

The Untold Story of Two War Dogs: Spartan and Marcus

Letter from Helen Nolan

Spartan and Marcus were owned by Helen and Jim Keayes of 11 Karabah Place, French's Forest NSW. Both were show dogs and Marcus also did Obedience.

Spartan was Tryax Charlie Brown. He was about 10 months old when I donated him (and Marcus) to the Army, on the breakdown of my marriage to Jim Keayes. He was doing well at showing, and had been Junior in Group at Garden Island show, and got 5th in his class at the Royal. His dam was owned by Ross Rowland of Iris Street, French's Forest. She was Khandahar Ilsa Lass.

Marcus was Greenbank Leonardo CD (born in WA, brother sister mating. He was a monocol). I got Marcus through Wendy and Bruce Andrew of Brierdene Labrador Kennels at Dee Why (Cromer), Sydney. They got him as a reject from Guide Dogs for the Blind, who said he was not suitable to train. I found him to be a very trainable dog, and in fact, he got to CDX level quickly. I think he was around 2 years old when I donated him to the Army.

The dogs were collected from my home at French's Forest by two Army men, Captain R. B. (Barry) French, and Sgt. "Blue" Carter. I was told they were being taken to Holsworthy.

I contacted Barry French after I have left the house and moved to Neutral Bay into a flat. I was told he could bring my dogs down to me to see if I liked. So, he did, and I had them at the flat for a day. I think Blue Carter came with him.

Barry French rang me about a week later and asked if I wanted to see where the dogs were kept at Holsworthy. I drove to Holsworthy and saw the kennels, but no one else, just men and dogs in the distance. French collected both dogs and we drove them to the nearby river where they had a swim. I delivered French and both dogs back to Holsworthy.

Next time I spoke to French, he asked me if I would sign a stud certificate for Spartan. He had arranged a mating for him, at someone's place - a Labrador breeder named Pickering or Piddington or something like that, he had a horse farm at Round Corner past Dural - French collected me from Neutral Bay and drove me to Round Corner. There were kennels at the rear, and Spartan was in those kennels, and one of his front feet was bandaged. Pickering? said "he got too keen and gashed his foot on the wire; don't worry, it's nothing bad". He said he was keeping him there for another day or so to repeat the mating. (I was later told there were no puppies). We sat inside Pickering's living room and watched out the window at a mare that was due to foal. French had drinks. He drove me home.

Next time he spoke to me he told me Spartan was dead. That he had been poisoned by someone in the kennels at Holsworthy.

I don't think that was true. I think French realised what a good dog Spartan was, and stole him, and kept the stud fees. He later contacted Brierdene Kennels and tried to buy a Labrador bitch. Some years later, someone (Major Brydon?) told me French had a pet labrador at his home in Newcastle. In any event, this would explain why the origin of my two dogs has been hidden in the written history).

I came home from Vietnam in April 1970 for a couple of months, then went overseas again until October 1970. After that I lived with my parents at Kingsgrove, and I wrote a pageant for the Labrador Club to perform at the Showgrounds as part of the Pal International Dog Show. I think it was their second annual show. I had lined up Chips Rafferty to do the voice over, but he wasn't well, so Hugh Gent did it instead. I think it was around 1972. Part of the pageant showed the labrador as a tracker dog. One dressed as a Viet Cong and was "tracked" by the labradors of the Army... Barry French organised a full mortar simulator and for the current tracker dogs and army personnel to do it (The Lab Club won the competition).

Marcus went on to become a tracker dog, and was shipped to Vietnam in around 1966. Some years later I was asked to go to Victoria Barracks in Sydney to meet up with a Major Brydon, who told me that when the Australians pulled out of Vietnam, Marcus would go to a good home with the Manager of the Bank of America in Saigon; I begged for him to be sent back, but was told that was out of the question.

I had told Barry French that Governor Roden Cutler had a black lab which he used to send to dog shows in a chauffeur driven Rolls Royce. A woman named Pat Dunstan showed the dog for Sir Roden. I think this might be where he got the idea to tell the historians the Marcus was donated to the Army by the Governor.

Peter Haran, who wrote the supposedly authoritative history of the Dogs of VN War, now knows the correct story of my two dogs, and says he will amend the "history" if ever the book goes to a second edition. But that is unlikely, so I am letting Dogs Victoria know this, through Jacinta Baker, a friend, to preserve the real history of these wonderful dogs.

- Helen Nolan