ARMY WAR DOG PAVILION DEDICATION

CAMP RIMINI

SEPTEMBER 16, 2023

DAVE ARMSTRONG III TALK

Thank you for joining us today as we honor the men who served at Camp Rimini 80 years ago. There is little available in the written record about what the men and their dog teams did at Camp Rimini and their subsequent deployments to remote regions for search and rescue. However, one of these men, my father, David Armstrong, Jr., wrote a book about his war time experiences at Camp Rimini and his later deployment to Newfoundland.

I want to take a few moments to briefly share his experience because it represents the contributions to the war effort by him and others that trained at Camp Rimini.

It all began in 1942 when the Quartermaster Corps selected Chinook Kennels in New Hampshire to procure sled dogs and drivers for military operations. The Chinook kennels were known for supplying dogs to the Byrd Antarctic Expedition and New England sled dog racing. Notably, my father had worked at the kennels for three summers and he “knew” people.

Dave Armstrong, Jr., entered the service in mid-September 1942. He was 21 years old. After receiving just three weeks of basic training, he was transferred first to the Eastern Remount Headquarters in Front Royal, Virginia, and then days later, was sent to the Wonalancet Kennels in New Hampshire to train sled dogs. This just six weeks after entering the service.

It is not entirely clear what the Army intended to do with sled dogs but in early January 1943 the Army staged a publicity stunt at the New Hampshire kennels using the sled teams. They mounted machine guns on the sleds, the dogs then pulled a crew of two men forward to a range where they commenced live firing after unhitching the dogs. It was never repeated.

In January 1943 he received orders to report to Camp Rimini. He and two others traveled west by rail with 40 dogs and all their equipment arriving at Camp Rimini on February 5th.

Originally established in 1936 as a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, Camp A-76 (aka Camp Rimini) was located a short distance from the town of Rimini, Montana. It housed some 200 CCC volunteers working in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service. The outbreak of World War II soon led to the closure of the CCC camp in 1942. However, it was quickly transformed into an Army War Dog Reception and Training Center officially brought online in November 1942, 11 months after the U.S. declared war on Japan and Germany.

The site was chosen by the Army as a training center because of its superior snow conditions and accessible mountainous terrain. Camp Rimini was one of four World War II posts established by the U.S. Army Quartermaster General as war dog reception and training centers under the Dogs for Defense program. Camp Rimini opened on November 11, 1942.

The camp accommodated some 140 military personnel and several hundred dogs of various breeds. In addition to the sled dogs, there were pack dogs and guard dogs trained at the camp.

Camp Rimini was used exclusively for the training of sled and pack dogs and their military handlers. During the winter months of 1943, they trained their dogs and honed their skills in and around the town of Rimini and on the slopes of MacDonald Pass. These sled and pack dogs were used throughout World War II for rescue of downed allied aircrews ferrying aircraft over the great circle route to Europe and Asia. They were also used for transportation, freight hauling and providing vital communication links in the extreme northern climates such as Newfoundland where snow was an obstacle.

During the dry months the dog teams trained pulling stripped car chassis up and down Rimini Road. On December 12, 1943, orders were received for 11 men, 81 dogs, 125 sleds and equipment to travel to Presque Isle, Maine, by rail. At Presque Isle, the teams continued to train and on January 12, 1944, David Armstrong, Jr., now 23 years old, and a fellow musher Willard Gregg were ordered to Stephenville, Newfoundland, arriving by plane with 13 sleds, 2 dog teams (18) and equipment. Little did they know they would soon be put to the test.

In January 1944, the U.S. Signal Corps was closing in on the establishment of the vital Long Line communication system with its 64 stations and 550 miles of cable connecting all of Newfoundland. The installation of the repeater stations was an arduous task and the one for the top of Table Mountain near Port Aux Basques was causing headaches due to the steep terrain covered in deep snow that impeded movement of the station components.

Signal Corps personnel had struggled for weeks to pull crude sleds up the trail by hand without success. Within days of his arrival in Newfoundland in January 1944, my father, Dave Armstrong, Jr., and fellow musher Willard Gregg were tasked with assisting the men of the Signal Corps with hauling the station up 2,000 feet on a narrow 2.5- miles, snow covered trail to the top using dog teams. This would be equivalent of going from the Helena Library to the top of Mount Helena on a sled pulled by dogs.

In those days there were no roads in Newfoundland, so dogs, equipment, supplies, and food were loaded onto a rail car in Stephenville near Harmon Field and delivered by the “Newfie Bullet” some 80 miles south to a desolate, cold and snowy siding near Cape Ray.

Over the space of ten days in January 1944, the completed the mission delivering 15 loads to the site of the installation. Two of those loads weighed more than 1,000 pounds. The station components were delivered intact following some near misses.

Just a few weeks later, my father, Dave Armstrong, Jr., accompanied by two other drivers and a pack dog handler, was sent to recover the cargo of a crashed C-54 transport plane #278, 35 miles south of Harmon Field. The crash was located up on the plateau in deep snow some five miles east of Codroy Pond.

On March 24, 1944, in the dead of night, the pilot had flown the place into the snow-covered plateau as though on a landing strip. The force of the impact stripped the two left motors off the wing and flipped the plane upside down. Miraculously, the pilot and six-man crew survived. Two of the crew were severely injured and were later flown out by a ski plane to a hospital where they recovered from their injuries. The remaining crew walked out to the rail siding at Codroy Pond and were taken to Harmon Field by train.

The dog teams and pack dogs recovered 5,800 pounds of cargo and 32 sacks of mail from the crash site in just two days. The entire contingent of sled dog teams and pack dogs assisted the salvage crew to carry as much of the aircraft as could be saved down the mountain, including a dual landing gear weighing 2,800 pounds. The landing gear was lashed to a sled with the two wheels trailing behind and was pulled by a team of nine dogs down the rail siding.

Other equipment that dog teams hauled out on this mission included the 1,500-pound nose gear, all of the propellers, and propeller gearing. Wrestling such heavy loads down the mountain was labor intensive and dangerous. Drivers sometimes narrowly missed serious injuries when they were smashed between bulky loads and trees as sleds slid off the trail.   
All in all, the outcome was better than expected.

During most searches for downed planes, the hope of saving lives kept rescuers going, but the grim reality was that most plane crashes weren’t survivable. Search and Rescue became recovery which was mentally and physically exhausting.

On Valentine’s Day 1945, a B-24 Liberator crashed on instrument approach and exploded on impact in terrible weather some 15 miles north of Gander Field. Search and rescue crews searched for days and weeks on snowshoes in an area far short of where the plane was eventually found. The search for the plane and its crew lasted for more than three weeks.

The plane was finally located by a local trapper who first spotted a shirt in a tree, then a body and finally the aircraft. The debris field covered an area of 100 yards by 50 yards.

Led by my father, Dave Armstrong, Jr., two dog teams were sent out from Gander, fifteen air miles away, to recover not only the crew but also new, secret radar equipment on board the aircraft. Over the space of 10 days, recovery personnel and the sled dog teams recovered the bodies and equipment. The bodies were returned to Gander Field and buried in a nearby allied cemetery. The remains were eventually repatriated back to their families in the U.S. after the war ended.

These are just a few examples of what the men of Camp Rimini and their teams accomplished in support of the war effort. Throughout the war, men and dogs of search and rescue squadrons in Canada, Alaska, Newfoundland, and Greenland rescued survivors, recovered casualties, and salvaged equipment. These few men and their dogs retrieved approximately 150 survivors, 300 casualties, and millions of dollars’ worth of equipment by the close of World War II.

Eventually the war came to an end for my father and he was discharged from service on December 13, 1954. He had served three years, three months. He was 24 years old. It is our hope that this Pavilion will honor the service of the men of Camp Rimini to their country, and they will not be forgotten.