



DOGMAN

A Brotherhood of All Combat Veteran Dog Handlers



VIETNAM DOG HANDLER ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 29 - NUMBER 3 - SEPTEMBER 2022

Remembering SFC Jesse S. Mendez (Ret.)

Duty – Sacrifice - Family
January 15, 1928 – June 3, 2022
by Michael Lemish

The date is April 17, 1969. You are 41 years old, career Army and soon to retire. And you are at a civilian airfield near Columbus, Georgia about to make your 238th parachute jump. The jumps you made at this time were still primitive by today's standards – a conical chute and the hope you didn't break anything on landing. This is not a jump for the Army but one for yourself and something you believe in. It's the companion that is along for the ride with you that makes the difference this time. Hang on to your risers and file this episode from history under "P" for persistence.

Jesse Salvador Mendez was born in Mason City, Iowa. His parents were working class and lived a hard-scrabbled life. Mendez did not have it easy – the United States was just entering the "Great Depression" that would make life unbearably harsh for many Americans. The second strike against him was being born Mexican-American. You'd grow up as a second-class citizen in a world where many storefronts posted a sign, "No Mexicans Allowed." Mendez took the high road and wanted respect. He decided the best way to earn it was to join the military.

Mendez joined the Marine Corps in 1945 and for two years was part of the occupation force in the Pacific

with an MOS of railroad traffic duties. After departing the Marines, he worked for several railroad lines back in the states until the military bug bit him again and he joined the Army in 1950.

In 1951 he shipped overseas where the Korean War was in full swing after a year of conflict. Mendez became a minefield demolition platoon sergeant and served two years there. He was awarded the Korean Service Medal with one silver and one bronze star. He also earned the United Nations Service Medal along with the National Defense Service Medal.

But it would be in 1954, when he would find his true calling in the Army. Jess always enjoyed the company of dogs. He volunteered for the Scout Dog Training Course conducted at Fort Carson, Colorado. It was during this period when he met his soon-to-be future wife, Eloise Perez. Jess continued training and educating himself before attending and graduating from the Scout Dog Instructor Training Course.

It was in 1957 when Mendez was posted in Lenggries, Germany, the hub of Army dog training and the procurement of German shepherds for military use in Europe and the United States. Jesse and Eloisa Perez were married on June 27, 1957. Behind every good man is a strong woman. Eloisa fit the bill precisely.

The pair would raise three children and she would bear the brunt of the work with her husband often away on deployment. Loneliness and hardship are not uncommon burdens most military families face to this day.



Jesse Mendez with his wife with baby Saba, the first of three children. Photo courtesy of Monica Mendez.

In 1962, the United States began shipping German Shepherd dogs from Europe to South Vietnam. The idea was to start a military dog program for the Army of Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). In April 1962, Mendez volunteered along with three other instructors. They began at Go Vap, about 12 miles east of Saigon while construction of a larger training facility commenced nearby.

In one of my early interviews,
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From the president

By John R. Harvey
VDHA President

I imagine, based on our military backgrounds, we all have many of the same personality characteristics. Over the years I have been told by family and friends that I operate on a mission-oriented basis. Whether it is painting the kitchen or cleaning out the garage, once I get started (motivated) it is “damn the torpedoes full speed ahead, get out of my way.”

Family trips are marathons. You start at Point A with the objective of reaching Point B in as little time as possible. Rule number one, go to the bathroom before getting into the car. As long as there is gas in the tank there are two options, hold it until the next rest area, or stop at the side of the highway with the front passenger and back passenger doors open. Hopefully, you won't hit either one when you squat.

Travel items in the back seat include bottled water, a roll of toilet paper and snacks, if so inclined. Travel times are limited to six to seven hours, unless you experience the occasional leg cramp; then you are allowed to stop and stretch. I am not advocating this as a desired lifestyle. I am just describing the life that I lead. Hopefully, when I finally retire, I will be able to stop at those quaint little antique shops along the way that my wife loves to browse in.

The end of July, my wife convinced me to take two weeks off and try to escape the Fort Lauderdale heat up in the North Carolina mountains. We spent four days in Beech Mountain at 6,200 feet with the average temperature at 72 degrees. We then stopped in Asheville, NC, for a couple of days. For the first part of the trip we were joined by John Sciascia and his lovely wife Johanna. But all too soon it was time to start the first leg of our trip home which was driving from Asheville, NC to Savannah, Georgia. We scheduled the drive such that we would get into Savannah around 4:00 pm in order to check into our hotel.

Four hours into the drive, I turned to my wife and asked if we could stop along the way, stating that there was something that I wanted to show her. She could barely contain herself. Stop along the way to see the sights? It had to be something really special, it was so out of character.

We were about eight miles from Columbia, SC. Moving along at eighty miles an hour, I started fiddling with the car's GPS trying to find 700 Hampton Street, Columbia, SC. Twenty minutes later we arrived at Columbia's Memorial Park. This is the home for Johnny Mayo's and Renee Bemis' War Dog Memorial.



The memorial is as beautiful today as it was the day that it was dedicated back on November 11, 2015. The lesson learned was accomplishing the mission is important, but sometimes taking a moment to stop and smell the roses is equally rewarding.

Next time you are near Columbia, SC, take a little time and stop and visit Columbia's Memorial Park. Life is short, and I promise you that you will not regret it.

Your board continues to discuss the planning for our next reunion. The general consensus is that we should wait until April or May 2024. There are a number of locations under consideration, however Reno appears to be a front runner. Unfortunately, negotiations with the hotels are limited to no earlier than 12 months before the event. This means it will be May of 2023 before we will have any quotes to compare. There is still time to let your board know of any alternatives. One thing we have learned is that it is easier if we have a VDHA member on the ground in the area of choice.

I would also like to bring another matter to your attention. There is a production company in South Carolina called Panteao Productions, LLC. They are producing a documentary called, *The War Dogs: A Voice for the Voiceless*. They are currently searching for Vietnam combat dog handlers to interview. The documentary will cover WW II, Korea and Vietnam. If you are interested in participating you can contact Fernando T. Coelho, President, at 252-767-6746, or fernando@panteao.com.

Remembering SFC Jesse S. Mendez (Ret.)

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Mendez talked about some of the problems the instructors faced:

"There were many difficulties encountered in getting the ARVN handlers to accept their dogs. It was very difficult to show how valuable the dogs were for security and scouting.

When we first got there, we had a heck of a mess. The Air Force had trained many sentry and attack dogs and the ARVN were trying to use them with infantry units out in the field when only a silent scout dog would work. They would bark on patrol and even attack their own patrol members. We were eventually able to exchange them out.

But the biggest problem was trying to get the handlers to praise their dogs if they performed well or did what was expected of them. Perhaps they were reluctant because of the dog's size - after all, many handlers only outweighed their dogs by a few pounds."



Mendez in the field with his ARVN handler and interpreter. Photo: courtesy Monica Mendez.

Mendez was instrumental in establishing five ARVN scout dog platoons. While in-country, he was awarded two Purple Hearts along

with the Air Medal (Army) based on the number of helicopter operations he was involved in. After three tours of duty, he returned home. The timing was perfect as the United States was sucked into the Vietnam conflict.

With just one scout dog platoon (26th IPSD) available, the DoD ramped up an expansion plan for additional platoons along with a push for dog recruitment. Mendez was able to take the lessons he learned in Vietnam and apply them at Fort Benning for the scout dog program as Chief Instructor.

Training manuals were updated and developed, and he had a simulated Vietnamese village built to make the training even more realistic.

And so, it was on a sunny Thursday afternoon in April of 1969 that Mendez would board a Cessna 175 with a parachute strapped to his back. But unlike all previous jumps, this time scout dog Pal (X296) would be along for the ride.

The pair climbed to 3,800 feet and they departed the plane together. Mendez delayed opening the chute and recorded the first HALO (high altitude-low opening) jump with an Army scout dog.

The results were almost anticlimactic as Pal did not struggle during the descent and the pair landed just 200 feet off target.

Still, it must have scared the crap out of the dog just like anyone who has made a jump for the first time. Several more jumps were made during the next six months including one at an air show. Pal eventually retired to spend his remaining years with the Mendez family. But the Army never ran with

the idea of parachuting handlers and dogs until many years later.

HALO jumps would eventually exceed an altitude of 15,000 feet and the idea of a handler jumping with a dog would not happen until parachute technology advanced. Credit Mendez with paving the way.



Departing the Cessna 175 with Pal the scout dog. Photo: Mike Lemish Collection.



SGT. Mendez and Pal after the first HALO jump with a scout dog. Pal is no worse for wear. Photo: Mike Lemish Collection.

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TRACKER REPORT

I attended the VDHA reunion in San Antonio and was surprised how well it went. It was our first attempt at changing the dates from the usual fall schedule. For me, I've been there many times in my life and enjoyed the visit because of the trip to Lackland and having lunch for the first time with fellow members at the Hemisphere restaurant. In fact, I've attended every single VDHA reunion from the beginning.

At this reunion, we had a chance to speak with military officials that gave us an update about current military K9 activities. Speaking with them brought back memories of going to the very first reunion in Washington D.C., and how that lead me to research facts presented there. It was also there that the idea of VDHA was first conceived. To explain, John Langley had the idea to get Vietnam dog handlers together and threw out invitations for them to attend. I answered, along with trackers Mark Bowen, Frank Merritt, and Grant Coates. In all, I believe there were 50 of us.

At the reunion, Howard Hays, DVM, gave a presentation about his interest in talking with Vietnam dog handlers. He was hired to study the affects of Agent Orange on the MWD's by the American Cancer Society. He told us that the main reason for the study was the fact they could not find any physiological data collected from military personnel that died in Vietnam. Basically, no autopsies or any medical documentation collected.

However, military working dogs that died in country were under orders to have necropsies performed on them when possible. He was hired to collect and collate data from this and report his findings. He found this was problematic at best. The main issue he found was the military did not keep any documentation of who handled what dog or how many. Basically, they couldn't coordinate the data collected from the necropsies to human handlers. (FYI, my dog had at least 4 handlers).

At the reunion, he had the list of the dogs' names and was seeking help in locating the Vietnam dog handlers that handled them. Since that reunion, I've obtained a copy of Dr. Hayes' report to the American Cancer Society. The list of MWDs from that list was collected by some VDHA members. As a result, we can make the assumption, it was our MWDs that contributed to the study of Agent Orange and it's affect's on Vietnam veterans.

On a side note, I tried to follow up on the statement concerning the lack of autopsies on personnel that died in Vietnam. Being a former Peace Officer and trained homicide investigator, I used information collected

through various sources concerning one tracker that I personally knew to verify that statement. He died in country and was listed as "non-hostile, died of illness or injury." My investigation included a statement from a tracker that was present the night of his death and a statement from his immediate family.

I was told the cause of death listed was "cause of death -infective disease." The questions came up, what was the disease, why weren't others affected, and why NO autopsy was performed? If there was a case to order an autopsy in civilian life, this would qualify. I still can't get information to contradict my assumption, but would gladly entertain more input about this statement. If anyone can help me clarify it, be my guest. Until then, SEEK ON.

BX HOLIDAY SALE

SEE THE SPECIAL OFFER FROM MIKE

(SHORTY) HURDER, BX MANAGER

ON THE BACK PAGE

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Dogman

Dogman is published quarterly by the Vietnam Dog Handler Association, Inc. Members and their families are encouraged to submit articles, letters, photos, etc.

Letters and stories are subject to editing. Email all submissions to Dogman@VDHA.us or mail to Steve Lemish, Dogman Editor, 105 W. "F" Street, Suite 206, San Diego, CA 92101 (include a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want them returned).

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Vice President's Report

Saluting All Medal of Honor Recipients

By Ernie Ayala

On a warm Sunday afternoon, as I was kicking back ready to read the Sunday paper and catching up on the latest news around Riverside, California, I received a call from a guy in Pennsylvania. "Hi, is this Ernie Ayala?" he asked. I said it was and he proceeded to tell me he got my number from the American Legion Magazine, *The Legion* from when I posted the notice about our VDHA reunion being held in San Antonio.

"My name is Jim Barton, the new commander of the reactivated VFW Post 2088 in Everett, PA. It's called the Sgt. Ellis Weicht Post in honor of our town's World War II Medal of Honor recipient. In restarting our post again, the membership decided to add Vietnam War Medal of Honor recipient, Robert Hartsock to the name of the post. I thought since you are with the Vietnam Dog Handlers you would be interested in that."

It was impressive that the small city of Everett, Pennsylvania had two Medal of Honor recipients they could be proud of while every dog handler in the history of U.S. Armed Forces had only one.

Robert Willard Hartsock was born in Cumberland, Maryland on January 24, 1945. He joined the Army in 1967 in Fairmont, West Virginia and by February 23, 1969 was serving as a staff sergeant in the 44th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog (IPSD), 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division.

His compound was attacked on that day in Hau Nghia Province, South Vietnam, during Operation Toan Thang III. As the enemy surrounded the compound and bombarded it first with mortars and then with small arms fire, the men at the compound held them off. A sapper squad got through the fence and was shot by SSG Hartsock but not before one of them flung his satchel charge toward the command center. In that split moment, SSG Hartsock made the decision to cover the bomb with his body.

He laid down his life to save the life of his commander, his unit and the military working dogs under his command. Despite his wounds, he still crawled five meters to a ditch and provided heavy suppressive fire, completely pinning down the enemy and allowing his commander to seek shelter. SSG Hartsock continued his deadly stream of fire until he succumbed to his wounds. As the Medal of Honor Citation read, "SSG Hartsock's extraordinary

heroism and profound concern for the lives of his fellow soldiers were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit on him, his unit and the United States Army."

Both names of Hartsock and Weicht and their Medal of Honor Citations are permanently etched in the Bedford County Veterans Grove near Everett. A large statue of SSG Hartsock with his MWD Duke is at the entrance. Hartsock is buried at Rocky Gap Veterans Cemetery in Flintstone, MD. A year after his passing, on April 7, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon presented the medal to Hartsock's son, Dion E. Hartsock at the White House.

The VFW in Everett is having a fundraiser to erect another statue of SSG Robert Hartsock in the city's town square. When I get more information about donating or attending the day of it's unveiling, I will pass it on to all our readers.

The Vietnam War Monument



The Vietnam War Monument triangle was dedicated in September 2020. The stone marker features the names of Bedford County Veterans who died during that war and the triangle Honor Walk features those who served during Vietnam. In-country vets are marked with a Vietnam Service Medal. The statue is of Everett Medal of Honor recipient, Robert Hartsock and his Military Working Dog, Duke. He is focusing on the stone marker which bears his name and all the names of those who died during the war. Thumbprints of vets who served during the Vietnam War are pressed into the base of the bronze.

Remembering SFC Jesse S. Mendez (Ret.)

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It was the following month when Mendez retired from the Army on May 31, 1969. Something truly deserved. As to his character, he was not one to sit around or be a layabout. He would continue to support his church and the Columbus, Georgia community.

He volunteered as troop leader with the Boy Scouts of America Weracoba District, Troop 132. He also belonged to Woodmen of the World, a national fraternity that supported their local communities in many ways depending on what was needed at the time. And with the growing enthusiasm of citizens band radio during the 1970s, he was a member of the "Valley Fivewatters," the Columbus Chattahoochee Valley Citizens Band Club.

True to form, dogs were always by his side, either at home or somewhere in the area that needed help. He volunteered at the Metropolitan Animal Shelter and as a driver for the Metropolitan Animal Rescue Service. Essentially, he was part of an ambulance service for dogs that were hit by cars or injured and needed immediate veterinary care.

He would also contribute to, honor the history of, and champion the advancement of military working dogs. After the dedication of the war dog memorial at Fort Benning in 2000, he was instrumental in establishing several memorial pedestals that would surround the statue.

At the memorial rededication on May 14, 2022, Jess was able to make one final visit to the site. Although he was not able to leave the car, he was overwhelmed by friends and well-wishers that wanted to greet him.

As we go through life, we will meet hundreds, if not thousands of people. Some we will dismiss, like, dislike, love or even hate. A select few may also inspire and make a mark on you.

And then there will be a couple of folks that make you say, "This is someone I want running shotgun on my backside to check my six." Jesse Mendez is one of those select few. I remember in a telephone interview I did with his daughter several years ago, Army LT. Colonel (ret.) Monica Mendez said, "He is my hero." Yes, Monica. But with his devotion to God, country, family and dogs, he is a hero to the rest of us.



Jesse Mendez speaking at the war dog memorial pedestal dedication overlooking Sacrifice Field at Fort Benning. Photo: Mike Lemish.

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DEADLINE

ARTICLES FOR
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ISSUE MUST BE
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November 23

The Tip of the Sword; A War Dog Story

Editor's Note: This is the fifth installment of a multi-part story. It details his story from college to Vietnam and his dog Skipper (X268). In this episode, he finally makes it to his unit in Vietnam.

By Vernon J. Roman

Scout Dog Handler

To make the situation more interesting, orders were handed out, and the three of us would be heading up to the DMZ. During that time frame, engagements up North were not going well and a lot of soldiers were ending up dead. We were one evening from shipping out. We never said a word between the three of us. We sort of looked each other in the eyes and we came to the conclusion that I did not have a prayer with that dog, and something had to be done. Without saying what we were going to do, we set off to eliminate the problem...that dog was not going to the field again.

The three of us headed out to do in the dog, but right before we reached our destination, we were intercepted by the in-country trainer. He knew what our intentions were and he told us it would not be necessary to do what we were planning. The dog had been scratched, and that I would be receiving a different dog from the scout dog unit itself. They had a handler that was a short timer, and I would be getting his dog. Problem solved!

My friend, Daryl and the trainer, for some reason, headed back to the main office. Another handler and I went back to our barracks to complete our packing to ship out the next day. Low and behold, the two of us walked into our funeral. Apparently, everyone knew where everyone else was shipping out to. The three of us were considered to be dead, or at least there was a very high probability that we were going to be killed and not see the USA again except in a box. They were conducting a candle light service for us. Talk about a real weird world experience...again...only in the country a week...and the odds makers (our fellow dog handlers) are now predicting that we were most likely going to be killed. Welcome to Vietnam. We flew up to I Corps and landed at Quan Tre Air Base.

If I were to make it home and have some sort of normal life, I instinctively knew that I needed to protect my mind as much as possible. So, from the very beginning of being in country, I knew I was going to need to take steps to limit the potential baggage that I could have rolling around in my head. I did my very

best to tune out the ugly stuff by ignoring it or refusing to acknowledge the event, or even that it was happening. I created my own reality. Even though there were bodies stacked like cord wood at the airport when we landed and deplaned, I did my best to totally ignore them or acknowledge they were even there.

We were met by someone from the dog unit. From Quan Tre, we rode in a jeep to our compound located at Camp Red Devil. However, we had one more stop we had to make first. This time, it was much more difficult to ignore or tune out what we saw and heard since we had to pay respects to two dead dog handlers from our unit that had been recently killed. I will truthfully say that I did not say any type of prayer for them or for myself. I just took it all in and tried to put it somewhere else in my mind so that it would not bother me. I saw the helmets, the guns, and the boots, and heard some words that I actually did not hear...then, finally, it was on to camp.

Our unit was located at the farthest end of the camp, which seemed to be surprisingly big. Camp Red Devil was like a little city and there was even a small trailer

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Treasurer's Report

CHECKING	\$32,815.66
SAVINGS	<u>5,075.60</u>
TOTAL	\$37,891.26

REMINDERS and INFORMATION:

Checks are always to be made payable to VDHA no matter if the funds are for dues or merchandise. The bank will not accept third party checks.

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Please, in the NOTE area of Pay Pal, indicate if your funds are for dues or merchandise. This will help payments move along faster. I won't need to call or email for clarification.

The Tip of the Sword

Continued from Page 7.

that held a PX where we could go buy items like cameras or watches. We were located on the side of the camp that was facing the DMZ. If attacked, the enemy would make contact with us first. Our location bumped right up to the road that circled Camp Red Devil. The bunkers were our line of defense. I remembered reasoning that the dogs would make excellent alarms in the event someone did manage to crawl in undetected.

As you went on the road leading to our platoon's location, there was a small hooch that contained the office, command center and our First Lt.'s quarters. Across from the command center was a hooch that served as our club house. During our down times, we could obtain beer, coke and sometimes hard liquor there. I fell in love with Coke. After living with the severe heat, being able to get your hands on an ice-cold coke that was pure heaven. To this day, Coke is my addiction...and it's no good unless it's ice cold.

We were able to have the luxury of cold cokes because our dogs' medication had to be kept cold. As such, we received a shipment of ice everyday. We did have to pay for what we drank at the club house, and I had \$20 dollars allocated from my check each month for spending money. Since I was never much into alcohol, I do not remember if we had beer and hard liquor or not. I suspect we did.

Along with that Coke, I would play hours upon hours of Pinochle which enabled me to wind down. If I was lucky, depending on what was going on around the camp, I might get to go out in back of the hooches and throw horse shoes. In the main compound, a little volleyball was played occasionally.

Nearby, there were several rows of dogs tethered to their kennels. We had about 26 Scout Dog teams and two Tracker Dog teams. While in dog school, we took care of the needs of our dogs. Here, when your dog was located at base camp, you did not have to worry about it at all. Right across from the dogs was another building/hooch that was the clinic for our dogs. Once a week, blood had to be drawn, and, the general health of the dog was continuously monitored by the Army's version of veterinarians.

Continued in the next issue.

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