A Marine and His Dog: An Indescribable Bond

My name is Matthew Plumeri. I am a junior at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, and a combat-veteran of the United States Marine Corps. I graduated from basic training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina on September 11th, 2009. Following basic training I was assigned to Military Police school. During the course of my training I competed against my peers for a special selection as a military working dog handler. Ultimately I was selected for this advanced training and was given orders to attend Marine Occupational School: Basic K9 Handlers Course at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio.

During Basic K9 Handlers Course training, I was once again selected from my peer group to receive more advanced training at the Specialized Search Dog School. This school trains military working dog handlers and their K9 counterparts to detect explosives off-leash, sometimes at a distance of over three hundred meters. This creates greater standoff from the handler and the explosive the dog is hunting. Upon graduating from Specialized Search Dog School March 3rd, 2011, I was assigned my first duty station aboard Camp Pendleton, San Diego, California.

After several months at Camp Pendleton, I was assigned Gulliver as my new primary dog. Gulliver was a specialized search dog that was assigned in a secondary status, which meant that he was not specifically assigned a handler that was in a deployable status. The side effect of this status meant that Gulliver was a bit rusty and would require extensive work to get him “deployment ready.”

I spent almost every single working day with Gulliver, from 7 am until the close of business at 4:30 pm. We conducted various explosive detection problems, obedience work, the obstacle course, and radio (walkie talkie) training. Each of these exercises improved Gulliver's overall performance and made him a more efficient specialized search dog. In addition to Gulliver receiving great training, the Marines in this unit who had already had one or more combat deployments, gave me specialized training and a unique perspective that only a combat veteran can truly provide. These Marines increased my situational awareness and sharpened my skill set which would prove invaluable on missions or “patrols.” This training included “ground disturbance” or indicators of possible explosives presence (markers for where explosives were hidden) and overall training on ways to make Gulliver and I effective and an advanced combat ready team. Over the course of our training cycle my trust in Gulliver grew exponentially as did his trust in me as his handler. I quickly learned that Gulliver has an amazing personality and was always eager to work and please me. When I was having a bad day, it took almost no effort from him to cheer me up. As our time together increased we grew into a great team, we were in sync, and we became one.

After almost two years of training at Camp Pendleton, several pre deployment courses, and nearly 4 years of service in the Marine Corps, I was selected for a combat deployment to the Helmand Province, in southern Afghanistan. This would ultimately become a seven month long experience that would forever change the relationship between Gulliver and I.
While we were forward deployed, Gulliver spent every day with me without exception. When we were outside of the main base where there was a kennel facility, Gulliver should have stayed in his kennel crate that I had with me as per the regulations. This was almost never the case. At first I would wake up in the middle of the night with him on my cot, sharing my pillow and blankets with me. It was not long before this became the norm. The only time during this deployment that Gulliver was not by my side was when I went to the chow hall or to the gym. When we were not running missions, we would play together as well as set up explosive detection problems with some of the local explosive devices found in the area to ensure that Gulliver and I would remain proficient.

Gulliver is a one of a kind dog. At night, when our unit would return from its missions, the infantrymen or “grunts” would gather around and shoot the breeze in a vain attempt to wash away the anxiety and other psychological byproducts of patrolling the most dangerous area of the most dangerous province in Afghanistan. Gulliver was no different than the other grunts that returned from outside the wire. As we all tried to unwind Gulliver was always the main attraction. It was never long before he would steal the show. Gulliver offered each of us, if only for a short time, an escape. For a few moments we could forget the dark and dangerous place we were in, and he almost intuitively knew what each of us needed. This might be giving us some good laughs at his ritualistic dance that he would do in anticipation of his kong being thrown or trying to get a fellow Marine to rub his belly. There is no doubt in my mind that Gulliver had an immeasurable benefit on the moral and mission effectiveness of the Marines in our unit, and the service members of other units that we supported.

It is a strange feeling, entrusting your life to a dog. This notion is even stranger when the realization sets in that there is also responsibility for the other 15-20 Marines on patrol whose lives depend on you and your K-9. They are expecting the path chosen to be clear of explosives, so they do not get maimed or killed, and can ultimately return home to their loved ones. I never doubted Gulliver. My trust in him was unconditional. I knew the training we suffered together would ensure the desired result. It was not hard for me to place my life in Gulliver's “paws.”

There were many occasions during missions when I would get a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach about a certain route we were taking to our objective location. Often I would choose to go another way. There were other times I felt as if I wanted to go in one direction and Gulliver would choose another path. My trust in Gulliver was so powerful that I walked behind him completely confident that if there was an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in the path, he would find it before it could cause anyone in the patrol harm.

Gulliver kept me safe for the entire 7 months we were deployed. No one who walked behind us on any patrol that Gulliver and I lead was ever injured let alone killed by an IED. Gulliver would remain calm in almost all situations, including when I was the target of small arms rifle fire or machine gun fire. He would always run right back to me as I called him, and I would ensure he had cover and was calm while the Marines and I would try to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy.
It was not until the end of our deployment when I noticed that Gulliver was acting differently. He was no longer the same dog that I had known for the past several years. Gulliver began to get anxious on missions, especially when we would inspect compounds (buildings) containing local national Afghans. He would not allow any of the local nationals come near him or I. He also began to show signs of fatigue. He became lethargic, his back legs began to get stiff causing him to lie down and take more frequent brakes and he was getting up far slower than was normal for a service dog of his age. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to work the extended periods that our missions required. Gulliver was also becoming very anxious, especially when there were any loud or unfamiliar noises that occurred on our bases or even within our own tent. I knew our time in Afghanistan was taking its toll on Gulliver’s physical and mental abilities.

On December 19th, 2013 we returned to the United States in time for the holidays. After a few weeks of checking into our stateside unit, and going through the required procedures for Marines returning from deployment, I went on 14 days of Post-Deployment leave to return home to see my family. Upon completion of my leave I returned back to San Diego and began to inquire about the adoption/retirement process for Military Working Dogs. I calculated that due to Gulliver turning nine in November 2014 that he would soon be eligible to retire. I wanted to ensure that I got the first crack at adopting him. Unfortunately this was not to be. I was informed that there was not anything significantly wrong with Gulliver and that he subsequently would not be retired from the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps believed he still displayed strong skills and would be effective in the Military Working Dog program. I disagreed with this due to what I was experiencing and witnessing at the end of our combat deployment. His anxiety with unfamiliar noises, his hind leg issues, and his decreasing ability to conduct long missions was evidence to me that Gulliver was in all likelihood suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. I was devastated, but this is the Marine Corps, and mission accomplishment is of ultimate importance. Sadly I had to leave Gulliver behind at Camp Pendleton when my five-year contract expired. I made the lonely trip alone to my hometown in New York to attend Marist College. Leaving Gulliver was one of the toughest challenges I had ever faced in the Marine Corps and was ironically the one for which I had no training.

There is now a glimmer of hope. This past October I received a phone call that Gulliver would soon be retired from the Marine Corps. Much to my surprise my wish was going to come true. Although there is not a set-date for Gulliver's retirement, I am optimistic that it will be forthcoming. The Marine Corps provides excellent care for all service dogs but much of Gulliver’s life has been spent in a kennel. As part of the “retirement package” I will ensure that he has five acres of land at my parents home where he can enjoy the freedom of movement he so richly deserves.

There are many challenges in the process of adopting a Military Working Dog. Costs associated with the adoption are the sole responsibility of the service member. Many times, the dog is flown home in a kennel crate inside the belly of the plane. It is my intent to fly to Camp Pendleton to be with Gulliver during his journey to our new home. I plan to purchase two plane tickets so that Gulliver can be able to travel with me inside the cabin. These expenses are not
something a college student normally has in their budget. This is why the Marist Veterans Service Organization is campaigning to help me achieve this goal and give this Marine combat veteran the respect he deserves.

It is extremely difficult to find the words that best describe our relationship. I owe my life to Gulliver, and I love him deeply. He is not just a dog; he is a United States Marine and a patriot. I will do everything in my power to bring him back so he can enjoy the retirement he fought for and earned. Semper Fidelis.

You can watch a Marine Corps Times interview with Gulliver and me, including running the obstacle course here: http://youtu.be/WsXoi55Dqxs

A fundraising page has been set up on “GoFundMe” to help Matthew bring Gulliver to New York: http://www.gofundme.com/gidbmc

Please be sure to “like” the Facebook page as well! https://www.facebook.com/BringGulliverHome