

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 4, Profile 10 – Afghanistan

Sapper David Brown – Royal Australian Engineers

Dateline for this profile is 12 December 2009 and 12 January 2011.

Images courtesy of David Brown and Defence Media

Background

Sapper (SPR) David Brown was born in Melbourne in 1961 and was a part of a large family of nine brothers and four sisters. The family moved to Wynnum in Queensland in 1969 where Dave completed his schooling. He worked in the Brisbane area in the clothing industry for a while before getting married and moving to Sydney. Dave worked in the Sydney area but needed some action in his life and decided to join the Australian Regular Army (ARA). In 1981, he attended the 1st Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka in NSW and was allocated to the Royal Australian Engineers. He attended his Initial Employment Training (IET) at the School of Military Engineering (SME) in 1981 and also attended a Clerk course shortly after his graduation from SME. Dave's first posting was to 18 Field Squadron of the 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment (3 CER) based in Townsville, Queensland. 18 FD SQN spent a lot of bush time as a part of training exercises. Dave spent eight months out of his first twelve, in the bush on exercises.

In 1983, Dave was posted to 18 Field Squadron (18 FD SQN) at Townsville in Queensland. In 1985, Dave was posted to the 21st Construction Squadron (21 CONST SQN) at Puckapunyal in Victoria. In 1988, Dave was posted to the 20th Divisional Support Squadron based at Enoggera in Queensland. In 1989, Dave was posted to 17 CONST SQN at Holsworthy in NSW in preparation for the Australian commitment to Namibia. Dave volunteered to go to the United Nations Transitional Assistance Group in Namibia (UNTAG) based in Namibia, previously called South West Africa.

Namibia

Dave was located in the city of Grootfontaine in the north of Namibia and worked as the Clerk Administration. Most of the strife was contained within the civil community with political factions causing civil unrest from time to time, but Dave and his group were able to drive about the country and pass through vehicle check points without incident. On his return to Australia (RTA), Dave was posted to the 7th Field Squadron of 2 CER based at Enoggera in Queensland. However, the training for war, by spending time in the bush, wore a bit thin with Dave and, having completed his nine years of service, in 2000, elected discharge.

RTA and Civvy Street

After discharge, Dave bought a house at Morningside in the Brisbane area and went looking for a job. He found one with Australia Post. Dave initially worked as a mail

sorter in the Roma Street Mail Centre. But Dave missed Army life and in 1996, joined the Army Reserve (ARES). But, Dave had to undergo his recruit training again which he did on a two week course at Wacol in Queensland followed by another Corps IET again which he did with 35 FD SQN at Mount Isa, graduating as a Field Engineer. He served with the 11th Field Squadron of 2 CER until 1999 when an opportunity to train in high risk search techniques presented itself and Dave was selected. He trained in the Joint Intelligence Response Unit (JIRU) at Holsworthy and became a part of one of the search teams. Dave was still an Army Reservist and had to suspend his civilian job for twelve months while he attended full time service with JIRU.

Back in the ARA

While Dave was operating as a full time Reservist in JIRU, a call for volunteers for service in East Timor arrived and Dave wanted to take up the opportunity. However, this meant that Dave needed to re-enlist in the ARA. So, Dave discharged from the ARES, enlisted in the ARA and quit his job with Australia Post, all in one fell swoop. This caused an automatic transfer from 11 FD SQN (the ARES SQN) to 7 FD SQN (the ARA SQN) of 2 CER.

East Timor

On 24 April 2001, Dave went to East Timor. He spent the next six months working as a Field Engineer at Fort Tonobibi near Balibo, constructing hard stands and other concrete works. This location is some three hours drive west of Dili, near the border with Indonesian Timor. Another task for the sappers was to produce non-potable water from seawater and this was used for washing purposes. Dave was involved in the construction of hire wire fences for the housing of the RAAF military working dogs and met a couple of the RAAF dog handlers operating as trackers with the infantry there. After six months, Dave's team were rotated out of East Timor and replaced by another group of sappers from Australia.

RTA and Doggies

On RTA, Dave was transferred to the Support Troop of 2 CER and drove trucks. However, Dave was about to have another career changing experience. Queensland hosted the Rugby World Cup in 2003 at Suncorp Stadium in Brisbane and Dave met two dog handlers who were to provide explosive detection dog support for it. They were SPR Justin Dunne and LCPL Phil Grazier. Dave was JIRU trained in high risk search techniques and so joined the search teams of Army doggies, Police and other security personnel as a "No. 2" to the doggies. Dave was impressed at the way the doggies functioned and at the end of the World Rugby Cup mission, he applied to become a dog handler.

Dave attended his basic dog handlers course at SME in February 2008 and graduated in May of that year. Dave was teamed up with EDD Jeb at first but was better suited with his second dog EDD Mandy. Dave and Mandy graduated together and were posted to 2

CER in Brisbane. But Mandy had age against her and needed replacement. Three dogs were sourced for local animal shelters including Herbie (KIA Afghanistan 7 Jun 2010), Tosca and Bundy. Dave teamed up with EDD Bundy and although they did well together, there was a disappointment in store when they failed a ROCOL opportunity in December 2008. This was an opportunity to relieve a colleague in Afghanistan for two months while he went for a rest out of country on leave – hence ROCOL. It was not a serious problem for Bundy, it was more an experiential thing with Bundy being a young eighteen month old dog and needing more time to mature. In 2009, Dave and Bundy went back to SME and passed their pre-overseas deployment assessments, returned to 2 CER and in December 2009, prepared for their deployment to Afghanistan in January 2010.

This included getting the dogs ready for a different tempo of search techniques as well as the requirement to conduct searches on vehicles, buildings and a lot of ground scenting work. The use of explosives used by the enemy in Afghanistan would have to wait until the dogs were in-country. The training was mainly done in the Enoggera military area, but some useful work was done at Woomera where the engineer dog teams worked in with 2 CER combat engineers and their Minelav detectors and infantry sections of the 6th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR).

Afghanistan

In January 2011, three EDD teams left Brisbane International Terminal by civil air charter, out-bound for the war in Afghanistan. The team comprised Corporal (CPL) Craig Turnbull and his dog EDD Tank, Lance Corporal (LCPL) Joshua Colbourne and his dog EDD Harry and Dave and Bundy. The dogs were transported in portable kennels which were stowed in the cargo hold of the aircraft. The dogs did not receive their full ration before the flight to minimise their need to defecate. On arrival at Darwin, the dogs were taken out and allowed to relieve themselves within the flight side of the airport. This was done under close scrutiny of Customs and Quarantine officers.

The next step of the journey was to Al-Minhad in Dubai. The EDD team spent a few days there but the dogs were required to remain out of the way of the local population for religious reasons. However, they were very well looked after by allocating the dogs and handlers the recreation room on the top floor of an air-conditioned building. The dogs enjoyed the comfort of soft cushions and sofas.

The final step of the journey was by USAF C17 (Globemaster) transport aircraft from Al-Minhad to Tarin Kowt (TK). The transport kennels were strapped to the floor near the passenger area at the front of the C17 and the handlers were able to see the dogs and they were able to see the handlers. The trip took 1 hour and 50 minutes. The 3 CER dog team were on hand at TK and they transported the 2 CER team to the EDD lines. The EDD kennel area was located next door to the Dutch Army dog teams at TK in Kamp Holland. Training continued with the local area stimuli such as home made explosives (HME), ammonium nitrate and aluminium powder (ANAL).

Dave and Bundy were allocated to Patrol Base Wally and were billeted at "Exchange House". This was a captured Taliban building. Dave and Bundy supported A Company (A COY) 6 RAR patrols which crossed the Sorklehz Bridge and this was the focus of a few Taliban IEDs. The Australian patrols needed to cross this bridge in order to proceed further into their patrol areas. Initially, Dave and Bundy patrolled with the HQ of the patrol, and only brought forward to check vulnerable points, but this changed and eventually, they were used far more often at the lead of the patrol in order to gain early detection of items of interest.

The Sorklehz Bridge was to provide Dave and Bundy's first find. In Dave's words: "It was in March 2010 and it was still pretty cool as far as the temperature was concerned. We went on patrol with A COY and just before we arrived at the Sorklehz footbridge, Bundy gave a strong indication with a positive "sit" and I knew he had located an item of interest. I recalled him and two of the combat engineers from 2 CER went forward and located a battery pack. It was the energy source for an IED without the IED being placed or connected yet. Our training with components for IEDs had paid off and Bundy instilled in all of us a lot of confidence in his ability to find and indicate items which were not part of the usual environment. Once alerted to the presence of one IED possibility the engineer search team continued to search. They crossed the bridge and found a pull wire attached to an IED and it was ready to fire. They disarmed this and captured the IED. While this was happening, I sent Bundy off to the flanks to prove the area and there was nothing else in that area".

But it was not just the dog that found items of interest. Dave found a cache of AK 47 ammunition secreted in a tree. The tree was part of the support structure of a house and Dave noticed a tiny piece of plastic protruding from a branch. On further careful investigation, he uncovered the cache.

In another incident, Dave recalls that: "We crossed Sorklehz Bridge and, at a little distance from the bridge, entered an old bazaar. I sent Bundy out on a box search and he indicated strongly on the left of the road. I recalled him and the combat engineers went forward and found an artillery shell rigged up as an IED. The combat engineers continued their search and found another two such IEDs further into the bazaar".

In July 2010, Dave and Bundy were in support of a patrol from A COY which was moving along Route Whale out of Patrol Base Wally when Bundy detected a command detonated IED along the road. It was a well used route and the command detonated set-up was intended to minimise the effect on civilians while focussing on Coalition troops as the main target. In addition, command detonated mines are favoured by the Taliban wherever possible because of the impact of electronic counter-measures carried by Coalition troops to defeat electronic means of firing a device. Later in July 2010, Dave and Bundy located a command detonated pressure cooker IED on Route Whale which had been placed into a rock wall, not far from Patrol Base Wally. It was loaded with 10 Kgs of explosive.

In September 2010, Dave and Bundy were out on patrol in support of an engineer Sergeant who was mentoring some Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel. The patrol was having a rest near a mosque and the area had been searched by a previous patrol of diggers. Dave saw a vine growing out of a bank near the mosque and sent Bundy in to investigate it. Bundy indicated right next to the vine and Dave located a pressure cooker IED filled with about 15 Kgs of ANAL. It had been very well camouflaged and it really surprised an infantry soldier sitting on the bank above it. He left his repose in a hurry.

With only three weeks to go to the end of their tour of duty, Dave and Bundy went on a patrol out of Patrol Base Marchelle. They were in the lead and needed to negotiate a defile in an open area of land. Dave sent Bundy forward into the defile and he indicated strongly in one place. The combat engineers found an IED which they blew up in place. The patrol moved on for about 100 metres and Bundy indicated again. It was a second IED which again was destroyed in place. Bundy had also uncovered a number of caches in houses around the Patrol Base Marchelle area on previous patrols and he was obviously enjoying his time at that patrol base.

Bundy also enjoyed aquaducts, or more correctly, the water in them. Every now and again something would float past in the water and Bundy would try his best to recover whatever it was. That is what a Retriever is all about. He also loved his helicopter rides. There were numerous times when the team was airlifted by helo into and out of operations, and Bundy loved the chance for the ride. For that matter, Dave enjoyed the rides too.

The worst moment for Dave in 2010 occurred on 7 June when a CPL asked him to come up to the HQ. An officer told Dave that his mates, Sapper Darren Smith and Jacob Moerland together with EDD Herbie, had all been killed in action that day by an IED. Dave was on his own in the kennel area at that time and he was left to his own emotions to deal with the news. The dog teams often spent most of their time allocated out as single dog teams to patrol bases. There was little opportunity for them to come together and it was a rare occasion when the whole team came together to relax and socialise. There was one occasion when the EDD handlers did have a piece of socialisation with each other, but when they did, they ended up organising a boxing match and watched their combat engineer mates pummel each other in a makeshift boxing ring. Strange people these engineers.

The EDD teams had a job to do right up until they were due to rotate out of Afghanistan. From about six weeks to go, Dave found that the strain on his concentration began to cause him some anxiety. This was mainly due to a lack of sleep and he recalls that as his time became "shorter" his sleep became more disturbed. Dave was visualising his next patrol when he should have been asleep, and that did not help his concentration when he was out front with Bundy. He was very relieved when his time to rotate out of country arrived and he had survived his tour of duty. The team packed their dogs into the transportation kennels, boarded them on to a C130 (Hercules) transport aircraft and flew from TK to Al-Minhad in Dubai. From Dubai to Darwin by civil air charter (Boeing 767) where the dogs were allowed to come off the aircraft for a stretch and a relief stop under

the careful monitor of the Customs and Quarantine officers, and then on to Brisbane where the handlers deplaned. Sapper Shaun Laing escorted the dogs further on to Sydney where they were placed into quarantine at Eastern Creek for four weeks. At the end of the quarantine period, the dogs were returned to their unit at 2 CER in Brisbane.

Post Afghanistan

The leave period for the returned EDD team commenced very soon after arrival in Brisbane. They marched with 7 Brigade through the streets of Brisbane as a welcome home parade and the citizens of Brisbane turned out in force to greet the diggers as they marched past. There were six riderless horses adorned with the helmets and boots (facing toward the rear) to signify the six diggers of 7 BDE who had been killed in action on that rotation. Two of the of the six horses marched behind 2 CER to signify the loss of SPR Darren Smith and SPR Jacob Moerland. Dave marched that day and acknowledged the support his wife Sharon and his three grown up children had given him while he was away.

Dave is at a crossroads in his Army career. He loves being a “doggie” and would not want that to change. He knows that if he stays in the Army, he will have to go to Afghanistan again. The strain on his family would be great and this plays on his mind. Dave has served for 18 years in the ARA and four years in the ARes. He would be delighted if there were ARes positions in Brisbane for EDD doggies, but there are none at this time. In March 2011, Dave elected discharge from the ARA and assists the Queensland Police dog squad as a casual advisor on EDD capabilities.

EDD Bundy

Bundy was recruited from the Caboolture Shire animal pound. We understand that he was born in June 2006. He commenced training as an EDD on 3 September 2008 in 2 CER, Enoggera, completing his training in June 2009 and qualifying with his number – EDD 477. In May 2009, Bundy passed his operational readiness assessment for overseas service. He deployed with Dave on 19 January 2010, completed his first operational tour of duty in Afghanistan and RTA 21 October 2010. Bundy completed his quarantine at Eastern Creek and returned to 2 CER in Brisbane where he is currently posted. At May 2011, he continues to serve as an EDD.



EDD Bundy – cool dude.



Image courtesy of Dave Brown.

Sapper David Brown and EDD Bundy, Afghanistan 2010.



Image courtesy of Dave Brown.

Dave indicates to Bundy where his EDD is to search. Afghanistan 2010.



Image courtesy of DEFMEDIA.

Dave, Bundy and fellow 2 CER combat engineers in a “Bushie”. Afghanistan 2010.