

# "My Partner Dustin"

*By John C. Burnam*

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I'm a U.S. Marine and the primary element of a two-member team trained to hunt and locate explosives. My partner and I trained as a team for many months honing our expertise to save American lives in the War on Terrorism in Iraq.

It's March 21, 2007 and I'm on the job in Fallujah, Iraq when an enemy fired Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) explodes in our midst. I'm blasted to the ground and stunned. My head is ringing and my body feels numb. My eyes can't quite focus on anything.

My partner is lying next to me severely wounded and bleeding. I move to him and touch him but he's not responding.

I feel sharp pains in my side and back. I'm bleeding but deal with it and concentrate on comforting my partner and protecting him from further harm.

Everything's happening so fast that I'm disorientated and confused. My senses pick up the lingering smell of burnt powder and smoke from the explosion. I hear lots of American voices and heavy boot-steps hurrying all around us. They reach our location and immediately attend to my partner, then carry him away. I'm separated from my partner for the first time. I'm not clear of thought and then I too am carried away but to a different hospital.

I'm in a building lying on a table with lights above and people talking. Still dazed and confused I hear a strange voice say my name, "Lex!" I gesture a slight reflex of acknowledgement. "Lex! You are going to be okay buddy! Just lay still. We are going to take care of your wounds, so stay calm okay,

Lex?" My eyes dart around the room searching for my partner, but he's not there and no one can interpret my thoughts.

Later, I'm released from the hospital and well enough to travel so they transfer me from Iraq to a U.S. Marine Corp base in Albany, Georgia. I really miss my partner, Dusty. I know something has happened to him because he would never have left me alone for so long.

Yes, my name is Lex. I'm a seven year old German shepherd Military Working Dog, service number E132. My master and loyal partner is Corporal Dustin Jerome Lee, 20 year old U.S. Marine Corps canine handler from Quitman, Mississippi. I'm well disciplined to my master's commands and expertly trained to sniff out bombs and explosives. Where's my master, Dusty, my partner? No one can understand me but Dusty. Where's Dusty?

Iraq was to be my last combat tour before retirement. Dusty talked to me all the time about going home and adopting me. I sure do miss him. He is the best friend I've ever had. I love that crazy Marine from Mississippi!

No one can measure the love and unconditional loyalty I have for Dusty. I'd sacrifice my own life for him and he knows it. I just wish I could have stopped that RPG or pushed Dusty away from that powerful blast. It all happened in a blink of an eye and I didn't see it coming until it was too late. Now I sit alone in my kennel-run waiting for the day Dusty shows up.

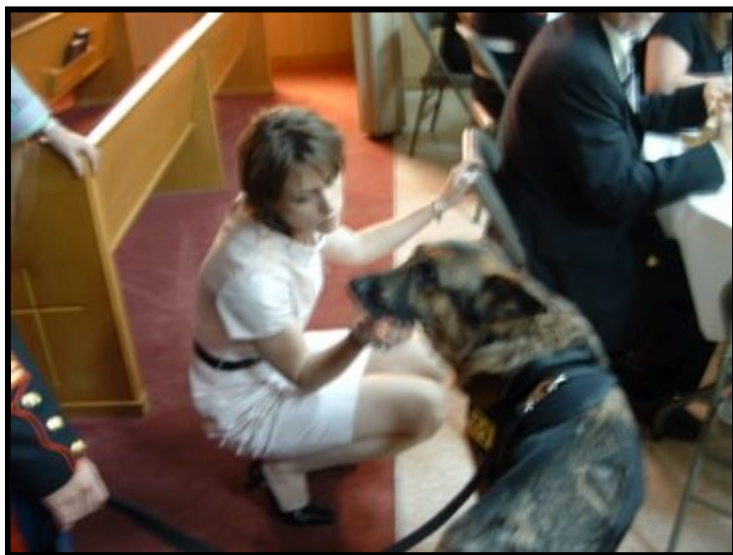
The U.S. Marines are treating me very well. I get enough food and water and exercise each day. And the veterinarian comes by to examine my wounds on a regular basis. I just can't sleep well at night. I wake up to every little noise and I think about Dusty. Where can that Marine be?

The nights are long. The days turn into weeks. Still no Dusty! My wounds are healing and my hair is growing back. The pain is still in my back but I can walk okay. I have a piece of shrapnel near my spine that the veterinarians avoid removing for fear of worse complications. I have spent twelve weeks in rehabilitation after my surgery and declared physically unable to perform in a combat zone.

One of the dog handlers gave me a real good bath and grooming. I felt so refreshed because I was on my way to meet Dusty's family. Maybe Dusty will be there waiting for me. When I arrived I sensed something was not

quite right. Dusty wasn't there and everyone was sad, but very happy to greet me. I then realized that I was attending Dusty's funeral. Everyone showed up to pay their respects.

Dusty is a real American hero and he was buried with full military honors. I was so proud to have been his last best friend and partner. At one particular moment of total silence during the ceremony, I sniffed a slight scent in the air that was very familiar. It smelled like Dusty. I figured he sent me a signal that he knew I was there! I wagged my tail and moaned a sigh of grief that he would only hear and understand. I just about lost my tail in that horrible explosion and the veterinarian fixed it so it still wags okay.



I was greeted by the Lee family with joy in their hearts. The picture is of Dustin's mom, Rachel, and me in church. It felt so warm and comfortable to be with my partner's loving family. I wanted to stay but I was escorted away after the funeral and back to Albany, Georgia. What is going to happen to me now?

Wait a minute! I was due for retirement, right? Why did the military take me to see Dusty's family and not leave me there? I belong with them in Mississippi not here in Georgia.

The Lee family adopting me would not be too much to ask considering they will never again see their son, grandson, brother, nephew and friend. Adopting me will keep a big part of Dusty's life alive for them and for me. I will enable Dusty's family to experience what he already knew about me. I loved and protected him everywhere we went and even on the battlefield in Iraq. It's time the U.S. Marine Corps allowed Dustin's family to adopt me. I'm not a young pup anymore, you know! I'm a senior of retirement age. I want to spend last years of my life with the Lee family. It's where I now belong!

It's been eight long months since we buried my partner, Dustin, and all attempts by the Lee family to adopt me have failed. The Marines have

placed me back on duty training new recruits. My back bothers me some but I'm an expert on the job. It's the recruits that have a lot to learn about keeping their eyes on me and understanding my body language. Dustin and I bonded as a team and our minds were always in sync.



There has been a turn of events in my adoption. U.S. Congressman Walter B. Jones of North Carolina heard my story and immediately contacted the U.S. Marine Corps Commandant at the Pentagon in Washington D.C. requesting my urgent release.

The Marines really showed off their compassion for the Lee family and me too! They even dispatched a veterinarian to give me a complete final medical examination. I feel a sense of excitement I haven't felt in a very long time. I even have a prance in my step!

That's a Christmas picture of me and Dusty in Iraq, December 2006.



That's me smiling with the Lee family and some of Dusty's Marine pals at the funeral in Quitman, Mississippi, April 2007.

The top Marine brass and the veterinarian signed the official papers saying I'm A-OK to be adopted. I got an honorable discharge from the U.S. Marine Corps on December 21, 2007, the anniversary day of Dustin's death. I will be home with the Lee family for Christmas.



That's a picture of me greeting the Lee family at my retirement ceremony at the U.S. Marine Corps base, Albany, Georgia, December 21, 2007. The news media was everywhere! My adoption even made the nightly news on national television. I'm the first Marine Corps combat veteran working dog to ever be retired to the family of a fallen Marine.

Dusty? I'm sure you had a lot to do with all this from heaven. And I can hardly wait to visit your room and lie down on your bed and sniff your boots and clothes. Living with your family will be like having you around again, Dusty!

Always Faithful,

Lex (E132)  
German Shepherd  
Military Working Dog  
U.S. Marine Corps Veteran (Retired)