The Road to the Nemo’s War Dog Heroes Memorial

Let me take you back in time for just a moment

Predawn hours of December 4, 1966

Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam was attacked by a large force of Viet Cong commandos. The Air Base was hit by approximately 60 mortars. The size of the Viet Cong infiltration force was believed to have been over 75 saboteurs.

Once inside the base, the enemy divided into smaller groups to attack their targets. Several sentry dog teams stationed on perimeter posts gave the initial alert and warning almost simultaneously. This early warning enabled security forces of the 377th Air Police Squadron to successfully repel the attack, minimizing damage to aircraft and facilities. Although wounded, one dog handler continued to engage the enemy, while notifying Central Security Control (CSC) of their location and direction of travel.

Two security policemen of the 377th Security Police Squadron, positioned in a machine gun bunker, were at the ready as the VC approached the main aircraft-parking ramp. In a short period of time they repelled the enemy, killing thirteen of the attackers. Security forces rapidly deployed around the perimeter and prevented numerous infiltrators from escaping; forcing them to seek refuge in a Vietnamese graveyard, dense vegetation and community wells. Search patrols believed that all-remaining VC were killed or captured the following morning.

During the initial assault, one handler (A2C George M. Bevich, Jr.) and three sentry dogs were killed. Sentry Dog Rebel (519X), who first detected a group of approximately 75 VC less than 100 yards away, was the first to be killed by automatic weapon fire.

At an adjacent post, Sentry Dog Cubby (612E), alerted and was killed by gunfire.

Another sentry dog, Toby (206F), also alerted as the infiltrators advanced, and was killed by gunfire. The attack had been thwarted and now it was time to secure the base as daylight approached.

Unfortunately, K9 teams were not included in those daylight patrols. Just before total darkness on December 4th, 1966 after Sentry Nemo (A534) and his handler were posted, Nemo alerted and was released to attack the VC who had evaded earlier detection. Nemo and his handler were both wounded, but not before killing two VC. Nemo's injuries included the loss of one eye and a gunshot wound that ripped into his nose.

A sweep of the area by the Quick Response Team (QRT) met with negative results.

Using additional sentry dog teams, the security forces located and killed four more VC.

A second sweep with the dog teams resulted in the discovery of four additional VC who were hiding underground. The remaining enemy forces were soon killed by other security police.

Before help could arrive, Nemo, an 85 pound German shepherd, although severely wounded, protected his handler by crawling across his body, and guarding him against anyone who dared to come near. When help arrived, they were able to convince Nemo to leave his handler, who was then given first aid. Nemo, suffering from a gunshot wound to his face, and the lost of his right eye, was relieved of sentry dog duties.

The 377th SPS was awarded the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for its "heroic valor," against the Viet Cong infiltration force.
"A2C Throneburg, Robert A., AF14840178, wounded in action on 4 December 1966 is being presented the Purple Heart at 3rd Field Hospital by Col Coe, Base Commander." "Attack On Tan Son Nhut" Dec 4, 1966. Throneburg handled "NEMO A534" when NEMO was wounded during the December 4, 1966 attack on Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Viet Nam. From the collection of the estate of Col Grove Johnson, Commander, 377th Security Police Squadron 1966-1967 (via Charles Penley March 6, 2009)

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A2C Thorneburg was shot in the left shoulder. Sentry Dog NEMO A534 was shot in the left side of his face and the bullet exited near his right eye. NEMO A534 was the first sentry dog to be sent home to the states from Vietnam. He became a goodwill ambassador for the remainder of his life. He died Mar 15, 1973.

Sentry Dog Nemo A534 prior to being Wounded In Action at Tan Son Nhut
Sentry Dog Nemo A534 in his stateside home kennel at Lackland during his days as an Air Force recruiter – Circa 1968
Sentry Dog "NEMO" A534

On 4 December 1966, Sentry Dog NEMO engaged the enemy during an attack on Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Viet Nam. Severely wounded, he saved the life of his handler and defeated the successful attack on the base.
Nemo A534
Circa 1968

Capt Robert M. Sullivan and Sentry Dog Nemo
United States Air Force K-9 Recruiters
Above Left – Captain Robert M. Sullivan and Nemo “take a break” in between cities while flying across the country as part of their recruiting duties.

Above Right – Captain Robert M. Sullivan and Nemo are photographed with one of the many awards presented to the K-9 team.

This team circled the globe recruiting canines for the defense of our nation. Captain Robert M. Sullivan and “Big Mo” were tireless in their efforts to recruit dogs to serve their country.

Thirty Seven Years Later
During a visit to the 37th Security Forces Squadron Kennel compound while attending a Vietnam Security Police Association reunion in October of 2003, the site pictured below is the original pad that housed Sentry Dog Nemo A534 during his retirement at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas.

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During the tour, we noticed an old cracked cement pad with a crumbling raised border around the perimeter. We found our selves looking at the remnants of where a Sentry Dog, named Nemo, had been retired after receiving wounds in a 1966 attack on Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnam. The pad was barren, with no markings indicating why it was there. I can’t begin to tell you the thoughts of our handlers when we realized that this was sacred ground – the resting place of Sentry Dog Nemo!

It was this sequence of events that inspired the formation of Nemo’s War Dog Heroes Memorial Association. Founding members are Terry Strickland (Korat/Bien Hoa), Kelly Bateman (Ubon), Ernest Childers, Jr. (Udorn) and Bill Cummings (U-Tapao).

The Committee went into action and fundraising began to ensure that Nemo and the attack on Tan Son Nhut would not be forgotten. For more than two years meetings were held with officials at Lackland so that the plans for a memorial could be built. Volunteers came forward to assist the committee to rebuild the kennel and turn this sacred ground into a memorial to honor our canine heroes of our past and future.

Cross country flights, hundreds of hours of “road trips” across Texas, long weekends at Lackland, hundreds of telephone calls and e-mails later, it was now time for the Committee to put the final touches on the “beginning” of the Nemo Memorial at Lackland Air Force Base. It was finally coming together, but we all knew that there was still so much more to do to make sure that the saga of Nemo, and his “canine heroes, including the teams that served together in combat over the last 37 years, were now to be remembered forever.

On the weekend of Veteran’s Day, November 2005, the committee and “friends” put the final touches on reconstructed kennel pad prior to the dedication ceremony to be held on Veteran’s Day, 2005. Thanks go out to TSgt Jonathan Matthews, Kennel Master, 37th SFS, for his assistance during the re-construction of the Nemo Memorial.

It had been a long two years and we were now less than twenty-four hours away from unveiling the memorial for the first time. It was so hard to describe the feelings that consumed the work area that weekend. We knew this was something special, we just didn’t know how special the event would be come Tuesday morning when the official dedication ceremonies began.

Pictured below is the work crew that assembled the memorial site on November 15, 2005: John Meehan (Phan Rang), Jimmy Thornton (Phan Rang/Udorn), Terry Strickland (Bien Hoa/Korat), Kelly Bateman (Ubon), Bill Cummings (U-Tapao) and Ernie Childers (Udorn). TSgt Jonathon Matthews missed the photograph, but not the work!
On Tuesday, November 15, 2005, the Nemo Memorial was officially dedicated. More than 200 military and civilian personnel attended as the attack on Tan Son Nhut was revisited. The Nemo Committee promised that our War Dogs would not be forgotten. Photographed below are Committee members, Bill Cummings, Jimmy Thornton, Ernie Childers, Terry Strickland, and Kelly Bateman. Not in the photograph, but attending the ceremony is committee member Mike Griffin.
The Honor Guard for the ceremony included SrA Christina Marth and MWD Hhart (H008) and SSgt Vilani Bio and MWD Amber (F608) of the 37th SFS Military Working Dog Section.

The Memorial Headstone

On September 23, 2005, several of the old dog handlers who had visited the site initially were invited to the graduation of SSD, Team II and the dedication ceremony of Nemo’s memorial headstone. With the installment of the stone, the groundwork has been laid for Nemo’s War Dog
Heroes Association to complete the memorial. Their intentions were to restore the kennel to the condition of 1967-1968 by using photographs of its original condition.

The efforts of today’s handlers, young and old, will bring the project to completion and put in place the path for the continued recognition of all War Dog Heroes. Well done SSD, Team II: Instructors U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Chris Willingham and Mr. Orlando Nunez, team members, Air Force SSgt. Mike Long (Class Leader), U.S. Army Sgt. Danyel Claire; U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Mark Corrado, CPL Tim Johnson, LCPL Josh Hays, LCPL Brett Hamm, and LCPL Mike Evans.

The Nemo’s War Dog Heroes Memorial – October 2008
For Additional information on the Nemo War Dog Heroes Memorial Project please visit

http://635thk9.com/tdhnemo.htm

To view Nemo Photographs click on Nemo’s Photo Gallery

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