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A Marine's Best Friend

Meet Lucca, the
brave K-9 hero
who risked her life
to save 14 men

Lucca, in
Woodbridge, Va.,
wears an honorary
Purple Heart
after losing her
left front leg in
an IED explosion
in Afghanistan.

A SALUTE TO LUCCA

WRITTEN BY
**MARIA
GOODAVAGE**

COVER & OPENING
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY MELISSA GOLDEN

MILITARY DOGS ARE OFTEN OUR TROOPS' FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE, SNIFFING OUT HIDDEN BOMBS IN SOME OF THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACES ON EARTH. THIS EXCERPT FROM THE NEW BOOK *TOP DOG* RECALLS THE SACRIFICE AND BRAVERY OF A SMART GERMAN SHEPHERD-BELGIAN MALINOIS MIX, WHO LED SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIERS ONTO A BATTLEFIELD IN AFGHANISTAN'S HELMAND RIVER VALLEY IN MARCH OF 2012. BUT IT ALSO CAPTURES THE LOYALTY AND TRUST THAT DEVELOP BETWEEN A DOG AND HER HANDLER AND THE DEEP, LOVING BOND THAT LASTS A LIFETIME.

MARINE CPL. JUAN "ROD" RODRIGUEZ CRUNCHED ACROSS THE DRY FARM FIELD, HIS RIGHT hand resting on the M4 rifle strapped to his chest. He kept clear of the path that meandered through hard clumps of dirt that looked nothing like the rich soil of his New England roots. The road less traveled—ideally, no road at all—was the safest from homemade bombs sowed by the Taliban. ★ Rod watched his dog Lucca, who was 30 feet ahead, inspecting for IEDs. Unlike much of the agricultural land around here, this field was barren. In the distance, a compound, a tree line, some worn-down mountains. ★ Rod could see Lucca trotting with a purpose, nose down, tail up. She was an old pro at the business of sniffing IEDs off leash. "Good girl, Mama Lucca," he said under his breath. ★ *Lucca Bear. Lucca Pie. Bearcat Jones. Mama Lucca.* The Special Forces soldiers Rod was working with had come to know Lucca by all the terms of endearment she had inspired during her career. She had led more than 400 missions, and no one had been hurt by an IED when they were with her. ★ *Mama Lucca* was the name that had stuck lately. She was the only one that the Green Berets felt comfortable hugging after a tough day. The maternal moniker was a natural fit. ➔➔

Gunnery Sgt. Chris Willingham, Lucca's original handler and current owner, still trains with her because she enjoys the challenge. To see more photos of Lucca, go to parade.com/lucca.



Rod saw Lucca moving close to the narrow dirt path. He could sense she was onto something, and watched her intently in case he needed to steer her clear of suspicious-looking spots. She walked back and forth and every few steps turned more quickly, as she traced the scent to its point of origin. Lucca's tail gave a few high, quick wags. She stopped and stared at Rod.

He got the message and called her back, praising her. "Good girl, Lucca!"

"Ben," he called to the engineer, who was following close behind. "Lucca just responded, right there," pointing to the spot.

"Okay, we'll take care of it," Ben said. "Nice work, Mama Lucca."

Rod shifted their course to keep Lucca away from the IED. She trotted ahead for about 25 feet, spun around, and headed back toward him.

A cloud of gray smoke erupted before Rod heard the explosion. "No!" Rod shouted, squeezing his helmet between his hands. Radios around him buzzed into a frenzy, but he didn't hear words. As the curtain of debris curled away, he could see Lucca had dragged herself up and was standing, dazed, alive. Rod dashed toward her, not thinking about IEDs that might be between them. Lucca could take only a few steps before Rod swept her up in his arms.

Snipers struck at times like this. Rod wanted to run to the tree line with his dog, but he was afraid she'd bleed out. He laid her on the ground and ripped a tourniquet from inside his flak jacket. The blood streamed, and the soil softened under Lucca. He saw now that her front left paw and lower leg had been torn away. Lucca panted hard, whimpering every few breaths.

Focus, focus, Rod told himself. He wrapped the tourniquet strap around her shoulder. Bleeding slowed. Good. He picked her up again and she melted into him as he ran to the tree line 60 feet away. The Green Berets pulled security around them. An 18-Delta medic ran over and injected Lucca with a dose of morphine. Her panting slowed, but she remained aware as the medic bandaged her leg and shoulder.

Lucca shifted her gaze to the sky. Rod looked and saw the Medevac helicopter coming toward them. The Black Hawk landed just far enough away so the wash didn't disturb Lucca. They loaded her up and Rod got in.

Special Forces Sgt. Jake Parker gave his friend Rod a thumbs-up as the Black Hawk headed east toward Camp Leatherneck.

That dog had better not die, Parker thought.



***** Rod never left Lucca's side as she recovered from surgery. *****

Three members of a veterinary team met the helicopter and carried Lucca to the back of a pickup. One of the vets rode with her, comforting her as he checked her vitals.

Inside the veterinary tent, they lifted Lucca onto a table. "You're going to be okay, Mama Lucca," Rod told her, trying to sound convincing. The team ran a series of tests, started her on IV fluids and antibiotics, and irrigated the wound. Then they drew the skin over what was left of the leg and stitched it shut.

"There's not much we can do for her," one of the veterinarians said.

Rod stopped breathing.

"We're going to have to send her to Kandahar. They're better equipped for trauma."

Rod exhaled and rested his hand on Lucca's fur. "I want to tell you," the vet con-

tinued, "she would have bled out fast if you hadn't acted so quickly." He suggested Rod grab some clean clothes for the trip. Once the vet was out of sight, Rod stopped fighting the tears for just a few seconds.

AT KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, CAPT. NATHAN CHUMBLER awaited Lucca's arrival. His veterinary team anesthetized her leg to assess the damage and concluded that it needed to be amputated. But they wanted to do the surgery in the "human" hospital. Since Lucca was stable and it was now late, they would wait until morning.

Chumbler bandaged Lucca using pinkish red and yellow vet-wrap, the closest they had to the Marine flag colors of red and gold. He wrote the Marine motto, "Semper Fidelis," on the wrap with a Sharpie.

Lucca was placed in a cage about four feet wide. Rod crawled in beside her. The vet tech, who had seen handlers like this before, brought him a blanket and a pillow. Just before dawn, when Rod grew too tired to worry about the complications of anesthesia, the possibility of infection, the idea of Mama Lucca's leg coming off, he finally fell asleep.

The next morning, Rod carefully climbed out of Lucca's cage to write a note to Staff Sgt. Chris Willingham, who had trained Lucca and served by her side in Iraq. After Willingham's second deployment there ended, he chose Rod to take his place as Lucca's handler. "I know you gave me Lucca with your trust," Rod typed in an email, "and I hoped nothing like this would happen." Willingham could imagine the guilt Rod was feeling: "I don't regret [my decision] for one minute," he wrote back. "I'm proud of you, man." Within two days of Lucca's surgery, she was walking again. A few months after that, Rod and Lucca boarded a plane to Finland, where Willingham was stationed with his family. They were adopting Lucca. Willingham worried that after everything Lucca had been through, she might not remember him. But when they met at the airport, she put her one front paw on his chest and licked his face for a good 15 seconds.

THE BOOK TOP DOG COMES OUT OCT. 23 AND IS AVAILABLE NOW FOR PREORDER ON AMAZON.COM.

TO READ ABOUT LUCCA'S LIFE TODAY, TURN TO PAGE 11.

A HISTORY OF CANINES IN COMBAT

When called, these tail-wagging warriors became battlefield heroes

SGT. STUBBY served through 17 battles in World War I, leading medics to the wounded and saving his regiment from a gas attack. He made the front page of newspapers back home when he caught a German spy literally by the seat of his pants.



SMOKY, a Yorkie discovered in a foxhole in New Guinea during World War II, accompanied Cpl. William A. Wynne (often riding in his backpack) for nearly two years through the South Pacific.



When Wynne was hospitalized, Smoky lifted the spirits of other patients and even went on rounds. She's considered the first therapy dog.

NEMO protected his handler, Robert Thorneburg, during a fight with Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Despite a gunshot wound and an injury that would lead to the loss of his eye, the 85-pound German Shepherd crawled



on top of his injured handler until help arrived.



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HOME TO STAY
Lucca settles into civilian life—
in the backyard

If you were to catch Lucca in the middle of her morning routine, she would look like any playful pup. “We take her outside and she rolls around on her back,” says Jill Willingham, wife of Gunnery Sgt. Chris Willingham. “Then we’ll get her fired up and she does a puppy dance and sprints in circles.”

In the two and a half years since her injury, Lucca, now 10, has adjusted completely to life on three legs. “She does everything she did with four legs,” Jill says. “She was like, ‘Hey, this is my new normal.’ But that’s what makes Lucca Lucca.”

Today, she is just part of the Willingham family in Southern California, where she enjoys living room wrestling matches, long naps, and family walks to the park with 5-year-old Michael and 7-year-old Claire (above, with Chris and Jill). When strangers stop to admire Lucca, Claire gladly launches into the story of her “hero dog.” (“It’s the cutest thing you’ve ever heard,” her mom says.)

Talking about Lucca’s days on the front lines helps Chris break the ice when he takes her to visit other wounded veterans. “Then they go on to talk about football and hunting and everything else,” says Jill. “It’s amazing to see the walls she brings down.”

Chris and Lucca also attend benefits for service members and veterans. At several of those events, they have been reunited with Rod, who is now a sophomore at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis, where he’s studying radiation therapy.

“Every time I get a chance to see Lucca, I don’t take it for granted,” Rod says. “It’s a great feeling to be around her.” Chris will hand Lucca’s leash over to Rod, and she’ll even sleep in Rod’s hotel room. “Chris always jokes that we have joint custody. It’s hard to put into words what she means to us.”

To learn about adopting a retired military dog—or to support deployed dog teams—go to uswardogs.org.

MARIA GOODAVAGE

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