



Episode 701, Story 2: War Dog Letter

Tukufu: Our next story explores a strange use of dogs during World War II. As the smoke clears over Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the U.S. Army knows that a costly war in the Pacific is now inevitable. But the opening months of 1942 go badly for the Allies and more and more territory in the Pacific is lost to the Japanese. There is a growing sense of desperation. How will the military defeat an enemy that is now dug in on islands all across the South Pacific? More than sixty years later, Andrew Turner from Kansas City, Kansas, has a document that may reveal a classified attempt to give new bite to the nation's armed forces....

Andrew: I seemed to have stumbled upon a bit of mysterious World War II history. Tukufu, it's an honor to meet you. Come on in.

Tukufu: Thank you. So what do you have here for me?

Andrew: Well, I have a bunch of documents, 1940s World War II era, formerly belonging to a Sgt. Henry Simpson.

Tukufu: How did you come about this stuff?

Andrew: I work for an online auction company and this stuff came in on consignment.

Tukufu: The documents appear to be about a secret program to train attack dogs off the coast of Mississippi.

Andrew: What's really cool about these documents is that they deal with K-9 service in World War II, but as I was going through the documents it kind of seemed like there was an extra level to it, like it wasn't just you know, simple dog training.

Tukufu: Well what, what led you to that conclusion? Most of the documents are bureaucratic and not terribly interesting – but one letter caught Andrew's eye.



Andrew: To Sgt. Simpson from a soldier he had served with named Don Reynolds. It appears that there is some sort of official army investigation going on.

Tukufu: Oh really.

Andrew: Yeah. He says, "We heard on the island two full colonels were coming down from Washington to investigate affairs."

Tukufu: It's not clear what the investigation is about – but the target is a man named Prestre.

Andrew: It looks as though the Colonel knows that Mr. Prestre is after his hide, so he is going after Mr. Prestre's.

Tukufu: Who is Mr. Prestre?

Andrew: Apparently he had something to do with training these dogs. What do you think of Mr. Prestre as a dog trainer?

Tukufu: Whatever the investigation is about, the letter writer seems very nervous. Really. Oh look at this. "Pardon my terrible typing, I'm in the orderly room in Gulfport, and was afraid one of the officers would come in any minute. However, I don't think there's any fear of your letters being opened, and I think you can write to me safely." so there's something going on.

Andrew: Something going on.

Tukufu: Something shady is happening here.

Andrew: Uh huh.

Tukufu: Okay.

Andrew: I consider myself an amateur World War II historian, you know, but I've never heard anything about this before.



Tukufu: Now what is it you want me to find out for you?

Andrew: Well, basically what was the army doing training these dogs and who was this Mr. Prestre and why was the army investigating him?

Tukufu: Well, I'm going to do my best. I'm a cat guy myself, but I'll try to find out as much about your dog story here as I can. All right?

Andrew: Okay, great! Thanks.

Tukufu: I'll get back to you.

Andrew: I look forward to it.

Tukufu: All the documents in the folder date to World War II. The letter between Simpson and Reynolds discussing the investigation of Mr. Prestre is certainly the most curious. It appears they gave a questionnaire to all the men. "Did Mr. Prestre ever promise or offer you a commission? What threats did you ever hear Mr. Prestre make against fellow officers of this command?" but it doesn't really tell us what he did, or even what he was accused of. What the dog training is for is not clear either. Let's see what else we got here. So this is like a list of the dogs assigned to the project and the date that they were acquired by the military. According to these documents, the dogs are being trained off the coast of Gulfport Mississippi, at a place ironically called Cat Island. I don't have much luck online running down any of the people mentioned in the documents. But the entry "War Dogs" throws up a couple of interesting items. Listen to this from March 1942; this is just three months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor: "the army will accept dogs of good health and intelligence to be trained for national defense, and called upon owners of suitable dogs to volunteer their pets for selective service." It was a time of growing national paranoia. German U-boats had been spotted off the American coast, and there were reports and worries about spies coming ashore. The military was worried about the sabotage of their coastal supply depots and decided they wanted to use sentry dogs to help guard against these kinds of attacks. The U.S. army turned to its Quartermaster Corps to train the dogs. But there's no mention of whether or not this is connected to what was going on Cat Island. Let me try to dig a little bit more here. Listen to



this: "the Cat Island War Dog reception and training center. Casual visitors are not welcome. Training secrets remain secret." Cat Island is about eight miles off the coast of Gulfport, Mississippi. I've arranged to meet a Gulfport native, Barry Foster. So, you been out to this Cat Island?

Barry: This Cat Island is very special to me.

Tukufu: He says he started researching Cat Island as a teen after hearing rumors about its secret wartime past. I always have time for amateur historians. They often turn up information that professional historians haven't come across. Local captain Kim Fulton has agreed to ferry us out to the island. Captain Kim, how you doing man? It's about a half-hour trip from shore. Barry tells me he was so taken with the mystery of Cat Island that he spent years doing research and tracking down eyewitnesses.

Barry: That's it! See it?

Tukufu: If the military wanted a secluded, hard-to-reach place to run a secret program, this was definitely a good choice...there's not even a dock we can land at.

Barry: They probably believed that the terrain here was somewhat similar to the islands in the pacific.

Tukufu: We come across remnants of the army's presence here: rusted hulks of machinery, and footprints where building once stood.

Barry: I believe we have the kennels here Tukufu.

Tukufu: I tell Barry what I've read about the army's Quartermaster Corps' program to train dogs as sentries, scouts, and mine detectors. Is this part of that?

Barry: No, actually, at the time they started, there were four sites where they were training dogs. This was a fifth that was kind of off the radar.



Tukufu: Off the radar? Barry explains that the top secret program on Cat Island started around November 1942. It was run by the army ground forces and headed up by a civilian: a Swiss refugee from New Mexico. His name was William A. Prestre. Yes! This is the guy in my letter. What was he trying to do?

Barry: He convinced somebody higher up in the military that he could train dogs to scent and attack people with Japanese blood.

Tukufu: Barry tells me that Prestre's plan to win the war was to train a ferocious assault force of 20 or 30 thousand dogs. Packs would be trained to sniff out the Japanese and hunt them down in a first wave of island invasions. Okay, it sounds kind of far fetched but I –

Barry: It sounds very far fetched now, but remember during that time that we were looking for any advantage we could get to win a world war.

Tukufu: Barry says the army greenlit Prestre's plan and gave him three months here to test his theory. The letter that I'm investigating suggests that Prestre was under investigation by the military. Do you know anything about that?

Barry: You know, I don't.

Tukufu: Barry says Simpson and Reynolds were simply soldiers stationed on Cat Island. He suspects that the investigation they are discussing may have something to do with Prestre's training methods.

Barry: Well his idea was to take American soldiers who were of Japanese descent and the Japanese Americans were brought here not as dog trainers, Tukufu, but dog bait.

Tukufu: As what?

Barry: As dog bait.



Tukufu: What do you mean they were dog bait? Barry tells me that some of the eyewitnesses he interviewed were these Japanese American soldiers. He's arranged a meeting for me back on shore. Barry's sent me to a local V.F.W watering hole to meet a veteran named Raymond Nosaka. Now 92, Ray was 26 and training in Wisconsin with the all-Japanese American 100th infantry battalion when he and 24 others suddenly received new orders.

Raymond: They took us to Gulfport, Mississippi.

Tukufu: Now, they didn't explain to you why they were doing this?

Raymond: All was so secret. We stayed there till about three weeks, you know on the island and then they told us we're going to train dogs, but actually us guys, we're the baits, dog baits.

Tukufu: According to Ray, the dogs soon grew accustomed to the 25 Japanese Americans. So he was ordered to use brutal methods to try to teach the dogs to quote, "hate."

Raymond: "You hit the dog." I hit the dog 'til he bleeds.

Tukufu: Ray was given protective pads and ordered by the dog's handler to retreat 30 paces and wait.

Raymond: And he tell the dog, "kill him!" Not to attack, said, "kill" that's the command they give. So when they come for you, they mean business. The dog so mad already, because I hit him, and oh, bite me all over the place. it's not a pleasant thing, but I always say, well that's our duty, we have to do it.

Tukufu: So, why did they select Japanese American soldiers to be the live bait?

Raymond: That Swedish guy told us that we smell like the enemy Japanese, which is wrong, the theory is not right.

Tukufu: I'm doing an investigation trying to find out about him; do you know anything about Mr. Prestre?



Raymond: I really can't say too much about him, because we hardly, we hardly see him.

Tukufu: Did you hear about the investigation of Mr. Prestre?

Raymond: No, I never...maybe they were investigating him, but they don't want us to be friendly with the trainers nor the dogs.

Tukufu: Thank you very much, you've been a great help. Ray never heard about Prestre after the war. He said Prestre had looked at least twenty years older than the enlisted men, so he's almost certainly passed away. I'm heading to Fort Lee, Virginia home to the US Army's Quartermaster Museum, and some modern day military working dogs. I'm meeting the museum's curator Luther Hanson, and dog handler, Staff Sgt. Nathan Gibson. The dog can sniff out a fugitive in the woods, or narcotics hidden in a vehicle. I ask Sgt. Gibson if their dogs could be trained to identify and attack certain races based on their scent.

Sgt. Gibson: No, sir, it won't be by scent.

Tukufu: So the dog doesn't know the difference between an Asian, a Caucasian, an African American?

Sgt. Gibson: Not, not by scent, sir.

Tukufu: I tell both men about my investigation. Luther confirms what Barry told me about the secret mission on Cat Island. I've heard some unbelievable stories about how Japanese American soldiers were treated on Cat Island; is that why Mr. Prestre was being investigated?

Luther: No, I don't believe so. The army looked at it as a way of saving American lives. They tried it for 90 days as an experiment only.

Tukufu: Why did the army end Prestre's experiment?



Luther: It was unsuccessful. The dogs were unable to determine between the Japanese Americans and any other scents they were able to find in the woods. They were also unable to keep the packs together. Unless you had a handler there pointing and giving direction to the individual dogs the dogs went after different scents and essentially either lost or didn't find the soldiers.

Tukufu: He explains that after Prestre was fired, the Quartermaster Corps took over the Cat Island training program. So if they weren't investigating his methods why was Mr. Prestre investigated by the military?

Luther: I'm not sure but I do know that the papers have recently been declassified at the National Archives and there may be some more answers there for you.

Tukufu: Thank you very much. I've requested the declassified Cat Island files from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. My office has forwarded them to me in the field. It appears that as Prestre's 90-day experiment wound down in January 1943, an inspection was held to show army brass the results. And it doesn't sound like it went well at all. Listen to this, "there was no actual ferocity displayed by the dogs. It was more nearly comparable to a vaudeville act." It sounds like things went downhill fast for Prestre. Check this out, "Mr. William A. Prestre was notified that his employment with this project terminates February 2nd, 1943." But, you know, I still don't see a reason for the army to have started an official investigation. Wait a minute...it looks like Prestre's firing wasn't the end of the matter. "Subject: investigation of Cat Island training program. Conducted: March 30 through 31st 1943." Prestre hadn't gone down without a fight. He claimed the army had hampered his ability to get results from his dogs, and he made several allegations of incompetence against his army bosses. And it looks like in each case, the army investigators ruled against Mr. Prestre. But the investigation had suddenly taken a far more serious tone. I found what I've been looking for.

Listen to this... So you were right, there was controversy; there was tension around Mr. Prestre and the Cat Island training facility. I tell Andrew about William Prestre's plan to train attack dogs, and the men like Raymond Nosaka whose duty it was to serve as human bait. As degrading and distasteful as that may sound, these men really distinguished themselves in this miserable circumstance.



Andrew: They still served their country even though they weren't exactly treated very well back home.

Tukufu: But you wanted to know specifically about Mr. Prestre, and our declassified documents have a lot to say about that as well. The investigation into the failed dog training program had turned into secret scrutiny of its unstable promoter. "Prior to his departure Mr. Prestre made several threats, the gist of which were that unless the project is continued, he would make plenty of trouble for any and all that opposed him, up to and including the president." Listen to this: "it is believed advisable to acquaint the FBI with his actions and attitude, and request that he be placed under surveillance if deemed necessary." I can find no mention of Mr. Prestre after this.

Andrew: Wow. I'm really glad, glad that I was able to stumble upon something that brings this little known piece of World War II history to light.

Tukufu: And for that I thank you very much.

Andrew: Thank you very much. Nice work.

Tukufu: Although the Cat Island experiment was a failure, the army's overall war dog program was a success. By the end of the war, the army had trained close to 10,500 dogs, and created 15 war dog platoons. Almost 1,900 dogs served overseas, mostly as sentries, scouts, messengers, and draft dogs. Their success proved how valuable man's best friend could be to soldiers, and solidified the role of the working dog in the military.