

Snoopy – A true story

By Michael Milligan

It's the 1970s and Vietnam is coming to a close. I'm a teenager now. (I made it through childhood, but the folks at the local hospital know me by my first name.) My mom has a friend who is in the Army; he's a sergeant. This guy is amazing. He's a real live G.I. Joe, complete with medals I don't even recognize, but he has a lot of them. He has taken a liking to me and our friendship grows. He knows I like dogs – a lot. I didn't know how many jobs the Army had at the time and I just figured all soldiers were, well you know, soldiers. This guy had a job in the Army that was my dream job: K9 handler.

Imagine that? A job that pays money to play and train with dogs all day. Amazing! He gets permission to take me to the training area to watch the dogs. I'm in heaven. The next day, we ride out to the training area, in the middle of the woods. He explains that it's so far out so that the dogs are not disturbed and don't disturb others. This is the first kennel I've ever been to and the cleanliness and spaciousness is amazing. There are about 12 dogs there, all German Shepherds. They are of varying colors, heights and weights. One of them is going ballistic in his run, almost turning a complete flip when he reaches the end. This gets the others barking, howling and yelping. I see why the kennel is in the woods, the sound is almost deafening. I find out why the one dog is so excited, his handler is here.

As we enter the facility other soldiers greet my friend "Sarge" and ask if he's ready to get started. He responds, "Not until I get a cup of java." After Sarge gets his coffee, he's ready to get started. He grabs a leash and goes to the run with the ballistic dog. The dog is a typical German Shepherd, with a black and tan color and a well-defined saddle. Sarge opens the run and snaps the leash on and brings him out. Sarge introduces us and I find out the dog's name is Snoopy. Snoopy is a Patrol Dog and is trained in tracking and detection along with protection. He is of medium-build with a set of eyes that mean business. Some of the other soldiers come out from the handler's office and help one get into a suit that reminds me of the scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz. Sarge explains it is a bite suit, to protect the soldier from the bites he is about to take delivery of. Lastly, he dons a football helmet and says he is ready to go.

"Sarge" takes Snoopy to the end of a grassy area and the soldier in the bite suit walks to the other end. The soldier turns around and begins to walk toward Sarge. Sarge tells him to halt. He is of course ignored and repeats the command with no effect. Sarge then tells him to comply or he will release the dog. Still no effect, and before I can completely comprehend what will happen, I hear "Get him!" and Snoopy is released. The soldier is on the ground screaming for the dog to be called off. It has taken all of two seconds. Sarge calls Snoopy off and he returns to his handler without any hesitation. "Watch him!" says Sarge and Snoopy intently stares the soldier down. Watching for any signs of aggression, Snoopy guards his adversary. The soldier stands still as Sarge approaches. Without warning, the soldier swings a roundhouse punch to Sarge's head. Snoopy attacks again, this time without a spoken command and with a deliberate strike to the soldier's legs, taking him to the ground and pinning him with bites to the body.

Snoopy is again called off and he returns to his handler. The soldier is helped to his feet and he removes the bite suit. Sarge asks me if I'm ready to take his place. Fear wells-up inside me, but I'm so fascinated I tell him "Yes." He then brings a sleeve made of the same material and instructs me on what to do with it. As I stand there, no more than ten feet from an animal that just put a full-grown man on the ground in the blink of an eye, I wonder what will happen if I misjudge the oncoming attack and Snoopy bites flesh instead of the pro-offered sleeve. Just the thought of it makes my skin crawl.

I try to hide my fear. I know the dog can smell my anxiousness. Sarge looks at me and says it will be fine; just offer the sleeve as I was instructed. I swallow the lump in my throat and tell him I'm ready. Snoopy is released and he is on the sleeve faster than I can process the thoughts of him jumping to bite the sleeve with my arm in it. Oh my God! The pressure is intense. Will my arm snap from the power in this dog's jaws? As fast as it began, it's over. Snoopy is back at his handler's side. I'm still alive, no mangled arm and the rush has taken hold of me. I'm ready to sell my soul for the breed now. The thrill of this experience has opened my eyes like nothing I've ever felt. Sarge takes me home and the excitement of the day fades to a memory.

Several months later, Sarge and Snoopy are deployed to Southeast Asia. I won't see Snoopy again. Sarge is wounded and shipped back to the U.S. with injuries that end his career. Snoopy is given over to the ARVN and after a couple of months is lost in the jungles of Vietnam.

I'm starting to learn the difference between a pet and a working dog. It hurts to know that governments see working dogs as property. Handlers, on the other hand, see them as partners that are trusted and loved. Some owe their lives to their four-legged partners.

Author's note: The names of both the soldier and the K9 in this story were changed at the soldier's request.