

GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR - GABE



Gabe began his service to the United States of America as a Military Working Dog in 2006 and as such has had an impact not only on the life of Charles Shuck, his handler, but indeed American soldiers around the world. While deployed to Iraq, he completed over 210 combat missions with 26 finds of explosives and weapons. When Gabe is not leading a combat mission he frequently visited wounded troops in Army hospitals.

Gabe was a noncommissioned officer (a sergeant first class), a combat veteran and a hero with some 40 awards including three Army Commendation Medals and an Army Achievement medal. He's trained to sniff out explosives, weapons and ammunition. Gabe is also a rescue dog.

At first, Gabe was a dismal failure at the Military Working Dog School at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, as he didn't realize he was supposed to be a military working dog. Sgt. 1st Class Charles Shuck said. "He was being a dog. ... He just didn't want to search, didn't want to find stuff." Though Gabe, who had somehow made his way to the Army after turning up in a Texas pound, didn't even know how to sit, Shuck had quickly fallen in love with the goofy 3-year-old yellow Lab working with him patiently for weeks. However, Shuck recalls, "Just prior to the final evaluation at SSD (specialized search dog) school, I didn't think Gabe was going to be my dog because he was not working out too well for me. I liked him more than the other dog personally, but I had to take the dog that would save my life downrange. "It kind of broke my heart, but when we got to that final evaluation, he was on it. You'd think he knew that if he didn't perform, he was not going with me. Gabe actually performed like a rock star and Doki (the other dog) was scared of the dark."

Seventeen days later, in August 2006, Shuck and Gabe were on a plane, heading to Iraq with the 178th Military Police Detachment. They would spend the next 13 months going out on more than 210 combat missions with the 1st Battalion, 37th Field Artillery Regiment and the 5th Battalion, 82nd Field Artillery Regiment, some as long as 18 hours, occasionally coming under fire and searching for explosives and weapons during everything from night raids to patrols to cordon searches to checkpoints. Gabe didn't like the sound of gunfire – he would shake at the sound of .50s and still tries to hide from loud noises – but he had 26 finds, making him the most successful detection dog in Iraq that year.

Shuck wishes they'd been on every mission. "We always say that maybe we would have found something that killed somebody." Even if Gabe found a single bullet, it was a victory, pointing out that was one less bullet that could be used against American troops.

The pair were together 24 hours a day in Iraq, and realizing that "no matter what kind of bad day I was having, Gabe was always there," making him feel better, Shuck started taking Gabe to visit other units and Soldiers who were having a hard time. In fact, Gabe's volunteer therapy dog role became at least as important as his actual detection job.

"To me, dogs bring more than just their nose," Shuck said. "You have a dog out there that's trained to do a mission, to find bombs, to find bad guys, but then also, you're able to bring that sense of comfort and home to Soldiers. ... They're able to touch Gabe and kiss Gabe and love Gabe, and that's just an amazing feeling."



Gabe was a docile dog, Shuck added, not a typical hyper Lab and not a tough scary working dog, just a loveable, cuddly overgrown puppy. “As Soldiers were killed, if we were able to go over to the unit and just let them cry on Gabe’s fur and just go be the dog in that unit, we did that. Or, on our way out of Iraq, we got to visit the combat hospitals and visit American Soldiers who were wounded in there and just go in there and let them love up on Gabe for about two hours. It was amazing.”

A year after the pair returned to Fort Hood, Shuck received drill sergeant orders to Fort Jackson, S. C. It was time to give Gabe up, and it “was horrifying ... when I had to put him in the truck and shut the door and watch him get driven away” to Lackland. Gabe had other ideas, however: He simply refused to work with a new handler. He would not sniff for anyone else, trainers at Lackland told Shuck when he stopped by for a visit a few weeks after they parted. Did he want to adopt Gabe?

Yes, of course.

“I was happy. I’m not going to lie, I was very happy. I knew he still had stuff to give to America, but I guess me being selfish, I wanted him to be at home with me, because that’s where I knew he belonged. When he left, it was like a piece of my heart was taken out. I almost died.”

The staff at Lackland pushed the paperwork through in a week. There was only one problem: Gabe was mad at Shuck, angry that he had given him away. He ignored Shuck, refusing to come to him. Fortunately a few treats did the trick. Like most Labs, Shuck explained, Gabe is a food hound and will forgive anything for treats. Gabe retired in 2009 after a very distinguished career earning over 40 awards and coins of excellence for his work. What he does is out of a love for his country and the people of the United States.

Gabe continued to visit schools to teach and inspire children with the importance of staying in school. Gabe had proudly represented the U.S. Military Police until his passing on February 13, 2013.