

A MIND FOR MUSHING



Dave Armstrong, a piece of living history, has shown his love for the art of mushing for decades in the Helena area beginning with his time at Camp Rimini training sled dogs in the U.S. Army.

Camp Rimini dog trainer recalls training dogs to fight Nazis, rescue pilots

Dave Armstrong a legend in Montana sled dog training

The dogs and handlers of Camp Rimini make their way down Last Chance Gulch in September of 1943 during a parade in Helena.

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For a time in the early 1940s, the barking of about 1,000 dogs in Rimini filled not only that gulch, but spilled over into other drainages.



The dogs and handlers of Camp Rimini make their way down Last Chance Gulch

The dogs and 100 or so men were training in support of one of the Army's greatest missions never attempted, the invasion of Nazi-occupied Norway — although most of the soldiers didn't even know that was the plan until a half-century later.

Go up Rimini Road to the flat areas that once held barracks and kennels and there is no sign or historical marker. Most of the record of the life and adventures of Camp Rimini live now in the home and mind of Dave Armstrong, the first name in Montana mushing, who arrived from his native New England just about 70 years ago, on Feb. 5, 1943.

"Three of us and 40 dogs climbed in a baggage car and came out here," Armstrong, nearly 92, said last week.

The soldiers at Camp Rimini trained teams of dogs to run. Sometimes, the dogs refused. Sometimes they got sick or wounded. They got stuck in brush. Some of the breeds just weren't cut out for pulling.

Armstrong and the others learned about the kinds of dog-personalities that work together. They developed sled systems that could carry 1,000 pounds or more of equipment for hundreds of miles where virtually no other means of travel was possible.

They developed a mount that could support a .30 caliber machine gun on a sled. Later, the Army even developed parachute harnesses so dogs, along with sleds and mushers, could airlift where needed. The invasion of Norway, to be launched by the First Special Service Force, training at Fort Harrison at the time, was called off — the British took that on instead.

The dog sled forces took up a different mission, rescuing and recovering pilots and airplanes lost in places like Greenland and Baffin Island. Stationed in Newfoundland, the work was grim. Armstrong recalls bringing in a large container of body parts from a plane wreck. Army investigators later told him the remains were from two different people. He said the worst recovery was the last, a B-24 that went down with 11 people aboard. It was equipped with something new and secret — radar — and the Army Air Force wanted the plane back. Soldiers searched for three weeks. The plane was finally located by a trapper who had been out in the wilderness for 30 days and saw a shirt in a tree, and then saw a leg hanging in the tree. Mushers would find duffel bags at wreck sites, closed and filled with clothes, and found tiny slits in the garments. It turned out aluminum shrapnel from the plane crash was so forceful it pierced the bags and clothes leaving almost no mark. They found crash sites in forests while looking for broken tree tops, the first things planes would hit in their way down.

“Basically, it’s a horror story,” Armstrong said.

One time in Newfoundland, Armstrong’s dogs lugged a sled full of radio equipment to the top of Table Mountain. The radio provided key communications in the war effort, and the dog teams made scores of missions. Yet, Armstrong said, he found no mention of the dogs in a regional museum. Similarly, there’s very little in Helena to memorialize the dogs and men of Camp Rimini and its unique mission in some of the world’s toughest conditions.

At the Montana Military Museum, inside the gates of Fort Harrison, several items tell the story of the local role in the canine mission. The collection, including a sled, may be the best set of records and relics anywhere of Camp Rimini except for Armstrong’s collection, both physical and in his tales.

Armstrong returned to Montana, about two decades after the war, with his wife, Alice. He was a founder of Race to the Sky, Montana’s top sled race, and remains a mentor to mushers.

Mark Ibsen, a local physician, recalls learning much of the skill from Armstrong. When Armstrong fell from a sled and cracked a rib, Ibsen and his then-wife ran Armstrong’s dogs and learned from the master.

“He was very, very generous with his knowledge and with his opinion,” Ibsen said. “I really think he is connected deeply to the bond between man and dog.” He said Armstrong also taught him the skill of taking a brow-beating from a crusty old “Down-easterner.”

In Armstrong's home, a large, historic structure, the first thing he showed to recent visitors was his own wood carving, about three feet long — "whittling," he called his handiwork — of a team of dogs pulling a sled and musher up a slope. Now Armstrong has just three dogs. But around the house are uncountable other dogs, sleds and mushers — in paintings, drawings and photos and etched in glass.

The "cream team," his top team, figures prominently. On one area are framed promotional posters of every year of the Race to the Sky — begun three decades ago with the starting line at the state Capitol and finish line at Holland Lake.

Among Armstrong's photos is one of his very first dog. He has photos of numerous sleds in action and, in binders, probably the single best collection of photos anywhere of Camp Rimini, and possibly the best documentation of the Race to the Sky anywhere.

He says sled dogs nowadays are bred and raised too thin, with mushers looking for speed instead of endurance. Ibsen joked in response that Armstrong trained dogs to go at about 4 mph all day — not a pace that will win races now.

One thing not well documented is the history of the individual dogs themselves. Their transfers to Newfoundland and Greenland are not recorded anywhere, Armstrong says.

When Camp Rimini closed in 1945, the dogs dispersed.

The Army tried to give some away, but the old war dogs didn't make good pets. Armstrong says there are no records, other than the 254 dogs sent to Fort Robinson, in Nebraska. That left maybe 400 or more unaccounted for. "The word that I got was that they put the dogs down, piled them, and burned them," he said. "I wasn't there so I can't prove it."



Dave Armstrong poses for a photograph with the "cream team" while on a filming expedition in the Rimini area in 1943.



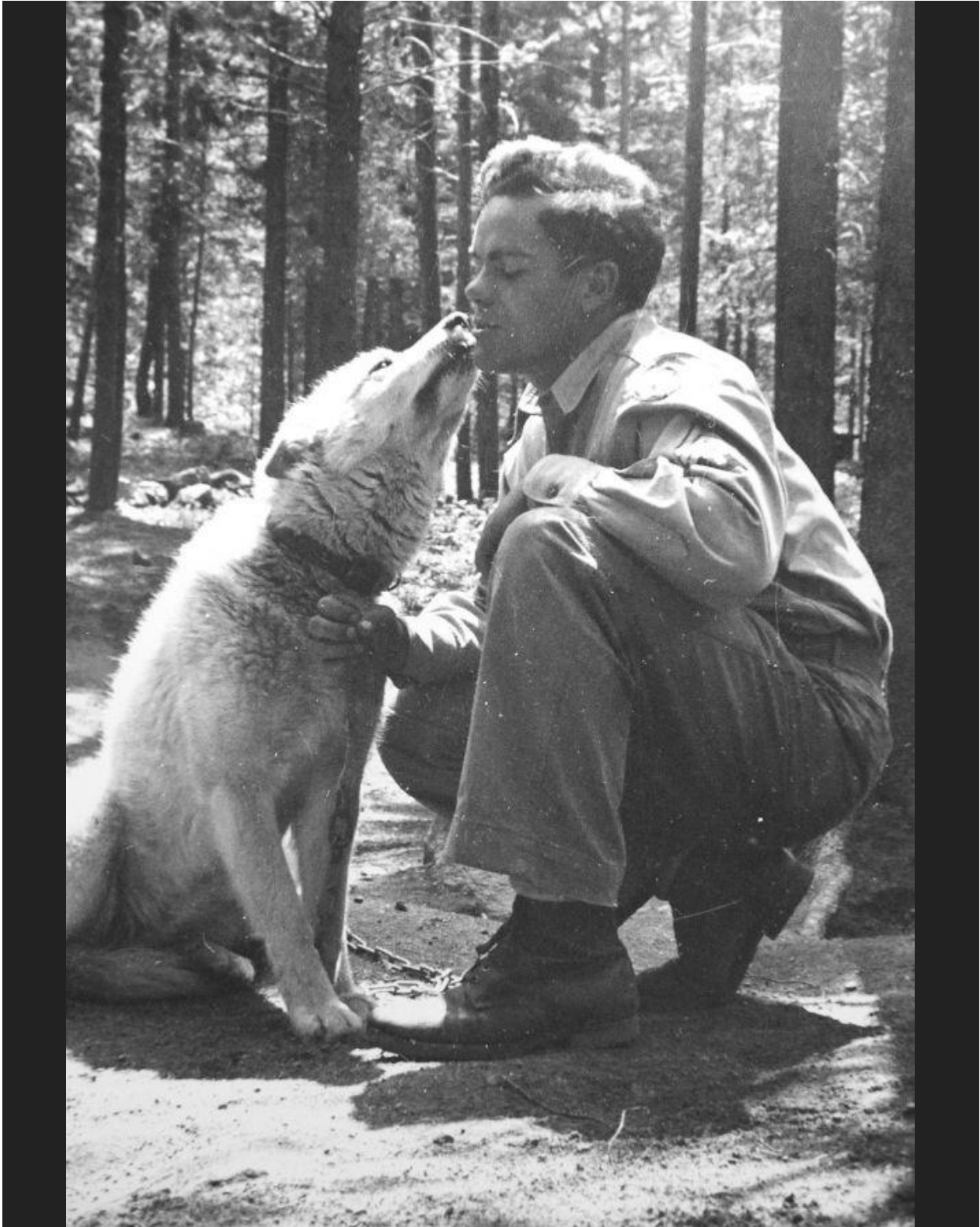
The soldiers being trained at Camp Rimini rescued pilots and airplanes lost in cold harsh areas such as Greenland and Baffin Island.



Dave Armstrong, on his "cream team," train with other dog teams on the trails roads and trails



One hundred or so men lived in barracks at Camp Rimini in the early 40's where they trained sled dog teams to help the allies take back Norway from the Nazi's in WWII.



Dave Armstrong gets a kiss from Jill Sr., a member of the "cream team" he developed in 1943