

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 4, Profile 4 – Afghanistan

Corporal John Cannon – Royal Australian Engineers

Dateline for this profile is 14 October 2009.

Three images are courtesy of John Cannon, one from ADF Defence Media as acknowledged.

Background

Prior to joining the Australian Regular Army (ARA), Cpl John Cannon worked as a paver, roofer and spent some time on the Australian Stock Exchange. Very soon after he turned 21 years of age, John joined the ARA on 24 October 1990. He passed through the 1st Recruit Training Battalion (1 RTB) at Kapooka in NSW and was allotted to the Royal Australian Infantry (RAInf). His Initial Employment Training was completed at the School of Infantry at Singleton in NSW and he was posted to the 3rd Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR). In 3 RAR John qualified as a military parachutist (paratrooper) and after four years he had several other combat skill qualifications including 81mm Mortarman. As a part of 3 RAR, he went to the RAAF Base at Butterworth in Malaysia for three months.

John always wanted to be an EDD handler in RAE but found it difficult to go to engineers in 1990/91 due to the Gulf War. Almost every soldier graduating from 1 RTB was allotted to the RAInf at that time. After five years with 3 RAR, John decided to Corps transfer to RAE with the aim of being an EDD handler. However, on arrival in the Liverpool area, John was employed assisting the Physical Training Instructors (PTI) with maintenance of the swimming pool at Holsworthy. He became a PTI himself and spent a further six years in that location.

It took 13 years, but, John finally completed his EDD course at the SME in 2003. This was followed by a posting to IRR in the Sydney area and then on to 1 CER in Darwin.

First Overseas Service

While at IRR, John was warned for overseas deployment. He and Sapper Phil Grazier were given one week to get themselves organised for a deployment to Afghanistan. This was in response to a call from Special Operations Task Group 1 (SOTG 1), already in Afghanistan, for the presence of EDD to support their operations. The aim was to subject the EDD to a trial and assess their usefulness in combat operations in that Area of Operations (AO). The first two dogs which arrived in-country for this assessment were EDD Sam (John's dog) and EDD Jasmine (Phil's dog). Sam and Jasmine performed so well that EDD teams became an ongoing requirement in the initial search for illicit explosives, caches, ammunition and other items of interest to coalition units in the area. The EDD dog teams were transported by Long Range Patrol Vehicles (LRPV) until they arrived at places such as vulnerable points (VP) or river crossings, where they would get

off the LRPV and search the immediate area for IED. There was a Pass through which coalition vehicles would traverse and this Pass was littered with the debris of wrecked Russian vehicles which had come to their demise in this location. The EDD team would work through and around the wreckage searching for IED before proceeding through this defile. The EDD teams lead from the front protected by friendly forces on the flank. John remembers this location as being a place of immediate danger and needed to be approached very carefully. It was definitely a case of “follow the sapper (and his dog)”. Later search techniques with the Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) and the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Forces (MRTF) deployments allowed the EDD to support an engineer section of sappers who had mine detectors and other detection devices. But, in the early days, it was the EDD teams which lead the way. During the early days, John’s team detected seven caches and this convinced the SOTG 1 command element that an EDD was a worthwhile combat asset in Afghanistan. They have been there ever since. John’s 3 RAR experience was well utilised at that time in that he often used his infantry skills to augment SOTG personnel when the situation called for it. John was instrumental in ensuring that all sappers arriving in-country to work in the EDD stream, were also well trained in infantry minor tactics as well.

John and Phil remained in Afghanistan when SOTG 1 rotated out of country and joined SOTG 2 when it arrived. Although the “normal” deployment was intended to be about four months in-country, John and Phil served for six months on their first deployment. This was mainly due to the need to train the newly arrived sappers into the job. A part of the training problem was that explosives can not be left in the ground without piquet in Australia. However, in Afghanistan, John could bury the ordnance in protected areas for weeks ahead of the time it was to be used as EDD search targets. This allowed the explosive scent to coalesce with the surrounding soil and set up a more operational search scent picture than was available to EDD trainers in Australia.

EDD Sam and EDD Jasmine were working so well it was decided to leave them in Afghanistan and to reteam them with the reinforcement sappers on the next rotation. In John’s words: “I found this part of the deployment really hard. I knew that Sam had to be reteammed with his new handler which meant that I had to ignore him and show him no affection. He had been one of my closest mates and had worked so very well in the rough stuff, and now here I was treating him with indifference. Poor Sam didn’t understand this and I felt so bad about it, I found myself weeping with grief for the little bloke. I boarded the C130 for my outward journey without a decent word of goodbye for him”.

EDD Sam and EDD Jasmine worked for a further four months after John and Phil left Afghanistan before it was their turn to return to Australia (RTA). On their RTA, Sam and Jasmine went through the quarantine system under the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) protocols in the Sydney area, and then resumed work as EDD in IRR. Here they proved to be excellent training media in the development of EDD skills for EDD handlers. They were retired on age from service six months later. They were both over ten years old when they retired.

An urgent new approach to training EDD teams in Australia.

In June-2006, John returned to IRR near Sydney and then was posted to SME as an instructor Jan 2007 in the EDD stream. John saw the need to update the training to accommodate the operational requirements for Afghanistan in the EDD stream. The EDD training at SME was based on a programme designed for a Northern Island situation and on John's arrival, he influenced a focus on Afghanistan. John travelled to 1 CER in Darwin just before that unit sent EDD teams to Afghanistan in support of the RTF projects. His presentations on the EDD search requirement for Afghanistan assisted orienting the sappers with an environmental, tactical and explosive detection situation which were ground-breaking, at that time. This included the need to train the EDD around pungent human and animal smells and other conflicting scents in a search situation. John achieved this by coordinating the EDD teams into country showgrounds just after a rural show had finished. The stimuli (explosives, caches, ammunition etc) was hidden or buried in amongst the faecal matter of cows, chicken, horses and other rural animals. This exposure helped the dogs to work through the distractions of other animal's urine and faeces.

During his time at SME, John completed his supervisor and dog training courses. He trained up five dogs for EDD duties, but of those, only one dog, EDD Storm, successfully met all the criteria required for an operational EDD. John teamed up with Storm and they have been a team ever since. In 2008, John and Storm were posted to 1 CER in Darwin. John was promoted to Corporal in 2007, and became the Commander of the 1 CER EDD section.

Second Overseas Service

On 19 September 2008, John and Sapper Troy "Strawbs" Croton departed 1 CER for Afghanistan in support of Reconstruction Task Force 1 (RTF 1) at Tarin Kowt (TK) in Oruzgan Province. Another member of John's EDD section, Sapper Brett "Turls" Turley arrived ten days later. The patrol base out of which the Australian EDD teams operated was nicknamed "Camp Holland". This base supported a number of forward patrol bases and John's team gave search support to RTF 1 elements on roads, vulnerable points and special areas. Most of the patrols were completed as one day events, but many included overnight stays in a village or in the bush outside the safety of a patrol base. John and EDD Storm had a find in a cave system which was the result of coincidence. John had laid some stimuli in a few caves for Storm to find. But Storm kept indicating in an area where John knew he had not laid a target for Storm's training. After a couple of confirmatory responses, John realised that Storm had detected something that needed further investigation. Storm had found a fuze from an American aerial bomb. The Taliban had stored the fuze for future use in one of the caves, and Storm and John recovered it before it could do any damage to coalition troops.

In another find, John and Storm operated in an abandoned village and on searching a house, they came across a small animal compound where the floor was covered in straw.

Storm paid a lot of interest to the area covered in straw and when John investigated he uncovered a false floor. The EOD technicians were called and they subjected the area to an intensive search. They captured explosives, mines and ammunition including mortar rounds, all stored under the false floor. This was a big find and Storm was given an extra pat for his efforts.

John and Storm were travelling in a Bushmaster APC when it ran over an IED. The IED had explosives which had suffered some degeneration and the consequent blast only inflicted minor damage to the vehicle. There were no casualties and the vehicle remained serviceable.

But, in another IED incident, the vehicle and its personnel were not so lucky. A loud explosion had been reported and John's team were directed to drive there and render assistance if necessary. Another Bushmaster had driven into the area where the explosion had been heard and they knew that this was trouble. In John's words: "We arrived in the area where the explosion had occurred and stopped short over a rise to where we knew the stricken vehicle was located. I searched with Storm and as we came over the hill, I saw the vehicle and it was pretty messy. On nearing the stricken vehicle I could see that both front wheels had been blown off, the remote control machine gun had been dislodged and there was other damage to the protective plates on the exterior of the vehicle. I knew that one of my EDD teams was aboard. It was Sapper Brett Turley and his dog EDD Gus. I was relieved to know that Brett and Gus had been casevaced by helicopter before I arrived. They were treated at an American hospital in Kandahar and returned to full duty three or four days later. The worst casualty was an Australian Trooper with a broken leg. The Bushmaster can take a hell of a beating and still protect its passengers".

Contacts with the Taliban were mainly at long range and not very frequent during RTF 1 and in the early part of RTF 2. In winter the temperature was in the minus degrees, but the low temperatures did not significantly affect the dogs. They were able to grow and thicken their coats for the extreme cold and then shed the winter coats when the warmer weather arrived. In fact, Storm went for a swim in a stream where the water made its way around blocks of solid ice. John believes that if Storm had not been castrated, he may not have been that keen to swim in winter. In base, the EDD were housed in kennels albeit they were very spartan. They could wear a protective oilskin style of dog coat, but they were not afforded heated accommodation. There was contact with an American EDD handler who visited the Australian EDD section often. He was a very motivated soldier and the Australians nicknamed their American mate "Nacho". Nacho and the Australian teams would lay stimuli for each other to detect and then exchange ideas on each others techniques.

This deployment lasted nine months and John and his dog teams rotated out of Afghanistan on 25 June 2009. John escorted all the EDD to the quarantine establishment in the Sydney area and returned to 1 CER, and home, a short while later. A part of John's responsibility was to maintain detailed records of every veterinary treatment for every EDD including worming, daily medications, cuts, bruises, any visits to the veterinary

team provided by the United States Army Veterinary Corps (USVC). The dogs had the fur on one front leg constantly shaved, just above the vein, in case an urgent canula needed to be inserted. The USVC had a computer program for every dog in-country where the details of the dog were stored in case they needed hospitalisation and urgent veterinary treatment. A printout of each dog's particulars was carried by the handler as a ready reckoner to assist a medic when working out how much morphine to administer should a serious wound be suffered by the dog in the field. It was handy for administering medications as well.

John wants to continue his career in the Army in the EDD stream. He has been deployed with SOTG and MRTF, has served with the IRR and has been an instructor at SME. Having served on operations with special forces, and also as a combat engineer on conventional operations, John believes that he still has a lot to offer the ADF. He is particularly keen to refine the process for the acquisition and training of dogs for EDD work. He has some ideas he wants to suggest about the management and rotation of dogs and handlers into 2010 and MRTF 4. He would like to become the Chief Trainer in due course. He is attending his subjects for promotion to the rank of Sergeant and continues to serve as the Section Commander of the 1 CER EDD section.

EDD Storm

EDD Storm continues to serve in 1 CER based at Darwin.



Cpl John Cannon and EDD Storm searching caves in Afghanistan 2009. Picture: Australian Defence Media, 2009.



EDD Storm indicates an IED.

Image courtesy of John Cannon, 2009.



Australian patrol takes a meal break beside their "Bushie" with EDD Storm. Afghanistan 2009. Image courtesy of John Cannon, 2009.



EDD Storm in his winter kit, and its snowing. Afghanistan 2009. Image courtesy of John Cannon, 2009.