



# Canine Hero

## Wounded USMC Dog Warms Hearts in Finland

By David McGuire, public affairs officer, U.S. Embassy in Helsinki

When a Marine Security Guard (MSG) detachment receives a new member, it usually goes unnoticed beyond the embassy gates, but that was not the case in Helsinki in July 2012 when one arriving Marine got a hero's welcome at Helsinki-Vantaa airport. Ambassador Bruce Oreck, Marine Gunnery Sgt. Christopher Willingham, embassy staff, representatives from American Airlines, local police and journalists from every major Finnish media outlet welcomed the newest member of the embassy's team, a Marine search dog named Lucca who had risked her life to save American service members.

Willingham, Lucca's first handler, knew how much she had sacrificed to protect others and how far she had traveled to reach this post. So in retirement at Embassy Helsinki, Lucca would not have to stand watch.

Lucca joined the Marine Corps in April

2006 at age 2. She is a specialized search dog trained to search roadways, open areas, buildings and vehicles for explosives, weapons and ammunition. Willingham, who enlisted in 1999, formed a special bond with his canine companion as they worked together for nearly five years. During two combat deployments to Iraq, she probably saved the lives of Willingham and members of his patrol several times by locating hidden explosive devices that would otherwise have gone undetected.

Once, Willingham carried Lucca home after a long day on patrol because "she deserved it." They were a team, and Lucca quickly became part of his family.

When Willingham left to take command of the MSG Detachment at the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki, he left Lucca with his successor, Cpl. Juan Rodriguez, but checked back regularly,

sending care packages filled with dog biscuits, toys and treats from the embassy staff.

In March 2012, as Rodriguez and Lucca were on patrol in Afghanistan, Lucca walking in the lead as always, she suddenly alerted the unit to an explosive device. Then, while continuing to sweep the area, Lucca was hit when another bomb exploded. She tried running to Rodriguez, who met her halfway, applied a tourniquet and began first aid, saving her life. She had burns on her torso and her front left leg had to be amputated, but Lucca had ensured that no other Marines had been injured.

Willingham, meanwhile, was planning to adopt Lucca after her retirement, and he finalized the paperwork while she recovered. Embassy Foreign Commercial Service officer Nicholas Kuchova worked with American Airlines, which ensured that Lucca traveled to



Lucca relaxes in the grass after returning to the U.S. with the Willingham family. Photo by Sgt. Christopher Willingham; Below right: Lucca and Willingham play outside his residence in Helsinki. Photo by Embassy Helsinki

To illuminate the contributions and sacrifices of canines in the military, the John Burnam Monument Foundation is building a monument to military working dogs at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, where many of the dogs are trained. Lucca's charisma and remarkable story have brought attention to the monument-building effort.

Lucca got a well-deserved rest in Finland, but made appearances there, too. In a private event with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö at a military hospital in Helsinki, she visited wounded veterans, some of whom served alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Willingham talked to them and Lucca provided quiet comfort. Lucca also visited school groups in Finland, where Willingham told her story and highlighted her contributions to global peace-keeping. In conjunction with the Marine detachment's Toys for Tots program, Lucca accompanied the detachment as it handed out gifts and spread seasonal joy at a school for disadvantaged children. The youths were as excited to play with her as with their new toys.

At the embassy, Lucca occasionally joined Country Team meetings, where she rested quietly at Willingham's feet or sniffed around for treats. Deputy Chief of Mission Danny Hall kept a bag of dog treats in his office, and Lucca would wait patiently for one whenever she visited.

"Lucca's bravery and loyalty were an inspiration to us all," Hall said. "Hers is an incredible story, and even now in her well-

deserved retirement she continues to provide support for others. Lucca brings so much to our mission in Helsinki, both within the embassy and in our relations with our host country. It's a pleasure and an honor to have her here with us."

Lucca enjoyed her retirement in Finland, spending time with her adoptive family and joining in their winter activities. Willingham's two young children took particular delight in including Lucca in their games, especially in the snow, and often pulled her in a sled or threw snowballs for her to chase.

In March, Willingham's tour in Helsinki ended, and he and Lucca joined his family at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., where Willingham had been handpicked by the commandant of the Marine Corps to serve in a teaching position.

In her time at the embassy, Lucca did great work in support of its public affairs efforts, allowing the mission to show its softer side while highlighting the important work that the U.S. and partner nations' militaries do in places like Afghanistan. She also helped the post reach audiences that might not have otherwise taken notice.

When Lucca left, her farewell Facebook posting reached the largest audience of any embassy posting. Americans and Finns were sad to see Lucca and the Willinghams depart, and many Finns commented on her final Facebook post with a simple heart—an appropriate symbol for a dog who saved, inspired and touched so many. ■

Finland in comfort. When she changed planes in Chicago, a military color guard escorted her through the airport, and she was honored in a ceremony at the special place chosen for her plane's departure—Gate K9. American Airlines then flew her first class to Helsinki.

Since her "retirement" in Finland, she has been guest of honor at the Dallas Sky Ball, where more than 1,000 attendees and donors honored wounded veterans; ridden a float in the Rose Bowl Parade; and done numerous media appearances, including the shows "Fox & Friends" and "Inside Edition."

Lucca's high-profile, lively appearances have gained her friends and raised awareness of the important contributions of military working dogs. Her Facebook page attracted more than 1,000 followers in the first 24 hours after its launch and reached more than 2,800 followers in just three months.

