

H-Net Reviews

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Charles L. Dean. *Soldiers and Sled Dogs: A History of Military Dog Mushing.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xvii + 129 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1728-7.

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Mush

The United States military has had involvement with sled dogs to varying degrees from as far back as 1901 up to the mid 1950s. Charles L. Dean has uncovered a wealth of information that has been unknown to the general public up until now. Five years of intensive research have culminated in putting together, in one volume, the story of the U.S. military's use of sled dogs. The book will have most appeal to those primarily interested in military history or books on dogs. But hopefully others will pick up the book and learn about an unusual chapter in American history, the World War II campaign in the largely forgotten Arctic Theater.

The book mainly covers this war effort in WWII, although as background there is a history of U.S. involvement with sled and pack dogs. I was surprised to learn of Billy Mitchell's connection with sled dogs. Mitchell has always been famous as a proponent of air power, but it seems that in 1901 a young Lieutenant Mitchell was given the five-year task to establish the Washington to Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System. Mitchell devised a plan to use dog teams to move supplies and equipment into place in winter. To do so, he put together a kennel of over 200 dogs, the first American military leader to purchase and keep sled dogs year around instead of relying on seasonal contracts. This innovation allowed him to complete the task three years ahead of schedule. Mitchell's innovations set the ground for the use of sled dogs in World War II.

During the Second World War America supplied

equipment to Soviet and European allies via air routes over Alaska and the Bearing Sea to Siberia and over Maine, Greenland and Labrador to Britain and later France. Search and rescue teams were vital when aircrews were forced down by extreme weather conditions in remote and harsh terrain. Survivors, casualties, and vital equipment had to be recovered and, in the days before helicopters, sled dogs were the only means available. It is estimated that 150 survivors, 300 casualties and millions of dollars of equipment were recovered. Sled dogs continued to be used by the Air Force after World War II for search and rescue until the mid-1950s when the helicopter finally closed the door.

Sled dogs were also organized for combat. The 10th Mountain Division was created and trained for a proposed invasion of Norway. As part of the planning, the 10th became the only army division to have a sled dog unit attached, the purpose of which was to bring in supplies and bring out casualties. The proposed invasion never occurred, and the sled dogs were no longer needed and were detached from the 10th. During the Battle of the Bulge, sled dog units came close to being sent in, but bureaucratic bungling kept the mission from going forward until snows melted and it was too late.

Both of these tasks led to an expansion in the number and organization of military sled dogs. The Army had to develop doctrine, purchase dogs, design, construct, and test sleds, and train handlers. Mr. Dean goes into great detail covering the evolution of the sled dog pro-

gram from inception at Chinook Kennels in New Hampshire through various training facilities in Hale, Colorado, Camp Rimini, Montana, and finally in Fort Robinson, Nebraska and goes into great detail covering actual sled construction and design variations. The great detail regarding the sled designs was a little dry for me but should appeal to Mushing aficionados.

One of the major challenges for the military was that they were training dogs and creating equipment for varying terrain and weather conditions. Equipment and methods for use in light power snow would not necessarily work in frozen wet terrain—Alaska was far different from Greenland and Labrador. And the “experts” used in training—who came from these varied terrains—had different backgrounds and views.

I found interesting the experimentation with parachuting dogs into remote areas with their sleds.

Dogs were dropped from jump towers, like paratroopers were at Fort Benning, graduating to actual “jumps” (they were thrown out of the plane) from heights varying from 350 up to 1500 feet. Two dogs, Maggie and Jiggs were actually awarded parachute wings after five “jumps”.

Finally, the author also briefly goes into the actual combat experiences of the Italian army in World War I and the German Army in World War II using sled dog units; the Italians in the Alpine front and the Germans in Finland.

Being an ex-scout-dog handler in the Vietnam War, I fall into two categories of someone who would be interested in this book. I found it well written and a welcome addition to my library. I hope others discover this book and pick it up to discover a forgotten chapter of our history.

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