



Dogs for Defense

When the United States declared war in December 1941, the nation mobilized for action, including America's dogs. As the military identified the vital need for dogs, citizens were encouraged to donate their pets to the war effort.

During World War II, over 3,000 dogs and their handlers were trained for the Coast Guard to conduct patrols along America's shores and to guard military installations against enemy saboteurs. The dogs were recruited through Dogs for Defense, a program which coordinated a rigorous selection process. The majority of dogs accepted into service were German Shepherds, but other preferred breeds included Belgian Sheepdogs and Doberman-Pinschers.

Nine dogs and 20 Coast Guardsmen with a Specialist D (for Dog) rating were assigned to guard duty at Naval Air Station St. Simons, today's McKinnon St. Simons Island Airport. According to the January 27, 1944 issue of the station newsletter *Tally-Ho*, both men and dogs had been trained at an estate in Elkin Park, Pennsylvania. The Coast Guardsmen were trained for eight weeks and the dogs for two to four months.

At NAS St. Simons, two men were assigned to work with each dog. Sentry duty was in 4-hour shifts. Twice a week, the dogs were put through "attack" courses, which required careful supervision to prevent injury. For example, a "suit" exercise involved the handler

commanding his dog to attack, unrestrained, a man in a heavily padded suit. The newsletter noted that the man in the suit "is completely at the mercy of the man in charge of the dog, and his ability to control the dog by voice alone." Night maneuvers were also held twice a week, when the dogs were taken to the base runway and sent out to locate Coast Guardsmen who were simulating an attack on the station.

By the summer of 1944, the need for sentry and patrol dogs on the Home Front had virtually disappeared, as the tide turned in favor of the Allies. Some of the dogs were "detrained" and returned to their owners, and others were sent overseas for sentry and tactical duties.

This month's image from the Coastal Georgia Historical Society's archives shows Coast Guardsmen with their well-trained dogs at NAS St. Simons