

JULY 2013

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES

Leatherneck

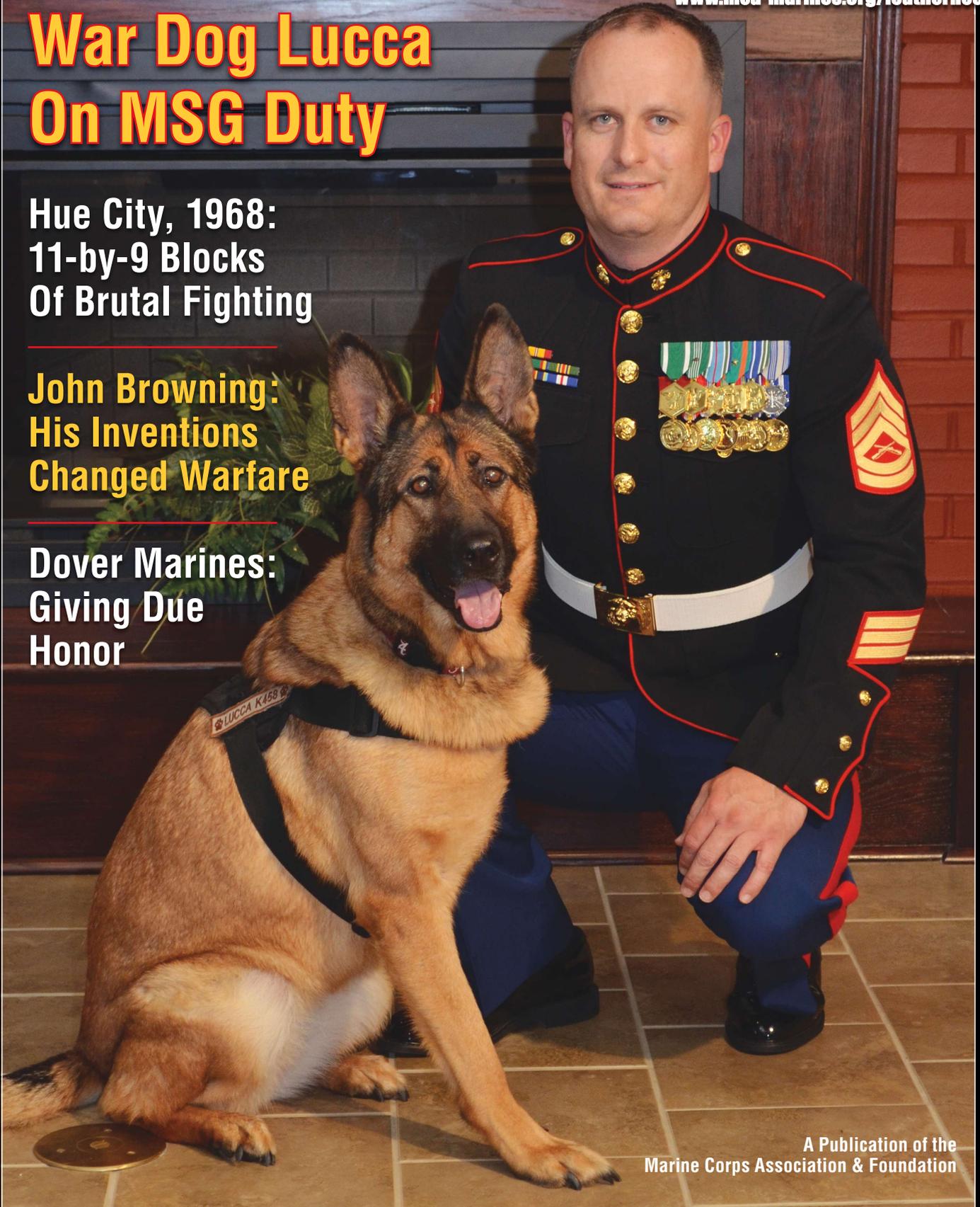
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War Dog Lucca On MSG Duty

Hue City, 1968:
11-by-9 Blocks
Of Brutal Fighting

John Browning:
His Inventions
Changed Warfare

Dover Marines:
Giving Due
Honor



A Publication of the
Marine Corps Association & Foundation

Lucca

Wounded Marine War Dog Warms Hearts



GySgt Chris Willingham, currently assigned to Marine Corps Embassy Security Group, MCB Quantico, Va., and Lucca, a combat-wounded Marine military working dog, formed a bond during five years of working together. Now the gunny and his family have adopted Lucca.

RON LUNN

By David J. McGuire

When our Embassy Marine Security Guard Detachments receive a new member, it usually goes unnoticed. That script was rewritten in Helsinki on July 7, 2012, when an arriving Marine received a hero's welcome at the Helsinki-Vantaa airport. Ambassador Bruce J. Oreck, Gunnery Sergeant Christopher E. Willingham, embassy staff, representatives from American Airlines, local police and journalists from every major media outlet in Finland were on hand to welcome the newest member of the embassy's team.

The Marine, named Lucca, had put her life in danger to save others and, in retirement, would not stand guard for a single day at Embassy Helsinki. GySgt Willingham, the MSG Det commander in Helsinki, knew firsthand how much Lucca had sacrificed to protect others and how far she had traveled to reach that post.

Lucca joined the United States Marine Corps on April 23, 2006, when she was only 2 years old. She is a specialized search dog trained to search roadways, open areas, buildings and vehicles for explosives, weapons and ammunition. Willingham became a Marine in 1999 and was Lucca's first handler.

The two formed a special bond as they worked together for nearly five years. In that time, they spent 20 months overseas, including two combat deployments to Iraq, during which Lucca saved the lives of Willingham and the members of his patrol on several occasions by locating hidden explosive devices that would have gone otherwise undetected.

Once, Willingham carried Lucca back to base camp after a long day on patrol because "she deserved it." They were a team, and Lucca quickly became part of Willingham's family.

When Willingham left to take command of the MSG Detachment in Embassy Helsinki, he left Lucca with a hand-picked successor, Corporal Juan M. Rodriguez. Willingham checked in regularly on his old platoon, sending care packages filled with dog biscuits, toys and treats from the embassy staff.

On March 23, 2012, Cpl Rodriguez and Lucca were on patrol in Afghanistan. Walking ahead of the unit, as Lucca always did, she suddenly alerted the unit to an explosive device. While sweeping for secondary devices, Lucca was hit when another exploded. As soon as the blast occurred, Lucca tried to run back toward Rodriguez, who met her halfway and immediately applied a tourniquet and began first aid, which saved her life. Lucca suf-



CPL JENNIFER PIRANTE

Lucca, an 8-year-old Belgian Malinois military working dog, sits in front of a Marine Corps flag at MCB Camp Pendleton, Calif. Combat wounds in Afghanistan led to the amputation of her left front leg and retirement from military service on July 2, 2012.



SRA ERIC HARRIS, USAF

On one of two deployments together to Iraq, then-SSgt Chris Willingham, assigned to 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, U.S. Army, and Lucca provide security during cordon-and-knock operations in Afak, Iraq, Nov. 30, 2008.

Top right: Cpl Juan M. Rodriguez, Lucca's handler with 1st Law Enforcement Battalion, I Marine Expeditionary Force, escorted Lucca to Helsinki, Finland, to join the Willingham family just days after her medical retirement.

Center right: After the heat of MCB Camp Pendleton and the extreme weather conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Lucca discovered she loved the snow in Helsinki.

Bottom right: Often seen around the U.S. Embassy grounds, the good-natured Lucca quickly became a favorite of staff and visitors.



Lucca now takes care of her Willingham family in Stafford, Va. From left: Claire, GySgt Chris Willingham, Michael and Jill.



CPL JENNIFER PRANTE



COURTESY OF U.S. EMBASSY HELSINKI



COURTESY OF U.S. EMBASSY HELSINKI

ferred burns on her torso, and her front left leg had to be amputated.

Because of Lucca's heroic sacrifice, no other Marine was injured during the patrol.

Willingham already had begun plans to adopt Lucca after her retirement, and after the attack he was more eager than ever to make her a permanent part of his family. While Lucca recovered at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., Willingham finalized the adoption paperwork.

Helsinki Foreign Commercial Services Officer Nicholas Kuchova worked with American Airlines, which put forth extraordinary effort to ensure Lucca traveled to Finland in comfort. When she changed planes at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, a military color guard escorted her through the airport, and she was honored in a ceremony prior to departure at the special place chosen for her plane's departure—Gate K9. American Airlines flew Lucca first class to begin the next part of her life in Helsinki.

Willingham and Lucca worked together to raise awareness of the incredible role military working dogs perform on a regular basis and also to raise the spirits of men, women and families impacted by combat deployments. The tradition of dogs serving vital roles in the military has been ongoing since World War II, but has gone largely unrecognized.

To illuminate the contributions and sacrifices of those animals, the John Burnam Monument Foundation is building a monument to military working dogs at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, where many military working dogs are trained.

Since last fall, Lucca's charisma and remarkable story has brought attention to the monument's worthy cause. She appeared as the guest of honor at the Dallas Sky Ball with more than 1,000 attendees and donors who gathered to honor wounded veterans. She then took a leading role on a float in the Rose Bowl Parade, combined with numerous media appearances including nationally broadcast "Fox and Friends" and "Inside Edition."

Her high-profile and lively appearances have given Lucca many friends and further increased understanding of the important contributions of working dogs to military operations worldwide. Lucca has her own Facebook page, which attracted more than 1,000 "Followers" in the first 24 hours after it was created and now has more than 2,800 followers.

Lucca's story resonated strongly in Finland, and she continued to offer comfort to Finnish veterans and families, who have served alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan. With Finnish President Sauli Niinisto, Lucca visited wounded veterans in a military hospital in Helsinki. She visited school groups in Finland to highlight the work she had done and tell her story (through GySgt Willingham). She also enjoyed her retirement, frolicking in the Helsinki snow with Willingham's two young children—her adopted siblings.

In March 2013, Willingham's tour in Helsinki came to an end. The Willingham family, now with Lucca as a member, moved to Quantico, Va., where Willingham had been hand-picked by the Marine Corps for a teaching position at the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group. An evening newspaper covered her departure, showing Lucca doing what she loved best: romping in the snow.

When Lucca left, her farewell Facebook posting reached the largest audience of any embassy posting, and friends shared it more than 50 times. Americans at the embassy, as well as Finns, were sad to see Lucca (and the Willinghams) go. Many marked her departure with a heart symbol mark used on Facebook, in response to a story U.S. Embassy Helsinki staff posted about Lucca's departure from Finland. It is an appropriate symbol for a dog who has saved, inspired and touched so many.

Author's note: This article was formulated from contributions by many members of the State Department team at the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki. We are honored to serve alongside the men and women from all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces and appreciate the great sacrifices they make to protect the citizens of the United States.

We are especially grateful for the commitment of all those serving in Embassy Marine Detachments around the world. Thank you for your service and camaraderie.

Editor's note: David McGuire, a career diplomat with the U.S. Department of State, currently is serving as Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki. His previous overseas assignments include Managua, Nicaragua; Madrid, Spain; and Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Leatherneck—On the Web

To see more photos of Lucca and her Marine family and to view a short video of Lucca, visit this link: www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/lucca