





# THE DEVIL DOG OF FLORAL PARK



Before his tour of duty as a US Marine Corps Devil Dog was over, Jack would valiantly help save the lives of US Marines on an island in the Pacific. Jack (left) is seen here on March 17, 1944, with fellow Devil Dogs Thor (center) and Caesar. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARC WORTMAN

JEAN CONKLIN

**D**URING WORLD WAR II, most of the US Marine Corps dog handlers of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon were given sleek, black Doberman pinschers. A couple of marines received German shepherds. But two young marines, US Marine Corps PFC Gordon J. Wortman and US Marine Corps PFC Paul J. Castracane, were assigned a dog that looked like a German shepherd and had a light brown coat sprinkled with patches of white. He also had a black mask, a ring of black round his neck, and a damaged left ear.

Gordon, who had trained dogs before enlisting in the US Marine Corps on December 4, 1942, thought the dog's ear must have been damaged in a fight at some point. Whatever the case, the young canine learned quickly, and Gordon bragged about his "very smart pup" in the letters he wrote to his parents back home in Davis Junction, Illinois. This "very smart pup" was also very courageous, and before his tour of duty as a Devil Dog (a name by which US Marine Corps war dogs became known) was over, he would valiantly help save the lives of Gordon and other US Marines during a pitched battle against Japanese forces on a mosquito-infested island in the Pacific. His name was Jack. This is his inspiring story.

Gordon J. Wortman, who was one of Jack's first two handlers during World War II, is shown here with his father at the time of his enlistment in December 1942 at the age of twenty.

## Enlistment

The road to becoming a Devil Dog and a hero was not a straightforward one for Jack. The journey began in Floral Park, New York, where he lived with Joseph Verhaeghe, an immigrant to the United States from Belgium, and his family. Jack wasn't always a model dog. He delighted in stealing ice cream cones from children during walks around Floral Park with Joseph. But Jack was not rough when he stole ice cream cones, and he was always forgiven when Verhaeghe replaced the treats Jack took.

Jack was a loyal companion, guardian, and a beloved part of the Verhaeghe family, but when the United States entered World War II late in 1941, Joseph Verhaeghe wanted to do something to help the war effort, and ultimately, this would mean giving Jack up. Verhaeghe was in his forties when the United States entered the war, and he had a punctured eardrum, which prevented him from fighting in the war or serving in any other way. He tried to enlist in the US Navy to become part of the US Naval Construction Force (the Seabees), but the navy wouldn't take him because of his eardrum. He tried to join the US Merchant Marines, but this organization wouldn't take him for the same reason. Verhaeghe even went so far as to try to join the Canadian army, but once again, the punctured eardrum kept him at home in Floral Park with his family and with Jack.

Verhaeghe, however, wasn't finished. He had heard about a group called Dogs for Defense, which was looking for dogs to serve in the US armed forces. After consulting with his wife and his son Bobby (whose dog Jack ostensibly was) and obtaining their permission, Verhaeghe decided to enlist Jack and drove him to Hicksville, New York, where he was inducted by Dogs for Defense. Jack was subsequently loaned to the US government for the duration of the war and assigned to the US Marine Corps, where he became part of its war dog program and a Devil Dog.

## Military Training

When Jack was enlisted in the US Marine Corps at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, on March 3, 1943, he was three years old. He was assigned to the Dog Detachment and was given the serial number O9H. He



Jack received his initial military training in the swamps, open fields, and thick woods of Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. In this photo from 1942, military working dogs are being taught to jump over obstacles. PHOTO: RALPH MORSE/GETTY

## Dogs for Defense

**D**OGS FOR DEFENSE was an all-volunteer organization during World War II that consisted of dog trainers, owners, breeders, and other people with an interest in dogs. The organization was founded shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and early in the war, it was designated the official procurer of canines for the US armed forces.

Dogs for Defense regional directors throughout the United States mounted campaigns asking the public to give up their pets to the war effort, and within two years, the organization had received some forty thousand pet dogs for service in the US armed forces. Once the dogs were screened for general suitability, the number of dogs the organization had to work with was reduced to eighteen thousand. No dog was accepted unless it weighed at least fifty pounds, was less than five years old (the age cap was lowered to three years later in the war), and stood at least twenty inches high at the shoulder. The eighteen thousand dogs that met these basic criteria were passed on to the Quartermaster Corps, which weeded out roughly eight thousand other dogs because of their size or temperament or for health reasons.

After receiving basic behavioral training (learning commands, such as "sit" and "stay"), the dogs that the Quartermaster Corps accepted were trained as either sentry dogs, scout and patrol dogs, messenger dogs, or mine detection dogs. Most dogs procured for use in the US armed forces during World War II became sentry dogs. In all, more than ten thousand dogs were trained for use in the US armed forces during World War II, and about one thousand eight hundred of these animals saw combat in either Europe or the Pacific. —JS

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was listed in his official US Marine Corps Dog Record Book as a three-year-old German shepherd, and while most references to Jack refer to him as a “Belgian shepherd,” it is likely that he was a variant of the Belgian shepherd called a Belgian Malinois. (Belgian shepherds are nearly all black and have much longer fur than Jack did.) But no matter, he belonged to the corps now, and even though he was little more than a pup, his days of stealing ice cream cones from children were over. He was going to be part of an elite US Marine Corps fighting force that had been active for only about a year—the US Marine Corps Raiders—and little did anyone know that in eight months’ time he would become a hero in the Pacific.

Although Jack was destined to join the Raiders, first came some initial training at Camp Lejeune. The swamps, open fields, and thick woods of Camp Lejeune were the perfect venue for his early lessons, and when the Dog Detachment completed its training in North Carolina, Jack was sent to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in southern California for his amphibious training.

Jack was transferred from Camp Lejeune on April 30, 1943, and arrived at Camp Pendleton, southeast of Los Angeles, on May 5, 1943. At Camp Pendleton, he joined the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon and twenty-three other dogs that were being trained to be Devil Dogs. It was at Camp Pendleton that Jack was assigned to be handled by Gordon Wortman and Paul Castracane.

Jack began his training with Gordon and Paul as soon as he arrived at Camp Pendleton. Since the Raiders, to whom Jack was ultimately going to go, almost exclusively used messenger dogs, Jack began messenger dog training. As part of this training, he learned to carry messages, which were placed in a pouch attached to his collar, from Gordon to Paul, and vice versa, whenever one of them ordered him to report to the other one. Gordon and Paul also taught Jack how to safely lead patrols and how to track the enemy, even with guns going off around him and explosives detonating so close by that he was showered with dirt. When Gordon and Paul weren’t working with Jack, they fine-tuned their own skills as patrol leaders and sharpshooters.

### To the Pacific

Jack was kept at Camp Pendleton throughout most of June 1943. During this time, he was listed as weighing a healthy seventy-two and one-quarter pounds. Gordon wrote home during their training, praising Jack’s abilities, saying he was “a second Rin-Tin-Tin.” They practiced landing on beaches until they were battle ready, and then on June 23, Jack was put aboard a troop ship and taken to the South Pacific, to an island south of the equator called New Caledonia.

New Caledonia, which was about the size of New Jersey, was located northeast of Australia. It was hot there, but even in the scorching heat, the members of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon maintained their skills by training with their dogs three times a day so that when the time came, they could participate in the American island-hopping campaign, which was by that time well under way.

After spending the bulk of July in a Corps Replacement Battalion Transit Center, on August 4, 1943, Jack was attached to the 2nd Raider Battalion, 1st Raider Regiment. Then on September 12, 1943, he was transferred to H and S Company of the newly formed 2nd Raider Regiment (provisional). Jack’s training continued, and by September 15, he successfully completed the messenger training he had begun at Camp Pendleton in early May.

On October 7, 1943, Jack was taken from New Caledonia to Guadalcanal. He arrived on the island on October 11 and was kept there for two days only. Then on October 16, he was sent to Éfaté, an island located near New Caledonia in the Coral Sea. While on Éfaté, Jack took part in beach landing maneuvers. Six days later, he was transported off of Éfaté, and by October 23, he was on the island of Espiritu Santo, which is part of the New Hebrides Archipelago and is located partway between New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands. Jack remained on Espiritu Santo for five days, and on October 28, he was sent back to Guadalcanal where he became part of the preparations for the operation to isolate Rabaul and the Japanese airfields located there. Rabaul was located on the island of New Britain, but the push to take Rabaul would begin with an attack on an island called Bougainville, the largest island in the British Solomon Islands chain. It was to Bougainville that Jack, Gordon, and Paul were sent.

The main assault on Bougainville began at sunrise on November 1, 1943. The goal of the marine and naval forces



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARC WORTMAN

Shown here is the Message Unit of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon, including Jack (center) with Paul Castracane (standing, center) and Gordon Wortman (kneeling, center).

attacking the island was to rout out Japanese soldiers, knock out Japanese air bases on the island, and replace these air bases with Allied airstrips and an Allied naval base.

As they neared Bougainville, Gordon wrote his parents saying that he and Jack were all right. "I surely hope you get to see him [Jack] some day," Gordon wrote. "If I ever get a chance to come home again I will try to bring him with me. Jack is sitting here alongside me now, and he said to send you his love. Don't worry about me. Jack will take care of me."

On the morning of November 1, 1943, shortly after sunrise, Jack was lowered over the side of a troop ship in Empress Augusta Bay on Bougainville's west coast and joined Gordon and Paul in one of the landing craft that was going ashore following the initial attack. The men in the landing craft crouched low as bullets whizzed by. Waves slammed against the boat as it weaved its way past other boats that had been damaged or abandoned during the first waves of the attack, and when the ramp was lowered, the men and dogs jumped into the water and raced to shore. They scrambled across slate-gray sand and ducked into a recently abandoned Japanese trench. Although there was sporadic gunfire, there were no casualties among the members of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon at this point, and in the fighting that followed, the marine landing forces destroyed the Japanese bunkers defending the beach and drove the surviving Japanese soldiers into the jungle.

By early afternoon, the transports were ferrying equipment to the newly secured beachhead, and the sand was swarming with men who were in the



PHOTO: © HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

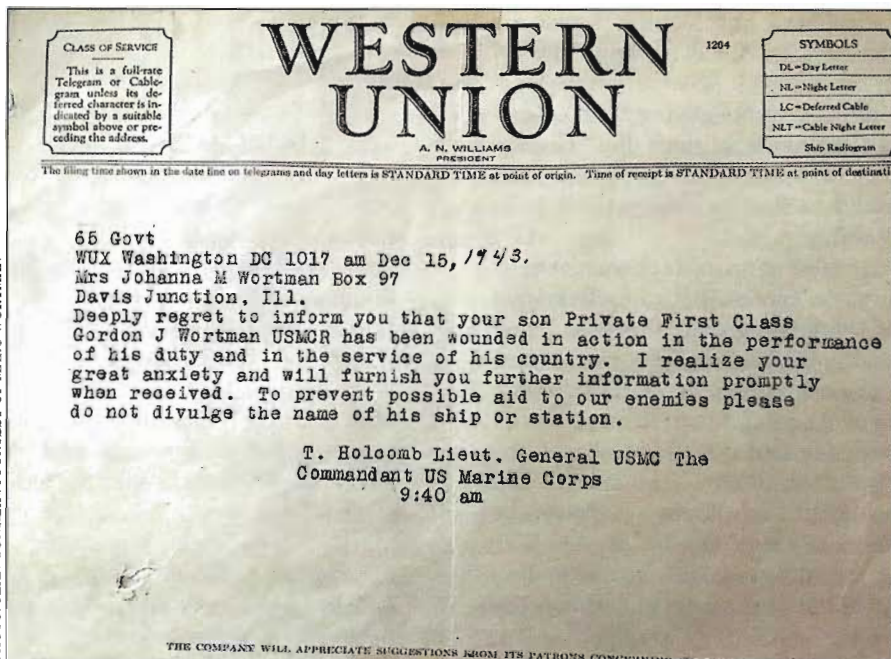
**A group of US Marines and their Devil Dogs pause for a photograph on Bougainville Island during World War II. On Bougainville, Jack was shot in the back, but still managed to carry a request for stretchers and reinforcements from the scene of a battle on the Piva Trail to the battalion command post. That message helped turned the tide of the battle.**

process of unloading vehicles, guns, ammunition, rations, water, and other supplies. A perimeter was established, and a roadblock was set up along a narrow, overgrown path known as the Piva Trail (also known as the Mission Trail), which was located inland from the marines' beachhead. The defense of this crucial spot on the trail was given to the 2nd Raider Regiment and members of the 9th Marines.

## The USMC Raiders

**T**HE US MARINE CORPS unit that Jack belonged to, the US Marine Corps Raiders, was established in February 1942 by order of Commandant of the Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Thomas Holcomb. When the United States entered World War II late in 1941, the US Marine Corps consisted of just nineteen thousand men. Knowing that it would take time for the US armed forces to mobilize, US Marine Corps leaders envisioned the Raiders as a small, elite fighting force that could fight behind enemy lines and carry the war to the Japanese Empire while the US Marine Corps and the rest of the US armed forces gained the manpower needed to confront the bulk of the Japanese forces head-on.

In all, there would be only four Raider battalions, and these battalions would be trained in methods of unconventional warfare that were heavily influenced by the way British commando units and Chinese guerilla fighters of the period fought. Opinions among US Marine Corps leaders about the need for the Raiders varied from the time of the unit's inception, and the Raiders was destined to exist for only about two years before it was disbanded on January 8, 1944, by Commandant of the Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Alexander Vandegrift. Among reasons why the unit, along with other special US Marine Corps units, like the parachutist battalions, was finally dissolved was the feeling within the corps that the existence of elite units was, as one US Marine Corps leader put it, "detrimental to morale of other troops." It was also felt that with mission-specific training, there was no reason that regular units within the US Marine Corps could not undertake the same tasks earmarked for the Raiders. —JS



Shown here is the telegraph sent to Gordon Wortman's mother, Johanna, to inform her that her son had been wounded in combat.

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### Jack the Hero

On November 7, 1943, Gordon and Jack were among those who were tasked with guarding the roadblock on the Piva Trail. Early in the afternoon, Japanese soldiers stole up on the marines and cut the telephone lines that ran from the roadblock back to the battalion's command post. Then they attacked. In the firefight that followed, the marines guarding the roadblock suffered casualties, and Gordon was shot in the leg. A Japanese machine gunner hit Jack in the back, seriously wounding him.

As the situation grew desperate, Gordon's commanding officer managed to get close to him and tell him that they needed to send word to the battalion command post that they were under attack and needed stretchers and reinforcements. He asked Gordon if he thought that Jack could make it back to the command post with a message. Gordon thought that Jack, wounded though he was, could make it. The officer scribbled a note requesting reinforcements and stretcher bearers on a piece of paper, and Gordon stuffed the note into the pouch attached to Jack's collar. Then he told Jack to report to Paul, who was back at the battalion command post.

Jack responded to Gordon's command by slowly and painfully standing up and taking a last look at Gordon before darting away into the jungle. A burst of Japanese bullets followed him.

Back at the battalion command post, Paul was just putting his gear away in his tent when he heard someone say that Jack had come into camp. The muddy, bloody dog located Paul and fell at his feet. Paul found the note in Jack's message pouch and rushed it to his commanding

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARC WORTMAN



Jack is shown here with handler Gordon Wortman in early 1944, two weeks after Gordon was released from the hospital following the battle on the Piva Trail.

officer. Then he sprinted to the medical station, cradling Jack in his arms.

As a result of the message Jack had succeeded in delivering, reinforcements were sent to the roadblock, forcing many Japanese soldiers to retreat. The marines overpowered those who remained and took them prisoner. Injured marines were placed on the stretchers that had also been requested and then were taken to a field hospital.

Following the battle at the roadblock on Bougainville, Gordon Wortman received a Purple Heart for the injuries he sustained. His parents were informed by telegraph on December 15, 1943, of his wounds and were assured that further information on his condition would follow. While Gordon was away from his unit recuperating, he wrote his parents letters expressing his eagerness to see Jack again.

By February 20, 1944, Gordon had recovered and was back with his unit, and although he saw Jack again, by then, the Raiders had been disbanded and Jack had been reassigned to another set of handlers. Jack's new handlers were US Marine Corps PFC Henry L. Denault and US Marine Corps PFC Francis F. Penrod, also former Raiders of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon.

Gordon Wortman went on to see action in Guam in July and August 1944 and was honorably discharged from the US Marine Corps on October 26, 1945. Although Gordon returned to Davis Junction, Illinois, after being discharged from the US Marine Corps, Jack never made it there, as Gordon had hoped he might.

On February 1, 1944, Jack was transferred to the 4th Marines, which on that date began absorbing most of the former Raider battalions. Some evidence suggests that by late March, Jack may have been assigned to other handlers, including a US Marine Corps PFC from the 1st



After Gordon Wortman was wounded on Bougainville Island, Jack was transferred to two other handlers of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon—US Marine Corps PFC Henry L. Denault and US Marine Corps PFC Francis F. Penrod. Private Penrod can be seen in this photograph standing with Jack, farthest to the left.



Jack, with his easily identified left ear, is shown here in late March of 1944 with a member of the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon identified only as US Marine Corps PFC Finley. Finley may have become one of Jack's handlers after the Raiders were disbanded and Jack was transferred to the 4th Marines in February 1944.

ENCLOSURE (4)

Date: Feb 4/1946

1. I, Joseph Verhaeghe, being the owner of a dog hereinafter described as JACK, a Belgian Shepherd whose U. S. Marine Corps Serial Number was 09H, do demand that JACK be returned to my custody and control.
2. I hereby certify that I have been informed by the U. S. Marine Corps, and fully understand, that the training for military service which this dog has undergone has made said dog too dangerous to release and that, notwithstanding the dog's vicious propensities, I demand that he be returned to me.
3. Understanding this, I declare that, by this request, I assume full responsibility for the actions of this dog from the moment of JACK's physical possession by me, knowing that I am required to effectively control JACK's movements and be responsible for injuries or other damages caused by the dog.
4. It is further understood that, in consideration of the return of the dog, I hereby agree to save harmless and indemnify the United States of America by paying to the Treasury any and all amounts paid to any person injured by this dog, pursuant to the judgment of any Court, Act of Congress or private settlement.

Joseph Verhaeghe  
Signature

State of New York }  
County of Nassau } ss

Before me, a notary public in and for the County and State aforesaid, on Feb 8<sup>th</sup> 1946, personally appeared Joseph Verhaeghe, known to me to be the person whose name is subscribed to the above instrument and being by me first duly sworn on oath, did acknowledge same to be his/her voluntary act and deed.

Alpha Jackson \*838  
Notary Public  
Nassau County

Marine War Dog Platoon named Finley. In any event, Jack's US Marine Corps Dog Record Book notes that he took part in the assault on Okinawa, from April 2 to July 6, 1945, and that he was then returned to the 1st Marine War Dog Platoon on July 31, 1945. He didn't return to the United States, however, until late 1945.

Following Jack's actions on Bougainville, several newspapers wrote articles recounting his and other US Marine Corps war dogs' brave deeds in battle. *Courage Comics* magazine did a story

Shown here is Joseph Verhaeghe's notarized letter, dated February 4, 1946, formally requesting that Jack be returned to "his custody and control."

about Jack in its fall 1945 issue, and news of Jack's heroic deed spread when the *Nassau Daily Review Star* printed an editorial cartoon featuring him. Eventually, Jack was sent back to Camp Lejeune, where on December 6, 1945, he joined the War Dog Training School. On February 4, 1946, Joseph Verhaeghe sent the US Marine Corps a notarized letter formally requesting that Jack be returned to "his custody and control." Having served the United States courageously, Jack was honorably discharged from the US Marine Corps on February 19, 1946, at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune. ■