

Iraqi Dog Finds Marine After Miracle Trek

Animal Befriended by Marine Wanders Into Camp After Two-Day, 70-Mile Journey Through Iraq



A pack of desert dogs lived at one of the Iraqi border forts patrolled by Marines. Maj. Brian Dennis took a liking to a wiry German shepherd-border collie mix, whose nubby ears had been cut off as a puppy. The 37-year-old Marine serving his second tour in Iraq, named the dog "Nubs." (Maj. Brian Dennis)



By **DAVID SCHOETZ**

For Maj. Brian Dennis, the Semper Fidelis credo extends beyond his fellow Marines.

The story began with a few e-mails Dennis sent home about a dog his unit had met while looking for insurgents along the border of Iraq and Syria. If all goes as planned, it will end with a man and a dog he grew to love reunited on American soil.



[A Marine and His Dog](#)

A pack of desert dogs lived at one of the Iraqi border forts the unit patrolled. A wiry German shepherd-border collie mix was the alpha dog. Maj. Brian Dennis took a liking to the animal, whose nubby ears had been cut off as a puppy. Dennis, a 37-year-old Marine serving his second tour in Iraq, saw the dog about each time they visited the fort. He named him "Nubs."

At first, Nubs wouldn't give the Marine the time of day. "Nubs wouldn't have anything to do with him," Marsha Cargo, the Marine's mother, told ABC News. "Brian just kept working on him and working on him."

Over a period of months, the animal came around, befriending Dennis and his fellow Marines. During one visit, Dennis found Nubs with a deep puncture wound on his left side. He later learned the injury was inflicted by a screwdriver. He helped nurse the dog back to health.

The time came, however, for Dennis' unit to relocate 70 miles from Nubs' home fort. He may have wanted to take Nubs with the unit, Dennis wrote in one of his e-mails home, but there were too many dogs to rescue and keeping a canine was against the rules. As always, Nubs sprinted alongside the Hummers as they pulled away for what Dennis assumed was the last time he would see the dog.

Two days later, Nubs wandered inexplicably in below-freezing conditions into Dennis' new camp, shocking the Marine unit. "I won't even address the gauntlet he had to run of dog packs, wolves, and God knows what else to get here," Dennis wrote. "When he arrived he looked like he'd just been through a war zone.

"Uh, wait a minute, he had," Dennis wrote.

Nubs' miraculous journey forced the Marine's hand, and Dennis and his fellow Marines unanimously decided to keep the animal, building a doghouse at the camp. When two military police officers told Dennis the dog could not stay at the camp, he decided the only way to properly keep the animal was to get it to the United States.

"This dog who had been through a lifetime of fighting, war, abuse, and had tracked down our team over 70 miles of harsh desert was going to live the good life," Dennis wrote.

In early February, the dog crossed the border out of Iraq and into Jordan, where friends of Dennis were waiting for the animal. The dog currently is receiving the proper vaccinations and will soon be transported to an F-18 pilot at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, the American base where Dennis, also a fighter pilot by training, is stationed. The Marine has received permission to keep Nubs with him at work.

Nubs is not the only dog befriended by an American soldier to earn a trip out of Iraq. Army Sgt. Peter Neesley found two dogs while on patrol during his second tour of duty in Iraq — Mama, a Labrador mix, and her puppy, Boris.

The soldier claimed the dogs, building a doghouse for them and sending photos to relatives in Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich. "They were his family away from home," Neesley's sister, Carey, told ABC News.

But tragedy struck when the 28-year-old sergeant died in his Baghdad barracks in Christmas, the cause of which remains unknown. His family decided one way to ease the grief would be to transport the dogs home, something they reached out to their homestate senator, Carl Levin, the ranking member of the House Armed Services committee, to help arrange. An airline and animal organization helped coordinate the 6,000-mile trip.

"It's second to having Peter come home on his own," the soldier's sister said. "If we can't have Peter, then at least we can have his dogs."

Dennis could be home from Iraq as early as March, his mother said. The dog no longer will have to contend with fighting to survive in the war-torn country, Dennis wrote in an e-mail, but instead will get to bask in the sun on the sunny beaches of San Diego.

It's a day Dennis' mother said she can't wait to see.

"He's always been a big dog lover," she said. "He's supposed to be this big, tough Marine, but he's really a softy."

ABC News' Barbara Pinto contributed to this report.

Dog Saved by Marine Gets Permanent Home

By CHELSEA J. CARTER – Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — It began with a simple act of kindness to save an abused, injured dog from becoming one more victim in the Iraq war.

But what followed for Marine Maj. Brian Dennis and the mutt was a tale of friendship and loyalty that spanned miles and overcame long odds — one set to take a turn Friday with the anticipated arrival here of the Marine's best friend.

"This dog who had been through a lifetime of fighting, war, abuse ... is going to live the good life," Dennis told his family in an e-mail from Iraq.

The tale unfolded in October, a few months after Dennis deployed to Iraq from San Diego to work as part of the military team building infrastructure along the Syria-Iraq border and training Iraqi forces to take over.

Dennis, 36, of St. Pete Beach, Fla., had volunteered for the assignment. It was a departure from his role as a fighter pilot. He had seen the country from the air, but it was different on the ground.

Dennis wrote stories home about the reciprocal relationship that desert dogs, strays wandering outside border towns, had with Iraqis.

"The dogs get to eat the Iraqi scraps and have a home in the middle of the desert," he wrote in an e-mail. "The Iraqis get an incredible early warning system; these dogs hear anything approaching from miles away and go nuts and scramble to defend their territory."

While on patrol in the Anbar province, Dennis spotted what appeared to be a gray and white, male German shepherd-border collie mix. He named the dog Nubs after learning someone cut the ears off believing it would make the dog more aggressive and alert.

Within weeks, Nubs was greeting Dennis during routine patrol stops along border communities. The Marines fed him bits of their food and by November, the Marine and his unit were keeping an eye out for the dog, which routinely chased their Humvees when they departed.

Life on the run, however, was taking a toll on the dog. He had lost a tooth and been bitten in the neck. In late December, Dennis found Nubs near death in freezing temperatures. The dog had been stabbed with a screwdriver.

Dennis rubbed antibiotic creme on the wound and slept with Nubs to keep him warm.

"I really expected when I woke up for watch he would be dead," Dennis wrote. "Somehow he made it through the night."

Dennis thought he had seen the last of the dog days later when his squad headed back to its command post some 65 miles away. He couldn't take the dog with him and watched as it tried to follow the Humvees away from the border.

Two days later, while Dennis and a comrade were working on a Humvee, he looked up and saw the dog staring at him.

"Somehow that crazy damned dog tracked us," he wrote Jan. 9.

But the reunion was short lived. Military policy prohibits having pets in war zones, and Dennis was given four days to get the dog off the base or kill him.

The decision was easy: Nubs was going to San Diego. The logistics, though, were anything but easy.

With help from his Iraqi interpreter, Dennis managed to find a Jordanian veterinarian to get the care and paperwork needed to get the dog to the states. He also negotiated the red tape to get Nubs across the border into Jordan.

His family and close friends helped raise the \$3,500 needed to get the dog from Amman, Jordan, to San Diego, said his mother, Marsha Cargo.

"I just can't believe it. Out there in the middle of nowhere these two find each other," Cargo said.

A colleague in San Diego agreed to care for the dog and have it trained until Dennis returns in March from Iraq.

"We anticipate a real steep learning curve for Nubs," Capt. Eric Sjoberg said. "We want him to learn to just be a dog."

For now, though, Dennis will settle for the knowledge that Nubs is finally safe — and waiting for his master to follow him.

Iraqi Dog's Miracle Trek Reaches U.S. Soil

Nubs Arrives Safely in Chicago as SPCA Focuses on Easing Adoption of Iraq Military Dogs

By DAVID SCHOETZ



Nubs, a wiry German-shepherd-border collie mix named for nubby ears that were sliced off as a puppy, will stay in Chicago with the family of one of his Marine colleagues until a final hop to San Diego, where a Marine fighter pilot stationed at Camp Pendleton has been given permission to care for the dog until Maj. Brian Dennis arrives home from his second combat tour.

"Touchdown" was the first celebratory word in an e-mail Marsha Cargo received from her son Maj. Brian Dennis, after a dog who survived a 70-mile Hail Mary trek through war-torn Iraqi deserts touched down safely in Chicago Wednesday evening.

"We're thrilled," Cargo told ABC News after the dog named Nubs arrived in the United States to a warm reception. "What would the alternative be? We thought this dog was going to be shot."

Waiting for the animal, which Dennis and his unit befriended during months of patrolling Iraqi forts along the border of Iraq and Syria, were a steak dinner and strawberry Pop-Tarts □ the latter a treat that had become a favorite of the dog during visits by the Marine unit.

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The reunion could happen as early as next month, Cargo said.

The dog arrived in the United States by way of Jordan after Dennis navigated the bureaucracy and expenses of transporting the animal out of Iraq, a process that required a series of necessary vaccinations and risky handoffs.

The 36-year-old Marine, trained as a fighter pilot and stationed in Miramar, Calif., befriended the animal during several visits to a fort where Nubs lived with a pack of wild canines as the alpha dog. Dennis recently bid what he thought would be a final farewell to the animal after his unit was relocated 70 miles from Nubs' home fort.

He may have wanted to take Nubs with the unit, Dennis wrote in one e-mail home, but there were too many dogs to rescue and keeping a canine was against the rules.

Two days later, Nubs wandered inexplicably in below-freezing conditions into Dennis' new camp, shocking the Marine unit. "I won't even address the gauntlet he had to run of dog packs, wolves, and God knows what else to get here," Dennis wrote of the animal's trek. "When he arrived he looked like he'd just been through a war zone."

"Uh, wait a minute, he had," Dennis wrote.

The miracle moment cemented Dennis' course of action □ he had to find a way to return the animal to the United States, a feat he can now say was successfully accomplished.

Nubs is not the only dog befriended by an American soldier to earn a trip out of Iraq.

The SPCA International, in partnership with ILoveDogs.com and through the Operation Baghdad Pups program, is working to make bringing soldiers' dogs home from Iraq less complicated. The program was launched in December, when a military unit contacted the animal awareness group about a dog named Charlie that the group had found as a vulnerable puppy during a night patrol.

After thousands of dollars were spent to arrange for the dog's safe return, Charlie arrived in Washington, D.C., last week, where he waits to be matched up with a new handler until the unit's return from Iraq, according to Stephanie Scroggs, a spokeswoman for SPCA International.

In the next few days, the organization hopes that two animals will arrive at John. F. Kennedy International Airport □ Liberty and K-Pot □ both of whom were born in Iraq and granted temporary status as security dogs while arrangements were made to bring them here.

Scroggs acknowledged that both are more accurately "mascot" puppies and are not truly performing security detail, but without the designation, the animals could not stay on with military units.

"Both of these dogs have just become a joy," Scroggs said, adding that one will live with the wife of a soldier and the other will live with a soldier's sister until the respective units come home. "Just the knowledge that [these soldiers] have a companion while serving in Iraq." The program has already screened requests from about 25 different dogs, according to Scroggs.

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"It's second to having Peter come home on his own," the soldier's sister said. "If we can't have Peter, then at least we can have his dogs."

Dennis, who wrote in detailed e-mails to family and friends about wanting to walk with Nubs along the sunny beaches of San Diego, remains grateful to everyone who helped him rescue Nubs. Already, the collective work earned the Marine recognition from the animal rights group PETA.

"I'm just glad Nubs is going to the states," the Marine wrote in an e-mail to ABC News.