

# PART 1

CHAPTERS  
1-6

ISABEL GEORGE

# DOG SOLDIERS

LOVE, LOYALTY  
AND SACRIFICE ON  
THE FRONT LINE



Isabel George

**Dog Soldiers: Part 1 of 3: Love,  
loyalty and sacrifice on the front line**

«HarperCollins»

## **George I.**

Dog Soldiers: Part 1 of 3: Love, loyalty and sacrifice on the front line /  
I. George — «HarperCollins»,

ISBN 978-0-00-815436-3

Dog Soldiers can either be read as a full-length eBook or in 3 serialised eBook-only parts. This is PART 1 of 3. Dog Soldiers tells the story of two brave young 'dog soldiers' (Army bomb dog handlers), killed in action in Afghanistan with their dogs by their side, through the inspirational words of their mothers. Lance Corporal Kenneth Rowe and Lance Corporal Liam Tasker were both dog lovers from boyhood and went on to do the job they had always wanted to do. Through the soldiers' mothers – Lyn Rowe and Jane Duffy – the book will take the reader on a journey and a celebration of the young men's lives that begins with the two young boys growing up and fulfilling their dream to serve Queen and country as Army dog handlers – Ken Rowe with his dog, Sasha, and Liam Tasker with his canine partner, Theo. Both mothers acknowledge that their sons signed up to do the job they loved best and fell with their loyal and trusted best friend beside them. Jane Duffy said of her son, Liam Tasker: 'I know my son died doing the job he loved. And he loved that dog as I loved my son, with every ounce of his being. To lose Liam was and still is unbearable. But for Liam to have survived without Theo? Unthinkable.'

ISBN 978-0-00-815436-3

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# Содержание

Copyright	7
Contents	8
Timeline	9
Introduction	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12



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## Copyright

HarperElement

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

First published by HarperElement 2016

FIRST EDITION

© Isabel George 2016

Cover layout design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2016

Front cover photographs (soldier) © Crown 2016, Ministry of Defence, published with kind permission of the family of Lance Corporal Liam Tasker.

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Source ISBN: 9780008148065

Ebook Edition © January 2016 ISBN: 9780008154363

Version: 2015-11-26

## Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Timeline](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1 Please God, look after him ...](#)

[2 Man down!](#)

[3 For Queen and country – The Troubles](#)

[4 The dogs of war – deployment to Afghanistan](#)

[5 Sasha enters the theatre](#)

[6 Home – RAF Lyneham](#)

[Moving Memoirs eNewsletter](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

## Timeline

Northern Ireland border, Clogher, County Tyrone, 23 July 1973

Corporal Bryan Criddle RAVC was injured when an IRA bomb, hidden in a milk churn, was detonated remotely. He died due to head injuries four days later. His dog, Jason, was blown 30 feet in the air but survived.

Northern Ireland, Kilkeel, 28 May 1986

Corporal Brian Brown QGM from Ballynahinch was a member of 3 UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment) and had been awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal for his service in Northern Ireland. He lost his life on 28 May 1986 when a bomb exploded at a garage in Kilkeel. Oliver, his search dog, was also killed in the blast. The ashes of the faithful Yellow Labrador were buried with his master.

Northern Ireland, Crossmaglen, 21 May 1988

Corporal Derek Hayes of the Royal Pioneer Corps died with his Army search dog, Ben, when an IRA booby trap bomb exploded. Cpl Hayes and Ben were on patrol in Crossmaglen when they were asked to investigate a partly hidden box in a ditch but as they approached the device exploded, killing them both. The ashes of the faithful Yellow Labrador were buried alongside the soldier.

Northern Ireland, Belfast, 25 May 1991

Corporal Terry 'Geordie' O'Neill was the victim of a 'coffee-jar' bomb (Semtex, nails, bolts and ball bearings). He was killed instantly. Darren 'Swifty' Swift, his fellow handler, standing alongside him, lost both legs in the attack, which took place as the two soldiers exercised their dogs in the yard of the Army Dog Unit. Several dogs were injured in the blast, including Geordie's dog, Blue, and Swifty's dog, Troy.

Four dog soldiers lost their lives during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, between 1973 and 1991. The conflict in Afghanistan was to claim the next man and dog.

## Introduction

As you made your way to the kennels at Camp Bastion it's said you could hear, from metres away, the dogs preparing their noisy welcome. Your walk would take you past innumerable dust-covered vehicles, and around you men and women in desert fatigues moved with constant purpose as life played out on the British Forces base in Afghanistan.

In among these scenes of everyday life stood memorials to the fallen – like markers among the living. Sand-coloured walls of Remembrance and glistening brass crosses rose defiant against the Afghan sky, bearing the names of the mighty and the brave: the men, women and dogs killed in action since the conflict began in 2001.

The memorial to the fallen dog soldiers wasn't easy to miss: it wasn't meant to be. And it wasn't hewn from traditional cold stone or rock. The lovingly carved wooden paw linked with metal chains was created by members of the RAVC (Royal Army Veterinary Corps) in honour of their own. It bore the names of two brave young soldiers and their loyal bomb dogs: Lance Corporal Kenneth Rowe and his dog Sasha, and Lance Corporal Liam Tasker and his dog Theo.

The men and their dogs died in the line of fire. The RAVC lost two men and dogs, and two mothers lost their sons.

The two boys grew up with a love of animals – especially dogs – and a desire to not just do a job but enjoy their chosen career. To them, life was too precious to waste on doing something that meant nothing. They were lucky, as they both had the support of their families, and when the RAVC became their second home it was a choice their mothers understood. The love of dogs was in their blood, an echo from childhood, and it had found its way through again. And for both mothers there was one massive comfort: their sons would never be lonely with a dog at their side.

Kenneth and Liam didn't need to be told that working with dogs is never a walk in the park, but for them the job was a joy. The series of protection dogs, and then the bomb dogs, all left their mark – some more permanent than others. In whatever discipline they were working both men stood out from the pack as natural handlers. Their skills were noted by their superiors and they were the ones to watch as rising stars. Both had a way with dogs and were good with people, and, more than that, they were dedicated to the Corps and all it stood for.

No one could have been more proud of their sons than Lyn Rowe and Jane Duffy. To see their boys happy and doing the job they loved was about as much as a mum could wish for. The two young men had found their true vocation. Now all their mothers could do was sit back and watch their sons' lives play out.

A soldier signs up to serve their country, every family knows that, and for these two young military dog handlers the call came to deploy to Afghanistan. For Kenneth and Liam Operation Herrick meant working on the front line, every second putting their life on the line and in the care of the dog at their side. For the family serving at home it meant reliance on letters, emails and the odd phone call. These they clung to for confirmation that their loved one was still alive.

But for Lyn and Jane the flurry of blueys, care parcels, dog treats and crossing dates on the calendar suddenly came to an end. Lance Corporal Kenneth Rowe and military working dog Sasha were killed in action on 24 July 2008. Lance Corporal Liam Tasker was killed in action on 1 March 2011 and his military working dog Theo died of a seizure just hours later.

Their names appear together on the memorial to Afghanistan's fallen dog soldiers. Soldiers first, dog lovers always. Soldier and dog bound for life and beyond.

Mothers, Lyn and Jane, still feel the loss and miss the life occupied by their brave boys, but they are proud of their sons and that they did their job, served their country and made the ultimate sacrifice. Knowing they didn't die alone, their tears are broken with some small comfort that their sons fell with their best friend at their side.

Maybe the warm desert air still echoes with the names of these young men and their dogs, Sasha and Theo, and their ghosts still drift along the ripples in the sand side by side as they lived and died so far from home.

Isabel George, September 2015

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