

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 4, Profile 3 – Afghanistan

Sapper Brett Turley – Royal Australian Engineers

Dateline for this profile is 26 June 2009.

All images in this profile are the property of Brett Turley except for one which is courtesy of the Northern Territory News 10 Aug 2009.

Background

Sapper Brett Turley (Turls) joined the Australian Regular Army (ARA) as quickly as he could after leaving school. He wanted to be a Combat Engineer from the word go. He did this in May of 2004 when he was seventeen. His father had joined the ARA before him at the age of fifteen and proceeded through the Apprentices School and worked in RAEME as an electronics technician.

Brett graduated from the 1st Recruit Training Battalion (1 RTB) at Kapooka in NSW in June 2004 and was allotted to RAE. He attended the Initial Employment Training (IET) course at SME and graduated in late 2004 as a Field Engineer. On posting to 1 CER in Darwin, Brett continued his training in Combat Engineer duties and during this time he saw Cpl David Simpson with his EDD and became so impressed with the efficiency of an EDD team that he wanted to become an EDD handler. In June 2006, Brett successfully applied for the EDD course and went to SME to undertake his EDD training. There were six sappers on that course. During that course, Brett was teamed up with his dog EDD Gus. It appears that no one on this EDD course wanted Gus except Brett and they bonded well from their first contact. On graduation from the EDD course at SME, the Turls/Gus team were posted to 1 CER in Darwin where they passed their operational assessment tests and became ready for operational deployment.

Overseas Service

In mid-2008 Brett was briefed for deployment to Afghanistan. However, his departure was delayed because Gus needed to pass the stringent veterinary tests for rabies. Gus' antibodies to that terrible disease were a little slow in developing. It took about three days to get Gus his veterinary clearance for deployment and on 23 September 2008, Brett and Gus arrived in Afghanistan. They received in-country training and this was a big boost to them because they were able to train on the current inventory of explosives and devices that they would encounter in their AO.

The patrol activity was intense. Brett and Gus dedicated 100 days to operational combat duty in the nine months that they were deployed. They were the first dog patrol to be assigned on operations with Reconstruction Task Force 1 (RTF 1). The dog section, commanded by Cpl John Cannon, detected twelve finds during their deployment and these consisted of weapons, ammunition, explosives, warheads, and a quantity of ammonium nitrate, which is an agricultural fertilizer, but is capable of being converted to explosives very quickly and simply. The patrol knew that this fertilizer was destined for explosives because there was a lot of bomb making material captured in the same house. Much of the work was centred on road security protecting road convoys as they operated

between bases, villages and reconstruction task sites. During one of these searches, EDD Gus gave an indication on an IED by the side of a road which turned out to be an anti-personnel (APERS) mine which was linked to about thirty kilos of high explosives. This was a common ploy of the Taliban, and was to have an effect on Brett and Gus later in their tour of duty in Afghanistan.

What about contacts with the Taliban?

In his words: “I had a job to search an area before a few armoured vehicles were moved into an overwatch location on high ground. There was a friendly patrol in the valley below us and as the area was in the green zone (had trees and grass), they needed protection from attack on the high ground around them. Gus and I started the search when we received automatic weapons fire, possibly from an RPK light machine gun (LMG), about four hundred metres away. The Taliban then extended their arc of fire to include the rest of the overwatch group, and while this lifted some pressure from Gus and me, we were still in the beaten zone of the LMG. However, our group returned fire and the Taliban ceased firing at us. The patrol in the valley below completed their mission and we all returned to our patrol base unscathed”.

“I was also involved in an IED incident. Gus and I had been searching roads for the “B” vehicles, such as cargo carrying trucks, so that they could transit their loads to where a new patrol base was being built. Gus and I had been searching for about four hours, commencing at about 0600 hrs and working almost non-stop until about 1000 hrs. When we finished work, we mounted a Bushmaster armoured personnel carrier (APC) and began our return to base. We observed another vehicle drive through a defile (a narrowing of the road), coming in our direction, and after it passed us we entered the defile. Just as we began to leave the defile, our vehicle ran over an anti-personnel mine, which was linked to about a thirty kilo charge of home-made explosives, and when that fired, the vehicle was extensively damaged. Our casualties were one person who suffered a broken leg. The remainder of us received shock over-blast effects and Gus, who had been lying on the floor of the Bushmaster, was blown from the floor to the ceiling and received some bruising. That there were no more injuries, or worse, is a credit to the design and quality of the Australian made Bushmaster APC. Gus and I were helicoptered from the IED site straight to an American hospital at Kandahar, and Gus was treated by veterinarians from the United States Army Veterinary Corps. We were both back on patrol duty at TK three days later. We continued with route search, vehicle search, building search, area searches and supported patrols as required, and this continued until my nine months were up, at which time Gus and I rotated back to Darwin”.

Toward the end of his deployment, the next group of EDD and handlers arrived from Australia for briefing and in-country familiarisation. They were trained on the local situation and briefed on coalition forces EDD capabilities as well. In Brett’s words: “On hand-over/take-over for the new EDD handlers, we gave them three weeks of familiarisation training including in-country explosives, current threats and a heads up on what they had to expect in our AO. They had been briefed well before they left Australia so we were able to have the new guys out on patrol within two and a half weeks of their arrival.

The Dutch troops had an EDD capability, but we could see that the operational employment of their dogs was quite different to the Australian method. The Australian EDD were extensively employed on route search and we used a “box pattern” of covering as much of the road and its verges as possible. The Dutch dogs were primarily used in building searches or on specific location searches. The EDD in the United States Army and United States Marine Corps operated along similar lines to the Australian dog teams and we could see many similarities in the methods of employment between the American dog teams and our own”.

Army Career

Brett believes that one of the main problems in the provision of EDD to handlers is the quality of the dogs. This observation is mainly based on the failure rate of recruited dogs. His experience with EDD is that a good bond between dog and handler is an essential element in the success of a dog team. But its not the only element required when on operational duty. Other factors such as the ability of the dog to withstand extremes of temperature such as that experienced in Afghanistan and the reaction to battle noises when a contact is initiated are also very important to the survival of the team. Brett prefers the working dog breeds from country Australia, such as Kelpies and Border Collies. The Labrador appears to struggle a bit in the heat, but the Kelpies and Border Collies have been bred to work cattle and sheep in the extremes of Australia’s bush, and so do not tire as quickly. He also prefers the country dogs because they have had to work rather than be treated as a pet in a city family environment. However, conditioning dogs to the range of violent battle noises is an ongoing issue and it’s a pity that the initial breeding programme started at SME in the early seventies did not continue. Those dogs were subjected to battle noise simulation from three weeks of age and developed an acceptance of battle noises as a part of everyday military life. Brett believes that the chances of recommencing a long term dog breeding program at the SME is very unlikely due to the resources required and financial constraints.

He arrived in Darwin from Afghanistan on a C130 on 26 June 2009, and instead of going on leave, he paraded at 1 CER, in his Afghanistan camo (disruptive pattern combat uniform) at Robertson Barracks so that he could be a part of the issue of the ADFTWDA War Dog Operational Medal and the Canine Service Medal to the 1 CER EDD. They included EDDs Scuba, Kylie, Jasmine, Mick and Sam. He was tired, relieved to be back home and happy to see the EDDs receiving the recognition for service they so richly deserved.

Brett wants to build a career within the ADF but prefers to stay in the EDD stream. He was promoted to Lance Corporal in September 2009 and will serve on in 1 CER. He expects to be posted to IRR in the Sydney area in 2010.

EDD Gus

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



Spr Brett Turley with EDD Gus in Afghanistan 2009.



Spr Brett Turley and EDD Gus on patrol in support of troops and Bushmaster APC in Afghanistan 2009.



Spr Brett Turley and EDD Gus resting in the “Green Zone” Afghanistan 2009.



Spr Brett Turley and EDD Gus after the Welcome Home Parade in Darwin, August 2009. Gus is wearing the War Dog Operational Medal with clasp “Afghanistan”. Image courtesy of the Northern Territory News 10 Aug 2009.