

Interviews with War Dog Operatives

Series 4, Profile 8 – Afghanistan

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Sapper Reuben Griggs – Royal Australian Engineers

Dateline for this profile is 23 May 2011.

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Background

Sapper (SPR) Reuben “Griggsy” Griggs was born in Gosford NSW on 31 May 1982. Griggsy spent a lot of his early youth being educated at Bateau Bay on the central coast of NSW, then on to Berkeley Vale to complete his education to grade 12. During his year 10 at school Griggsy wanted to join the Australian Regular Army (ARA), but had to wait until his education was finished. After leaving school, he worked in a couple of retail jobs and waited for his opportunity to arrive for enlisting in the ARA. However, this was happening too slowly for him so in August 2000, Griggsy enlisted into the Australian Army Reserve (ARES) as a rifleman with the 2/17 Royal NSW Regiment. In 2001, Griggsy completed his recruit training at the 1st Recruit Training Battalion, Kapooka, NSW and graduated to the Royal Australian Infantry. He attended his infantry Initial Employment Training (IET) at the Infantry Centre at Singleton in NSW and then after three years as an infantryman, in 2003, he transferred to the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE).

Griggsy attended his RAE IET at the School of Military Engineering (SME) in NSW and in November 2003, he graduated as a field engineer. He was posted to the 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment (3 CER) at Townsville in Queensland and continued his training as a combat engineer. In 2007, Griggsy was accepted into the EDD course at SME. Griggsy was teamed up with EDD Scuba and they were both posted to 3 CER. In 2008, Corporal (CPL) John Cannon, the boss of the EDD section at 1 CER in Darwin, asked Griggsy to pass Scuba on to him. This happened and Griggsy was re-teamed with EDD Nova. They trained together at 3 CER and in May 2009, the team deployed to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan - First Deployment 2009/10

Griggsy travelled by civil air charter from Townsville to Darwin, then to The Maldives, Kuwait and finally Tarin Kowt (TK) in Afghanistan. The commander of this EDD team was CPL Phil Grazier. Griggsy touched down in TK on 31 May 2009, his twenty-seventh birthday. Griggsy and Nova received their two week in-country training and briefings and were ready to go outside the wire.

Action came quickly because soon after Griggsy and Nova began supporting patrols they detected an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). In Griggsy’s words: “We were patrolling the finger features area and we came across an area where the commander of

the patrol became suspicious of the terrain. I cast Nova down a couple of re-entrants and on returning up one of these, she showed big interest in two specific areas. After a close search by the combat engineers, they uncovered an IED containing about 20 Kgs of explosive at one point where Nova indicated and then found the battery pack which would have energised the IED at the other point of her interest. Later on, Nova showed interest in two other areas and we recovered weapons and ammunition hidden in camouflaged caches at both of these sites". Nova was rewarded by playing with a tennis ball. Griggsy throws the ball hard, Nova tears away at top speed and tries to catch it in mid-air. But Nova has a funny way for a dog to catch it. She launches herself at the ball, and at the last moment jerks her head at it to tear it out of thin air. But. Very rarely, she misses the ball by hitting it with her teeth in that last desperate head lunge. The ball breaks off to any side and Nova, without taking her eye off the ball, leaps after it as if the whole world will fall apart if she does not grab it at the soonest possible moment. She loved the game – and so too did Griggsy.

On arrival back in TK, Griggsy and Nova continued training. On one occasion, Griggsy rewarded Nova by throwing the ball towards a pile of dirt. Nova tore off after it and tried to catch the ball but missed and sent it off into another direction. She tore off after it without taking her eye off the ball. But the ball rolled toward a forklift which was being operated, rolled under the front wheel, and before the forklift operator could stop his machine, Nova was under the wheel after the ball. The front wheel slightly crushed her chest and head before the machine could be stopped, but the injury was severe. Griggsy and SPR Brendan Keemink rushed her to the medical facility, but they could not treat the injury. Nova died of her injuries and the morale of the entire EDD team sank. Griggsy felt enormous anguish at the loss of Nova but was comforted by a host of supportive emails from friends, the ADFTWDA and many folk in Australia he had never met, but who wanted to share their grief with Griggsy and the team in TK.

Nova was cremated at the United States Army Veterinary Corps facility at Kandahar. Her remains were brought back to Australia by Griggsy and Nova's ashes are with him at his home. He re-teamed with his new dog, EDD Que (pronounced Kew) at SME.

Que was SPR Shaun Laing's dog and was at SME with Shaun while he attended his promotion course. Griggsy needed an experienced EDD immediately and so Shaun gave up his dog for that purpose.

Griggsy and Que trained for a couple of days at SME and then went to Afghanistan. A short period of familiarisation for Que plus a successful assessment for operational capability at the hands of CPL Phil Grazier, and they were ready to go outside the wire.

And Que earned his EDD status several times together with Griggsy. Que indicated on a number of caches and recovered a number of weapons and ammunition. His best detection was in a kwala. Griggsy: "We were supporting a cordon and search of a village when I cast Que into a kwala and he indicated at a site. On further investigation we recovered an IED, without its battery pack, ready for emplacement. On further searching in that village complex, we recovered the battery pack as well. On we went searching and

came up with a bag containing 20 Kgs of ammonium nitrate with aluminium in it (mixed with fuel oil, this becomes an explosive and is popularly used anywhere in the world). Further searching uncovered ammunition and a pressure plate made by a Taliban bomb maker. I was very happy with the way Que got stuck into it from his very first operation”.

Que arrived in Afghanistan in November 2009 and departed with the 3 CER EDD team in February 2010.

It wasn't just all search tasks either. Two times Griggsy was shot at while he and his dog were out in front doing their job. This happened at a village complex named Sorgwez. There was never return fire at the shooter in this village. The diggers humorously called him the “Sorgwez Sniper”. His behaviour was to fire a couple of shots with his rifle at the allied troops and then run for his life. He would then come back a few days later and repeat his performance. And he did this with almost monotonous regularity. The irony of this was that the friendly patrols would rent a kwala for accommodation in this village only to be shot at by the Sorgwez Sniper every two days or so. He never hit anybody, but he certainly got fit running away.

Return to Australia

After nine and a half months of combat duty in Afghanistan the 3 CER EDD team was relieved by the 2 CER team out of Gallipoli Barracks, Brisbane, commanded by CPL Craig Turnbull. Griggsy and SPR Stuart Conlin remained behind after LCPL Andrew Sichter and SPR Brendan Keemink returned to Australia (RTA) because they were married men and Griggsy and Stuart were single. The two “singlies” escorted the dogs on RTA back to Eastern Creek in NSW for the mandatory quarantine veterinary checks before they returned to Lavarack Barracks in Townsville.

When the leave period was completed and the dogs returned to 3 CER, the team resumed training under command of LCPL Andrew Sichter. They continued to train in the local area, and Griggsy handled Que until the end of 2010. Griggsy loves what he is doing as an EDD handler and combat engineer and has two more years to serve. If promotion comes his way he will take it but wants to leave his options open for opportunities as they arise, beyond his two more years with the dogs.

In early 2011, Griggsy was posted to 2 CER based in Brisbane where he continues to operate as an EDD handler. The opportunity to serve again in Afghanistan will probably arise in 2012 and he looks forward to operational duty. He teamed up with EDD Bundy in February 2011. Bundy served a tour of duty in Afghanistan with Sapper Dave Brown in 2010.

EDD Que

Que was recruited into the Army from Australian Customs in 2003. He was trained in EDD duties at SME by Corporal Murray Young. Que teamed up with other EDD handlers and he served three tours of duty in Afghanistan. In November 2009, Que was sent to Afghanistan to replace Nova after she was accidentally killed at TK. He RTA in February 2010. Que served with 2 CER at Enoggera for the remainder of 2010 when he was posted to SME. In 2011, Que continues to serve at SME as an EDD training dog.



Sapper Rueben Griggs and Que – that's chocolate in Griggsey's hand. Afghanistan 2009. Image courtesy of Defence Media, 2009.

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 Sapper David Brown on 19 January 2010, completed his first operational tour of duty in Afghanistan and RTA 21 October 2010. He teamed up with Griggsey in February 2011 and continues to serve as an EDD with 2 CER at Enoggera.



EDD Bundy

EDD Nova

Nova was recruited from the Sippy Creek Animal Shelter in 2008. She received her EDD training at SME and teamed up with Griggysy in November 2008. She deployed with Griggysy to Afghanistan in May 2009 and together, they located a number of “items of interest” including IEDs. Nova was accidentally killed in a freak accident at TK. Nova’s ashes are kept in loving memory in Griggysy’s house.



EDD Nova



Sapper Rueben Griggs and EDD Nova.

Afghanistan October 2009.