

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
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but it's all true

A DANGEROUS MISSION

A GRAVELY INJURED SOLDIER

AND THE DOG WHO REFUSED TO LEAVE HIS SIDE

Call of I



AS YOU READ,
THINK ABOUT:

In the military, what is the relationship between handlers and their dogs?

It was midday, bone-dry, and so fryingly hot that Marine Corporal Jose Armenta could taste the salt of his sweat as it trickled to his lips. Here in Sangin—one of the most dangerous places in Afghanistan (and the world)—Jose had a deadly serious job to do: Find bombs hidden by Taliban fighters.

Luckily, he had a helper: a 78-pound German shepherd named Zenit (ZEE-nit).

Zenit was a military working dog, specially trained to sniff out explosives. Together, Jose and Zenit formed an **elite** team—one of hundreds of such teams **deployed** by the U.S. military. On this day, August 28, 2011, Jose and Zenit were clearing the way through a dry riverbed. Jose was commanding Zenit to scour the area for any whiff of an **improvised** explosive device, or IED. Taliban fighters bury these bombs along roads and in fields—anywhere U.S. soldiers might walk or drive.

It was painstaking work, made worse by the deathly 120-degree heat and 75 pounds of gear Jose

was hauling. It was also dangerous. The area was **teeming** with enemy fighters. Out in front of the other Marines, Jose and Zenit were the first targets.

But Jose was eager to prove that he and Zenit were up to the task. They'd been stationed in Sangin for nearly 100 days without having found one IED as a team.

"I think I got one here," called out Sergeant Ryan Mulrooney, who was operating a metal detector.

Jose rushed over to find a wire poking out of the dirt. He flashed his famous smile.

"Yup."

Jose moved on, spied another device, and called it out. Behind him, the unit of Marines was walking slowly, single file, using shaving cream to mark the places that were safe to step.

Suddenly, Zenit, on the far side of the riverbed, froze, tail wagging, nose working overtime.

That change in behavior was an alert: Zenit had found an IED.

Jose was so proud of the dog that he let out a silent whoop. He knew he needed to stay calm,

COURTESY OF JOSE ARMENTA

BY MICHAEL PATERNITI

Duty

though, to keep Zenit focused; dog trainers say that emotion runs through the leash. How could Jose not be excited though?

He breathed deeply, following Zenit at a distance as the sun blazed down. Zenit was finding bomb after bomb now. It was all happening so quickly—too quickly.

Jose took a step.

And another.

And then the earth gave way and a deafening roar filled his ears.



A Graveyard

Jose and Zenit had been in Sangin for three months, stationed at Patrol Base Alcatraz. Sangin was littered with IEDs, which are among the Taliban's most brutally effective weapons against U.S. troops. The region had been a graveyard for many soldiers, and a place where many others had received disfiguring injuries.

On base, Jose sometimes heard the IEDs explode in the distance, set off by a goat or an unsuspecting villager. Sometimes frantic locals would rush a bleeding person up to the base for medical help.

Triggering an IED was not an idea Jose liked to dwell on, though he felt certain that if he did trigger one, he'd rather die than lose a limb. To keep his mind off the

danger, he did what all military dog handlers do: "You train your dog, do your job, leave the rest to fate," he says.

As Zenit's handler, Jose had plenty to keep him busy. He attended to the dog's every need, from grooming to making sure Zenit didn't get dehydrated. In the evenings, they trained, practicing commands to keep Zenit's skills sharp. It was on those evenings that they were happiest, just the two of them, working together in the dusty, desert otherworld of Afghanistan.

WHO ARE THE TALIBAN?

THE TALIBAN are a fundamentalist Islamist group that governed Afghanistan at the time of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S. The group's leaders were closely linked to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, U.S. forces led a military campaign that ousted the Taliban from power. But the war in Afghanistan persists today, as Taliban fighters continue to battle for control of the country.

The Taliban practice an extreme interpretation of Islam that most Muslim people do not agree with. In areas under Taliban control, music, television, and movies are banned. Girls are barred from going to school. Women are not permitted to work and cannot travel anywhere unless they are accompanied by an adult male relative. The punishment for breaking Taliban rules is public beating or even execution.



Tradition and Ritual

Growing up in East Los Angeles, California, Jose was tough, simply because he had to be. His parents were involved with gangs and split up when he was young.

The rent was often overdue, and sometimes his family moved to another house to avoid paying. By the time he graduated high school, Jose had lived in 15 different places.

Living in a violent world of real and wannabe gangsters, of random shootings and drug dealing, Jose wanted to escape. So in July 2007, at age 18, he enlisted in the U.S. Marines. Immediately, he fell in love with the military's sense of tradition and ritual. A class standout, he was offered the chance to train as a dog handler.

Jose found the work inspiring:

One bomb found in the field might equal several lives saved.

When Jose and Zenit began training together in 2010, Jose's first impression was that Zenit seemed too sweet and a little unruly, still full of puppy energy. But Zenit proved to be a perfect partner—and an excellent bomb sniffer. Man and dog bonded right away, like they were made for each other.

At the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. military had a force of roughly 2,500 military working dogs. In general, the military regards these

dogs as pieces of equipment, something Jose understood the first time he saw Zenit's ID—N103—tattooed in his ear.

But Jose would come to realize that Zenit was far more than a piece of gear.

On Fire

Down in the riverbed, Jose opened his eyes. All he could see was the sky. He'd been blown back 20 feet; his mouth was full of dirt, and his body yowled, as if on fire.

Even though he could not quite comprehend what was happening, he knew that



A Belgian Malinois named Dino and his handler practice a drill in Yuma, Arizona.

Dogs are at least 10,000 times more sensitive to smells than humans. They can pick up the scent of just a few particles of a substance. They can smell a bedbug in a pile of sweaty gym clothes or a crumb at the bottom of a locker. What's more, dogs can track a scent to its source. Bomb-sniffing dogs are trained to follow the scent trails of explosives. Once the dog detects an explosive, it alerts its handler.

his worst fear had come true. He had stepped on an IED.

Mulrooney was the first to his side.

“Do I still have my legs?” Jose kept asking.

And then: “Where’s Zenit?”

“You’re good, man, you’re going to be fine,” Mulrooney said.

Jose, however, was not fine. He had lost a lot of blood, and the closest helicopter was two hours away.

While Mulrooney and the other Marines worked to save Jose’s life, Zenit lay beside his master, ears pinned to his head, chin resting on his paws. The dog knew something had gone terribly wrong. They stayed like that, dog and handler, until at last the helicopter arrived and whisked them both away.

Coming to Terms

What followed wasn’t easy. Jose was flown to Germany, then back to the U.S. He underwent 12 operations; both of his legs had to be amputated above the knee. Jose slept 20 hours a day for a month. He had nightmares. He woke thrashing, calling for Zenit, only to learn that “N103” had been assigned to a new handler in Afghanistan.

“I was furious,” Jose says, “and jealous. We were a team. I just



A French sergeant and his dog wear gas masks on the front lines of World War I.

Dogs have been used in combat throughout history. In ancient times, they were sent into battle to attack the enemy; more recently, their duties have included locating wounded soldiers, carrying messages, guarding camps, and detecting bombs.

wanted my dog.”

But Zenit didn’t belong to Jose. Zenit belonged to the Marines.

Back at home in California, Jose waited for his incisions to heal, then worked to strengthen his core and what remained of his legs. He was given “shorties,” **prostheses** without knee joints so he could learn to balance and stand—as well as get used to the pressure on his legs.

Jose’s wife, Eliana, whom he married six months after getting injured, remembers some very dark days—Jose, 24, sitting in a wheelchair,

drapes drawn, trying to come to terms with his new life.

Meanwhile, Jose was intent on getting Zenit back. “Nothing felt right without him,” Jose remembers.

He isn’t the only soldier who has felt a nagging sense of incompleteness without his or her dog. Some injured handlers are able to adopt their dogs after the animals are discharged from the military. Others, like Jose, begin asking for their dogs even while the canines are still on active duty.

To date, no formal program exists in the military to reunite dogs with their injured handlers, and some of those handlers have found the process frustrating. For Jose, there were calls, paperwork, agonizing months of waiting. Eventually, Zenit was sent to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in California.

More months passed. Finally, in June 2012, after the Marine Corps approved the adoption, Jose and his wife took a three-hour



Zenit enjoys some shade.

road trip to the base.

It was an emotional day. Jose, in his wheelchair, approached Zenit. And Zenit, recognizing his former handler immediately, covered Jose in slobbery kisses.

"I couldn't stop smiling," says Jose. "I'm still smiling. It felt like the beginning to this new life."

Three Worlds

It's twilight in San Diego, and Jose is seated by his pool, throwing a tennis ball for Zenit. The German shepherd's glossy, **sable** coat flashes in the sun as he chases down each toss with zeal, then returns the ball to Jose, who keeps up a **patter** of "Good boy."

It's a long way from war, yet the war seems ever present. "For a long time, I beat myself up over that day," says Jose. "I kept wondering what I could have done differently."

Still, Jose has come a long way. He can now walk on his prosthetic legs. Sometimes when he is out for dinner, a kid may see his plastic-and-metal legs and ask if he's a Transformer.

"Nah, man," Jose will answer. "This is what happens when you don't eat your vegetables!"

And then he'll flash that huge smile of his.

He's learned to sail and ski.



Zenit and Jose at home in San Diego, July 2014

He works as a **dispatcher** for the military police. He comes home to Eliana and they take Zenit to the beach.

"He's like my quiet partner," says Jose. "He bridges three worlds: the person I was before Afghanistan, the one I was there, and the one I became after."

Jose cocks his arm and releases the ball, which arcs into the darkening sky like some forlorn hope. Before it takes a second bounce, Zenit has the ball in his mouth, joyously racing to return it to his master. ●

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WRITING CONTEST

Write a letter to Congress arguing that veterans should be given the chance to adopt the military dogs they worked with. Use information in the article to support your ideas. Send your letter to **ZENIT CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Dogs of War* by Sheila Keenan and Nathan Fox.

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