

# workingdog

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# Military Working Dogs

MARINES & K9 COMPANIONS FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

*By Jeanne McKinney*

**I**t was a rare sight on March 4, 2018, to see the unequalled traits and skills of military working dogs (MWD) on display at Camp Pendleton, San Diego, California. An overcast sky hung over a new turf yard where Patrol Explosive Detection Dog (PEDD) Piko and Specialized Search Dog (SSD) Lucky trained off leash. Marine Staff Sergeant Shawn Edens (Piko's handler) and Sgt. Andrew Wundsam (Lucky's handler) directed these formidable, beautiful animals. 'Awe' best describes the reaction to them charging down the turf for bite work and leaping over obstacles on a course that readies them for the Marines' fight against terrorism.

"For them, work is play," said Edens, adding, "He [Piko] loves to work for the handler, looking for affection. He's very driven."

An MWD handler is a dream job for Edens as he and Piko prepare for an upcoming deployment with the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). Scheduled to depart to the Pacific mid-2018, those aboard the 13th MEU are prime for forward action, while they train with other military forces. It is the first deployment for both dog and handler.

Handlers and dogs receive basic courses at Lackland Air Force Base, headquarters for the MWD program. Air Force "doggy school," supported by the Department of Defense, breeds select dogs and trains them and dog handlers for duty. Once a dog receives certification, the team transitions to an expeditionary unit that trains to forward deploy. MWDs receive specialized instruction once in a unit.



No more are the days of whipping and shocking a war dog to perform independently. Handlers study how to perfect the skills of the MWD by employing natural canine assets. This saves thousands of troops facing dangerous, turbulent conflicts. A handler builds a bond, not of fear, but love and trust.

### **Achievement is ours, not mine.**

It wasn't exactly magical when Edens, an experienced handler and former chief trainer and kennel master out of Quantico, first met PEDD Piko, a full-bred German Shepherd Dog, at Camp Pendleton. Edens describes him at just under three years old as still being "puppy wild, sporadic, fun-loving." Piko had stepped in his not-so-flowery deposits, and when he jumped up on the kennel door, it pushed poop all over Edens' uniform.

"I gave him a bath and took him out. From that point forward, it was a really good match. We have similar personalities, which is something we look for when we match dogs to handlers," said Edens.

PEDDs sniff out a comprehensive array of military and homemade explosives using olfactory receptors that are far superior to ours. A human has five million olfactory receptors versus 225 million in a German Shepherd Dog like Piko. Hence, they own a superhuman hidden weapons sniffer.

SSDs, like Lucky, take verbal and physical commands off leash. A typical SSD can go out approximately 200 yards without any assistance from the handler.

Edens relates, "That's giving you that much distance from danger at the time, and the dog can let you know, 'Hey, there is something here.'"

"Something there" is what Lucca, a marine SSD, took the hit for in March 2012 in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. An IED detonated under Lucca, and she lost her leg. She was deployed twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. In her over 400 missions, no human fatalities occurred under her watch.

For her six years of unequivocal service, she received the PDSA Dickin Medal — stated by PDSA as:

*"the highest award any animal in the world can achieve while serving in military conflict."*

### **MWDs are given humane tasks that do the most good.**

In the Marine Corps, German Shepherd Dogs, Belgian Malinois, and Labrador Retrievers are typical breeds acquired. They also use German Shorthaired Pointers, and Edens has even seen poodles. Superhuman abilities make dogs ideal for a variety of military specialties.

Some MWDs are trained for detecting narcotics and are dual certified for patrol. The Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego searches hundreds of cars weekly for narcotics, explosives, and weapons. A surprising amount of medical marijuana and suspicious packages come into the depot.



**Photos left to right:** Handler SSgt. Shawn Edens takes a break from training Patrol Explosive Detection Dog Piko for bite work • Sgt. Christopher J. Sandbeck trains Patrol Explosive Detection Dog Largo • Specialized Search Dog Lucky ready for off leash training on war zone obstacle course from handler Sgt. Andrew Wundsam, Camp Pendleton, April 4, 2018. Attached to 1st Law Enforcement Battalion, I Marine Expeditionary Force, they are preparing for an upcoming deployment with the 13th MEU - *photos by Jeanne McKinney*

With their acute senses of sound, scent, and sight, scout dogs serve as valuable enemy alert systems, more subdued in nature, to get along with friendlies. Radio-controlled SSDs are sent out while the handler stands back and gives directions on which way to go. The dog wears the radio on its harness.

### **Sentry dogs are some of the more aggressive MWDs.**

Their function is to detect and attack on command anyone but their handler and those who care for them. Anywhere security needs to be maintained, a sentry dog proves valuable. They work on a short leash and learn to warn by growling and barking, and therefore scare potential intruders into re-thinking a confrontation.

A combat tracker dog tracks down a person who leaves the explosives that other specialized dogs detect. "I've seen people getting tracked through the woods, on the concrete, then a car driving [off]. The dog still follows a couple miles down the road until it finds the person," Edens explained.

Multipurpose MWDs have triple certifications for explosive detection, patrol, and tracking. They operate off leash and are used only with Special Forces, i.e., Marines Special Operations Command.

Each dog needs to understand its military occupational specialty. For instance, the patrol dog trains to press an attack at the command of its handler with the aggressiveness of a sentry dog, but unlike the sentry dog, the attack can be stopped anytime, making it nonlethal.

### **Teaching MWDs to detect changing threats in the fight against terrorism.**

Edens appreciates the opportunity to train with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to imprint new odors concocted by whatever enemy the Marines must confront. And it's not just explosives, but teaching the dogs different skills.

"We simulated an assault on a compound that didn't have a wall or an entrance to it. I had to put Piko on my shoulders and climb a ladder. It took some training to get him to that point," said Edens.

External stimuli, such as artillery and arms fire, are hurdles to clear. A handler must consider getting on an aircraft in close proximity to people, the effects of rotor wash, and the press of detection at a rapid pace.

"If training in a sterile environment all the time, the dog can get thrown off in a new environment. Doing detection in a closed room, compared to doing it with a lot of gunfire, is completely different."

A handler's watch is their dog, 24/7. They rise, ingrain discipline, hone formidable skills, play, and put the dog to bed.

### **Marines have to find the right match between dog and handler.**

It's not always easy to match dog and handler. The scars on Edens' arms are a reminder. Edens had previously sought to work with an aggressive dog. While he made progress at first, the dog bit Edens three times. It bit another handler also, making the risk to the Marines too great for a dependable rapport.

## Training ended, leaving a sadness that lingers.

Many dogs and handlers have been killed and injured in war zones while serving their country. We grieve the numbers. MWDs have forward deployed in military operations as early as World War I. But unlike their compatriots of yesteryear, better understanding, advanced training and veterinary care, and a structured retirement add up to more success, less loss, and no leaving any dogs behind.

Sgt. Christopher J. Sandbeck, a recently transitioned marine and former handler, served in Kuwait and Iraq 2015-2016 as part of a crisis response team with PEDD Largo.

“We’re an asset, there to lessen the probability of the enemy defeating with some type of explosive or personnel. They are definitely afraid of them [the dogs] because we’re the number one threat against IEDs.”

When Largo retired to Colorado with a friend, Sandbeck said he realized, “Patience is a big quality when it comes to dog training ... and kind of taking a breath and relaxing. You start getting frustrated with something or having a bad day, and you look at that dog and say, ‘That really didn’t matter.’ They can bring out the best qualities in you.”

## Courage, leadership, and responsibility.

Four paws and a set of boots hit the uncertain ground first with U.S. Marine troop movement. Mutual trust is in every step: I’ve got your back, and you have mine.

Edens strives to be as effective as possible in real operations. “The people that I’m supporting are reliant on me to be able to do what my dog is capable of. I have to be visually aware of what’s going on and possibly see indicators of explosives, as well as my dog detecting them. It may be that I step over it, and I don’t actually trigger it, but somebody else behind me does. It provides the people I’m working with a sense of security so that they’re better able to operate on their actual mission. You have to consider what’s at risk — it’s not a typical job,” said Edens.



**Clockwise from top left:** SSgt. Shawn Edens gives a tour of modern military working dog kennels, Camp Pendleton, April 4, 2018 - *photo by Jeanne McKinney* • Sgt. Josh Jones handles his canine counterpart, Uuriah, during a training event completed by Canadian Special Forces at Camp Lejeune, February 26, 2018 - *photo by Lance Cpl. Damarko Bones* • Handler SSgt. Shawn Edens runs to Kennel Master Sgt. Eric Gann, to get Patrol Explosive Detection Dog Piko to release bite - *photo by Jeanne McKinney* • Cpl. Juan M. Rodriguez, military dog handler with 1st Law Enforcement Battalion, I Marine Expeditionary Force, kneels next to K9 Lucca, 2012 - *photo by Cpl. Jennifer Pirante* • Specialized Search Dog Lucky waits for command after running obstacle course - *photo by Jeanne McKinney*





MWDs ask so little yet leave tracks of selfless service in the fight against terrorism. For the Marines' hero MWDs of 1st Law Enforcement Battalion, I Marine Expeditionary Force, for example, a Kong toy and loving praise reward a job well-done. In Piko's case, McDonald's fries are a special treat as well.

"I always have a good time being out there with him," said Edens. "Although wars are fought with weapons, they are won by men and women and their ever-faithful canine companions."



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**Jeanne McKinney** is an award-winning writer whose focus and passion is our United States active-duty military members and military news. Her *Patriot Profiles* offer an inside look at the amazing active-duty men and women in all armed services, including U.S. Marine Corps, Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, and National Guard. Reporting includes first-hand accounts of combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fight against violent terror groups, global defense, tactical training and readiness, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance, next-generation defense technology, family survival at home, U.S. port and border protection and illegal interdiction, women in combat, honoring the fallen, wounded warriors, MWDs, and much more. McKinney has won 10 San Diego Press Club Excellence in Journalism Awards, including five first places.



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