

Seven Questions

When Your Co-Workers Stand on Four Legs

Retired Master Sgt. Nathaniel Burney, a military policeman who joined the Army in 1996, spent the second half of his 20-year career around military working dogs—handling them, training them and keeping their kennels in order. He trained aggressive dogs and good sniffers, and ran the DoD program that trains other handlers. Now he raises and trains service dogs for combat veterans. Burney is proof that when your co-workers are canines, and you can help make the life of a combat vet a little better, you're the luckiest guy in the world.

1. What is it about dogs?

They crave attention. We humans need to be in charge of something. Even if we're not in charge of ourselves, we can take charge with a dog because all they want is our love and attention. So, I think us humans, we love and flock to dogs because—look at them—they're majestic creatures just waiting for our love and our direction. And the ability of a dog cannot be replicated by man or machine. They are invaluable.

2. Did you love dogs before you started working with them?

Growing up I had dogs. I had no issue with dogs, but when I was in 10th grade, I was at the bus stop, and there was a pit bull that came up to the bus stop. He was sniffing everyone, everyone was all scared, he was loose, and I wasn't worried because I like dogs. He came up to me and he smelled that I was not scared of him. Then he tried to be alpha, tried to start humping me, so I shooed him away and he attacked me. That made me hate dogs, but then I became a dog trainer in the Army. It got me over the fear.

3. How did that come about?

I was an E-5 with the 3rd Infantry Division at the time, burned out from the military, tired of deploying. I'd already done two combat tours, plus Bosnia and Cuba. I was ready to be done, but my sergeant major and commander didn't want to let me go, said the Army

needed to hold onto good NCOs. They asked me what it would take for me to stay, and I thought I was calling their bluff when I asked for dog school. But they made it happen. I left for DoD Military Working Dog [Training] School in San Antonio the next day.

4. What was it like seeing the Army ramp up its use of dogs in the war zone?

It was crazy. At the time, the Army didn't really know how to use the dogs correctly, so you'd have a military working dog team assigned to a signal battalion, and they just sit on their butts with their radar. When you have a dog that is trained to detect a massive number of hazards and you've got them sitting and withering away, the training and value of the dog is lost. The Army has gotten smarter, about three years ago, by making canine handler its own MOS, 31K.

Now there is no signal commander in charge of a military working dog team.

5. How does the Army procure service dogs for soldiers who need them?

They don't. Service dogs are provided by nonprofit organizations like the one I work for, Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs, Inc. But if they are, they have to show their DD214, give written medical proof they need a service dog and then we talk to the provider. It's not an emotional support dog, you can go to a



DAWN BURNEY

Then-Staff Sgt. Nathaniel Burney with his dog Gerco when he was an instructor at the DoD Military Working Dog Training School, San Antonio.

psychiatrist and say you need one, or a therapy dog, which you might see at a hospital to help kids feel better. Those dogs have no rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act like service dogs do, so they cannot go everywhere a service dog can go.

6. How do the recipients react when they get their dogs?

Emotional. A lot of them start tearing up, a lot can't even move or speak because the animal is something that comes up on them and loves them. The dogs are affectionate, nonjudgmental, and is just there for them.

7. Is this a satisfying job?

It's overly satisfying. It's not even a job. When I get up and go in every day, it's not work. It's something that fulfills me.

—Gina Cavallaro



Guardian Angels
Medical Service Dogs, Inc.