

## A Visit to a Military Working Dog Veterinary Facility

The Department of Defense Military Working Dog Veterinary Facility is located at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. This facility is the primary training ground for service dogs that go on to serve in all branches of the military, all around the world, as both detection and patrol dogs. Over 500 dogs reside there at any one time. These dogs are either undergoing initial training or working as training aids to facilitate the training of military dog handlers.

There are approximately 2000 military working dogs serving worldwide. They include U.S. Customs Service and Border Patrol narcotics detectors, Federal Aviation Administration drug and bomb sniffing dogs, and Secret Service explosives detectors. Hundreds of patrol dogs are trained for protection/attack to aid in law enforcement in all branches of the military. Almost all received their initial training at this facility. In the 1950's, after establishment of the U.S. Air Force, the USAF began using veterinarians to provide medical care to military working dogs (MWDs). The current USAF veterinary hospital was built in 1968 and remodeled in 1990. It is dedicated to the primary care for the 500 dogs living at the base and specialized consultation and referral care for all U.S. military dogs worldwide.

The hospital staff includes specialists in internal medicine, surgery, radiology, behavior, pathology and epidemiology. They treat all sorts of problems for the over 500 dogs in training nearby. They also consult with the veterinarians located on military bases worldwide about diseases and problems occurring in the working dogs residing on those bases. Cases that cannot be handled at these less sophisticated facilities may be flown in from all over the world for specialized care or surgery. The hospital also maintains complete medical and radiographic records for all military working dogs, past and present. This collection represents the largest database of technical information on military working dogs in the world.

A few dogs are bred here but most are raised elsewhere. They start their training here at about 1 and ½ to 2 years of age, once they are mature enough to concentrate on their tough curriculum. After their initial training, they leave the facility with a 95% accuracy rate in drug and bomb sniffing and a 90% success rate in their patrol training.

Because these dogs are specially bred and trained they are worth thousands of dollars, and an immense amount of time and expertise are available for their care. CT and MRI imaging for these canine patients are available through the Air Force's Wilford Hall Medical Center. The dogs have a higher priority than some of the people – retired generals have been bumped off the schedule so a working dog can have priority access to the MRI machine!

The approximate monthly workload at this veterinary hospital includes over 3000 outpatient visits, 1000 diagnostic procedures such as ultrasound scans or MRIs, 60 surgical and dental procedures, 30 procurement examinations and 60 telephone, e-mail and tele-radiology consultations. All candidates vying for training as military working dogs undergo behavioral and medical screening, including physical exam, hip and elbow x-rays under anesthesia and blood testing before being admitted to the program.

The health of these dogs and the longevity of their working lives is impressive, despite extremely rigorous training and conditions. Some dogs end up in the arctic, others in the tropics. They are exposed to diseases that most U.S. veterinarians have barely

heard of. The average house pet may sleep 15 hours a day, whereas these dogs may work for that many hours. Yet the average MWD retires from active duty at age 10 and ½ and many continue to work until age 14 or 15. Some become semi-retired in their teens and are used to train new handlers at Lackland.

This longevity and good health is due in great part to the level of care these dogs receive. They receive physical exams twice a year; complete blood screening (CBC, chemistry panel, thyroid level, electrolytes) once yearly until age 8 and twice a year thereafter; hip x-rays every 2 years; Heartgard and Frontline Top Spot monthly; echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart) annually after age 8; Science Diet Active food; annual vaccinations; and dental care as needed. Because of a high incidence of GDV (gastric dilatation and volvulus or bloat), when female dogs are spayed at Lackland, the stomach is tacked to the body wall to prevent it from twisting later on. Advanced orthopedic procedures are also common at the facility.

Good health care is extremely important to the fitness and longevity of these dogs. If you want your dog to work or play this hard for many years you, too, need to provide good medical care. It's also important to have good genetics. Hip and elbow dysplasia, along with many other inherited diseases, disqualify dogs from this kind of work because the dog won't stay healthy long enough to pay for the immense amount of training they require.

Next time you see one of these dogs in action, at an airport perhaps, or in film footage of a military action in a foreign country, you'll have a better understanding of the value of these wonderful animals who work so hard for our military forces worldwide.

Seeing eye and other therapy dogs receive the same type of rigorous screening and health care. These dogs save or enhance people's lives and are worth a great deal to their owners, who often cannot function effectively without them.