. rations cans—garbage that was supposed to have been buried, and might have been. Sometimes the small cans contained extras, nails, scrap metal from weapons or other machines including helicopters, wire, can openers, used batteries, ball bearings, glass, and anything else that would tear flesh, with explosive added. Or it could be a grenade inside a small can, with the pin pulled out but the safety lever held in by the can, then released by someone stepping on it or on a wire across the trail. Or the grenade might have been packed into mud. When the mud dried, the pin was removed, so that when someone walking along a trail accidentally kicked the piece of mud, it exploded. The North Vietnamese, and especially the Viet Cong, didn't have the resources we had, so they learned how to find bits and pieces that were ours, seemed meaningless to us, and figured out how to painstakingly refashion them, bit by tiny bit, into things they could use against us. Some say ninety percent of these devices were made with our own cast-off supplies. And among those things were these mines.

This unit was working northeast of Hue, along the coast in I Corps, one of the four Corps Tactical Zones that the U.S. military had decided comprised South Vietnam for purposes of planning and strategy. And now it found itself bound in by mines, held prisoner by earth-covered or brush-concealed bundles of shredded

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metal and slivered glass and explosives that could decimate a foot, a leg, an abdomen--for they were often aimed for the U.S.-height groin--and annihilate a life.

They had gone out there and they had found themselves in the middle of a spider's web of explosives, unable to go forward or even to retreat. Already two men were down and the lieutenant wouldn't risk another.

So they called for a dog team.

They waited for the helicopter that roared in, loaded the wounded, and lifted out, quickly so it wouldn't become a target. And they waited, not saying much, if anything, for the dog and the man.

Back at Landing Zone Sally, Larry Proper was at the top of the board. It had been less than a week since his last mission, but the dog teams of the 47th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog were being called out a lot these days, and when your name rotated to the top of the board, unless someone called in with a special request, you went. Or the platoon lieutenant, Stan Stockdale, might tag you for a mission because you and your dog were especially good at something--high altitude or bad weather or brushy trails or personnel or bunkers or mines. There were no absolute systems here either.

Their tour lasted a year, and during that stay, they would be called on by a variety of Army units, usually those from the Second Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division. They would lead patrols through the rice fields, the jungles, the lowlands, and the rocky mountainous trails that together made up the terrain from Hue to the Demilitarized Zone in I Corps, the northernmost section of South Vietnam. Dog-man teams would be dropped out of helicopters and into these areas to find the things

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that had eluded human detection, but that the dogs would target and identify with their superior sensory abilities. By conservative estimates, each dog would save an average of ten American lives. They would foil enemy ambushes, pinpoint snipers in trees, reveal mines and traps, and prevent friendly fire, among other accomplishments. And they would not work without some failures as well.

Each handler in this platoon had trained with one dog, and unlike most other military dog platoons in this war, that animal would go over to Vietnam with him, become first his partner, and then ultimately his second self, for the duration for the tour.

The handler alone knew how to interpret the dog's silent language--the tipped ear, the raised haunches, the frozen stare--and the handler would know not only that there was danger, but precisely what form that danger took. The man would serve as the medium through which the dog could communicate his knowledge, because the dog would know well before the man where things were hidden--where there were people, weapons and other supplies, booby traps and mines, secret tunnels, camps, villages, and also snakes, monkeys, or water buffalo. They had been thoroughly trained to search and find, but in the scrubby pine forests and salt marshes of Georgia, not the suffocating heat and frightening, bizarre geography of I Corps, and not with the same stakes. The dogs had been trained on a positive system of reward, not punishment.

Jonathan Wahl, the unit clerk, took the call, a simple request, no details provided since none had been given--to prevent interception by the enemy. In the fall of 1968 the Tet counter-offensive was still underway, and while

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some areas saw less action that year, I Corps did a brisk business.

Proper packed his gear--three days worth of everything: ammunition, rations, canteens, socks; and three days of gear for Fellow too: cans of dog food, bags of dry dog food, canteens for the dog, doubling the load of water. With water-purifying tablets, heat tablets, insect repellent, towel, poncho, poncho liner, knife, .45 revolver, and M-16 automatic rifle, the rucksack weighed a good seventy pounds.

They had been review-training earlier in the day, and now Fellow was resting under Proper's cot. It was, or at least it seemed somehow, not exactly cool but just less hot in there than at his stakeout in the kennel area. The thick, sickening heat held little mercy for a German shepherd, this one solid black except for the brown exclamation-point eyebrows that Proper thought might, in the dark, look like extra eyes to frighten anyone they might encounter at night. The heat didn't do much for Proper either, who pushed on his heavy, clumsy helmet.

Fellow was aware. He lifted those exclamation points and jumped up ready and excited, with the naive, joyful anticipation of preparing for a favorite game. Fellow's intelligence easily translated all this activity into the knowledge that he was on his way to a mission; his innocence allowed him to expect the best, to bend himself back and forth in happiness, unfrightened at the prospect of heading out on an adventure with his human partner, where he would be challenged to use his learned skills, his instincts, and his naturally endowed senses. It was time for the Big Game, and he was always ready.

Dogs remember what happened last. People who live with dogs witness how a dog reacts to going to the

veterinarian, or to your leaving the house without them. If these dogs had been afraid of what would happen on missions, where they'd experienced plenty of unpleasant moments, they'd have tried to avoid going. They'd have hung back, whined, or hidden. But these weren't that sort of dog. As a whole these dogs exuded confidence, enthusiasm, and optimism, even though they remembered what had happened the last time they'd been on that helicopter ride. Or maybe they were just thinking about the ride, up in the only cool air, where they could lose themselves in the wind, soaring up and out with their human wrapped around them.

Fellow was now highly trained, solid and true, ready for these adventures, a willing soldier. Scout dogs had to be bolder than the average dog, but smart, had to be able to listen to the voice of his handler, had to be able to bond with a person. Though some had been gun shy in the early stages of training, they'd overcome it (or been dismissed). Others had been too fierce, too aggressive, and had become sentry dogs instead, if workable. Scout dogs weren't warriors, because they did no actual fighting. They weren't trained to attack anyone, as the sentry dogs were. When they found the people or traps, they were sent to the rear of the platoon because they were needed to find the enemy and his paraphernalia and should be protected from the action so they could survive to find again. Their purpose was to save, not take, lives.

But they had minds of their own that didn't necessarily shut down because, in the Army's mind, their assignment had been completed. They were known to have gone after NVA or VC soldiers firing directly at them, and to have lost their lives that way.

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When the dogs came up against the Vietnamese, the animals exhibited the body postures and facial positions that are generally accepted to indicate an aggressive-threatened posture with readiness to attack—the stiffened legs, raised back hairs, upward thrust head and tail, forward ears, teeth-revealing snarl, locked eyes. Everything that worked toward the trust between the handler and his dog was turned inside out when the dog confronted the Vietnamese.

This was true even with the South Vietnamese at first, when the dogs entered the scene on the advice of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, early in the sixties. Sergeant Jesse Mendez, head of dog training at Fort Benning, and other instructors, came over in 1962 to get the training and care of the dogs straightened out. Was it the looks or the speech--its tone, inflections, or content--of a race of people different from their handlers? Or was it simply that the Vietnamese were in general afraid of the dogs, perhaps causing them to exercise the quick, jerky retreat movements that would further stimulate the dogs' aggression? Did the dogs detect a wall of mutual distrust between their handlers and the Vietnamese, even the South Vietnamese?

It makes sense to deduce that the dog was able to comprehend the threat of the enemy as an extension of their handler's enduring emotional state of fear and aggression toward the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong while hiding from him or while hunting him. And maybe they had sensed distrust between Americans and their South Vietnamese allies too. Sometimes they suspected them when their handlers didn't: one dog persistently attacked his platoon's "Kit Carson" (South

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Vietnamese) scout while on a mission. The scout was eventually found to be Viet Cong, his rucksack loaded with a Chinese-made grenade intended for this patrol. He hadn't fooled the dog for an instant.

Though the dogs weren't intended to be used against personnel, U.S. soldiers quickly recognized their enormous potential as a perceived threat to a prisoner of war. Their mere presence at an interrogation became an effective force for eliciting information from captured North Vietnamese or Viet Cong. The dogs, bold strapping German shepherds, were the prisoners' equals in size and weight.

While the dogs were being trained a world away at Fort Benning in Georgia, the quarry they were trained to find consisted of American men. They were taught to find, that's all, people or mines or tunnels or things that just didn't belong there in the dirt or the tree or the brush. And sometimes, later when they were in Vietnam, for a minute they became regular dogs again, forgot themselves and ran down a water buffalo, or even a village cat, instead.

They accepted the infantry platoon members with whom they and their handlers worked their missions, almost always a new set of people each time out, maybe because their handler told them to or maybe they could read the signs well enough. They understood the body language and voice intonations of their handler. As the Americans in the unit greeted one another, maybe not joyfully but at least peacefully, the dogs could recognize the mutual acceptance. A dog's mind won't hold the notion of a geopolitical war, but dogs are all about pack integrity. If a handler brought his dog into this new pack, it was okay with the dog. He looked up to his handler

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and respected his intentions. But the dog also protected his handler, and some did that with teeth if infantrymen got too close, in the dog's mind, to his handler.

An unneutered male dog, which is what most of the canine scouts were, is ready to take on a conflict, and these lionhearted dogs had been trained to see the handlers' conflicts as their own. They wouldn't have been afraid to face them, including a search that could end in explosion or gunfire and pain. Wounded dogs, if they could recover, were sent back to work as soon as they were fit. Many of them knew about the pain, but the dog loved his work. Part of that was the search-game with the handler, and part of it was also the opportunity to protect.

The dogs were aware their handlers' fear. They know, and their own senses sharpen up, focus in, prepare to defend the handler, who is no longer an Other but has become an Us. That empathic acceptance usually seems easier for dogs to manage than humans, but in this place at this time the most attuned handlers got it, too. The genetics of pack or family or community mentality are etched into our own human cell structure as well as the dogs', and was now called on.

The dog would lead his handler at the head of the platoon, as they moved together into the elements. The working harness now replaced his choke collar and lead. That confirmed everything. This was about being together and serious now, in focus, wary, and searching.

Waiting in the heat at the landing zone, the dog Fellow stood up seconds before Proper could hear the low percussion of the approaching Huey. The helicopter soared in, flattening Fellow's black coat as he lifted his nose to feel the wind of the blades; then Proper heaved

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the scrambling, eager dog into the open helicopter and jumped in after him. He settled them both down, hanging on to the leash and his M-16, while they swooped out again, over the red dirt of the landing strip.

The men were strung out along the trail, or the series of trails, through the field of high grasses edged by spare saplings. They were frozen into their positions. It was hot and sunny, and there was no wind or even breeze until the helicopter bobbed in at the rear, where it was safest, and was out again, and lifted away its breath of air.

Proper faced the tangle of brush and the grasses, razor-edged and six feet high in places. He could barely see over it. It was green, but not soothing, an acid green, and thick enough to conceal an arsenal of traps.

The dog-man team was greeted with respect. In his typically understated fashion, Proper nodded, and noted only that the frightened men seemed anxious to get out of the situation and that he and Fellow needed to get right to it.

Scout dog teams were expected to handle a variety of situations, and as they walked together at the head of a platoon, sometimes with another soldier walking shotgun nearby to cover them, individual dogs developed their own methods of communicating their knowledge to their handlers, sometimes in an idiosyncratic fashion.

Otis Johnson's dog Rolf was a veritable actor, with an impressive repertoire of signals that became part of the language of their shared communication. If a sniper was in a tree, Rolf would squat down and fold his ears back. If the quarry was on a mountainside ahead, he would freeze and stare and refuse to move. Johnson would

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know right away if there were livestock in the area: Rolf would sit up and put his front legs in the air. For detecting a mine, he would freeze and point his head down directly at the mine location.

Jesse Mendez, the trainer and sergeant from the Ft. Benning dog school, would dismiss such descriptions. Dogs were trained to stand at a silent freeze with ears up and forward for a personnel alert, and to sit for a booby trap or mine alert. This was the school method. But handlers working in the field knew otherwise.

Every dog had his own signs, usually slight variations from the standard alert. As Rusty Allen would later explain to new handlers, "That's why it is so important to have that close relationship with your dog, to work and train together constantly even when you aren't out in the field. Some of the alerts are really subtle, and if you aren't close with your dog, you'll miss it, and that could be it."

Fellow's personnel response was a quick action--ears up, and eyes and ears in line with the enemy. A glance away, and Proper could miss the signal; he could walk straight into an ambush. For trip wires, Fellow would freeze in his tracks. Since these fine, taut wires were nearly invisible to the human eye, the halt would cue Proper to kneel and carefully search the air in front of him until he saw it. Fellow would already have heard the air moving over the wire. For punji pits and mines, Fellow simply walked purposefully around them.

And now the training mantra rang in Proper's head, shutting out all other thoughts, *Walk where the dog walks. I am just walking where he walks.* By this he meant each step. Proper knew his dog completely, as the dog also knew him.

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Training had been one thing. There they'd mastered the mechanics together and become a friendly team, buddies. But once they'd arrived in-country, the bar had been raised, and suddenly there the mutual trust expanded into a palpable energy. Trust took on a surprising magnificence: the closeness they developed with their dogs affected the men; it elevated them, comforted and strengthened them. They were unto themselves, their own unit of two, always together in a place where a person could be terrifyingly alone.

From the rear, Proper and Fellow advanced together with the energy that existed between them, a confluence of skill and intelligence, energy, affection, and trust. They paced each step, deliberately and slowly, along the trail--Proper ducking the brush but not looking at it, only watching his dog; Fellow in a hyperfocus, all distractions tuned out, knowing this job must be perfectly executed, and knowing why.

Did he do it for survival, for the game, or to please Proper? Looking at it another way, was he absorbing all he'd been taught, targeting his mind, releasing the power of his natural senses--smell, hearing, sight, and perhaps another or so that we've not yet been able to measure--did he knit all these parts of himself together and transcend being a dog to become a dog-man force, attuned to itself and to all that surrounded it, so the work of the mission was not for this person or that game but altogether the purpose of existence?

If you can believe that people give off an energy--by scent or pheromone--that can be detected by animals, and that fear is probably the easiest to detect, you can believe that the dog absorbed the fear-electricity that surrounded each man. But he was undeterred by it or

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maybe energized by it, his senses now heightened even beyond their already exquisite powers.

With his nose to the trail, he moved with slow steps, unhurried, completely in and of the moment and not projecting, calling on his intellect, his instinct, his senses, his training, his bond to Proper. And sometimes the steps would ease into a lower gear, his legs stiffening ever so slightly, and the shoulders tightening as he lowered his body; then he would loosen the tenseness and move on, more smoothly now, past or around a something that seemed wrong to him.

One by one he reached and then moved past the men, and each time Proper signaled them to follow, reminding them, "Walk where the dog walks. Exactly in his steps and in my steps." And each man in his turn gave over his trust to the dog and the man, seeing that Proper and the dog were moving in perfect unison and in safety. One by one Proper passed them, each step in the step of the dog. One by one they fell in behind him, also in the same steps, until at last the relative safety of their destination of the rice fields appeared, not three hundred feet away. Oblivious to the heat, and with those achingly deliberate steps, the sometimes poised foot and sometimes walking off the trail and into the stinging brush, all of them, from the rear to the front, were led out of the area without a single casualty.

Notes

Mines: Ebert, pp. 189-95; Lemish, 269 (nts. 19 and 32); O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, pp. 125-29.

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Activity in I Corps: Spector.

What they carried: Sykes, "Another Mission," *Dogman*, vol. 1, no. 5 (Dec. 95), p. 1.

Hatred/fear of Vietnamese: described by numerous sources; Kit Carson story from 47th guest book, 7/30/99, Craig Latham, 34th PID, Airborne.

Body postures: Fogle, p. 64; others.

Jesse Mendez, phone conversation re Rolf/Otis Aug. 6, 1999.

An article from *Danger Forward*, the magazine of the Big Red One (1st Division), *Vietnam*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 1969, noted the variety of alerts that existed, including a dog, Major, who "has the strange habit of crossing his ears on an alert, while Eric puts on an acrobatic act by walking on his hind legs."

Dog-human empathy: Arluke and Sanders, pp. 61-81.