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BRITISH ARMY DOGS: FOUR-LEGGED 'FORCE MULTIPLIER' IN IRAQ

Among the 8,000-plus British troops helping to keep law and order in Iraq, there is a small, highly expert team who more than earn their rations.

The Theatre Military Working Dog Support Unit is a vital asset to Multinational Division (South East) based in Basrah, south east Iraq.

The 13,000 strong Division, from 10 countries including over 8,000 British Servicemen and women, is commanded by a British General and is working with the Iraqis to improve the area's security and help rebuild the country.

Although progress in Iraq is rapid - with reconstruction continuing apace and the Iraqi police and other security forces gradually taking over from Coalition forces in protecting the public - crime, theft and sabotage are still a problem in some areas.

It is critical for British troops to ensure the safety of their bases from theft, break in and attacks. While most Iraqis are law-abiding, there are still supporters of the former regime who are ready to attack Coalition Forces and their bases, or steal their equipment when they get the chance. With many people still poor and crime a strong temptation, there is a ready market for stolen and smuggled goods.

However, faced with these challenges the military dogs are playing a key role in the pursuit of peace.

Hard working and devoted, they are based at three locations: Shaibah Logistics Base, the city of Basrah and the British-guarded port of Umm Qasr, on Iraq's only piece of coastline.

In such a testing environment, they are fully proving their worth, as Captain Mike Robinson, the Officer Commanding the Dog Support Unit explained:

“We have 20 dogs in this Theatre, both Protection and Specialist. They are used for a variety of tasks and are extremely valuable as a ‘force multiplier’. They can easily do the work of a five-man patrol if used properly.

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“The ‘main effort’ for the Protection dogs is guarding perimeters, camps and cordons, mostly at night when their hyper-alert senses can pick up intruders – and in that role they present an excellent deterrent factor.

“The Specialist dogs are used to search vehicles, houses and buildings, and include Arms & Explosive Search Dogs.

While the Protection dogs come out from Iraq without a handler and then team up with one that we have trained out here, it takes much longer to train a Specialist dog and handler to work together, so they come out to Iraq as an already-trained team.

In a quiet area – such as a remote camp at night - a dog can pick up on an intruder 500 metres away, and we have already had quite a few successes, spotting intruders on several occasions. The dogs have also detected arms and explosives.”

According to Mike, one of the most notable examples led to ‘Buster’, an Arms & Explosives Search dog, winning the Dickins Medal – the Animal VC.

“He and his handler Sergeant Dani Morgan, Royal Army Veterinary Corps, found a large quantity of arms and explosives in the Iraqi town of Safwan, planned for use against Coalition Forces earlier on last year. Buster is now back in UK resting on his laurels.

“On another occasion, several weeks ago, on his first day back from leave, Lance Corporal Toby Aylett was patrolling with ‘Prince’, a German Shepherd, when they picked up eight armed intruders who broke through a perimeter fence and fired at them. They were trying to steal engineering equipment, but made a run for it when Prince spotted them. Toby and Prince gave chase, and eventually one of the intruders was caught in a follow-up operation.

A more recent incident involved dog-handler Lance Corporal Suzi Lowry and her ‘Patrol Arm (True)’ German Shepherd dog ‘Monty’, as Suzi explained: “We were patrolling a compound a few weeks ago when ‘Monty’ picked up on some intruders. I challenged them, but I couldn’t release ‘Monty’ since they weren’t pointing a weapon at us. However, we gave chase and they made a break for it, throwing a load of stolen batteries into a trench, which we were able to recover.”

Suzi (22) is actually the Unit’s Veterinary Technician but, as a trained dog handler, helps out on patrol duties. “The dogs are so healthy that, when I have spare time, I help out with patrolling”, she explained. Having nearly completed her six months in Iraq, Suzi is now heading home at the end of her Army career, and is planning to train as a midwife.

Intruders might be horrified to see a patrol dog heading towards them, but when Bruce Fleury of the Devon and Dorset Regiment saw Belgian Shepherd dog Danko’ giving him a hard stare, he was thrilled. Bruce explained: “We served together in Kosovo when I was a Reservist, and then I volunteered to serve in Iraq.

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When I arrived at the Military Dog Working Unit, who should I see but Danko? It was a great reunion and we just had to be paired up. Thanks to Danko, I am applying to enrol full time in the Royal Army Veterinary Corps.”

Of course, intruders are not the only challenge for dogs and their handlers, as Mike Robinson said:

“The intense heat of Iraq and the sometimes bitter cold at night present an environmental challenge for the dogs, but they stand up to it well.

“All in all they thrive in this tough environment and the extreme climate. The air conditioning in the summer heat is a great help and the dogs have a quick recovery time. There is no doubt about it, they have proved a big success story out here in Iraq”.

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