



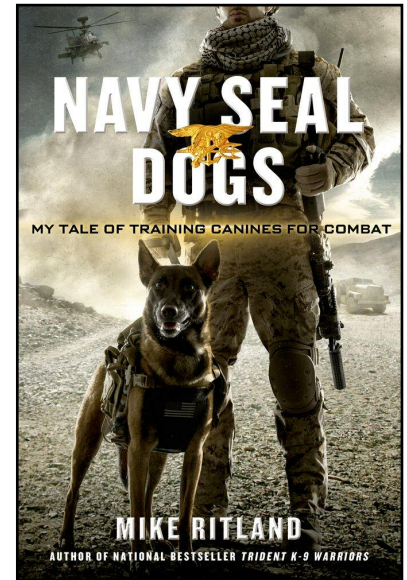
ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

TEACHER'S GUIDE

# Navy SEAL Dogs

My Tale of Training Canines for Combat

by Mike Ritland



“Readers are sure to be surprised by the different levels of service and skill that go into making an elite team of twolegged and four legged SEALs.”

—Howard Wasdin, former Navy SEAL and *New York Times* bestselling author of *I Am A SEAL Team Six Warrior*

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This guide addresses  
**Common Core**  
Standards for Reading  
Informational Text

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Trident K9 Warriors* gave readers an inside look at the SEAL teams' elite canine members—who they are, how they are trained, and the extreme missions they undertake to save lives. From detecting explosives to eliminating the bad guys, these powerful dogs are also some of the smartest and highest skilled working animals on the planet. Mike Ritland's job is to train them.

This special edition presents the dramatic tale of how Ritland discovered his passion and grew up to become the trainer of the nation's most elite Military Working Dogs (MWD). Ritland was a smaller-than-average kid who was often picked on at school, which led him to spend more time with dogs at a young age. After graduating BUD/S training—the toughest military training in the world—to become a SEAL, he was on combat deployment in Iraq when he saw a MWD in action and instantly knew he'd found his true calling.

Ritland started his own company to train and supply working and protection dogs for the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, and other clients. He also started the Warrior Dog Foundation to help retired Special Operations dogs live long and happy lives after their service.

This is the true story of how Mike Ritland grew from a skinny, bullied child, to a member of our nation's most elite SEAL Teams, to the trainer of the world's most highly skilled K-9 warriors.

This guide has three main sections:

- A chapter-by-chapter Teacher's Summary
- Questions for the class based on Common Core Standards for Reading Informational Text
- Activities to reinforce and extend the book's content

There's also a Teacher and Student Resources section to help plan enriched study of the background of the historical events described in the book.

*"Navy SEAL Dogs gives a unique insider account of the training and deployment of these special animals and their handlers. Ritland does a superb job of detailing these dogs in combat, as well as the bond between operator and K-9. Readers are sure to be surprised by the different levels of service and skill that go into making an elite team of two legged and four legged SEALs."*—**Howard Wasdin, former Navy SEAL and New York Times bestselling author of *I Am A SEAL Team Six Warrior***

*"After a stellar career in the Teams, Mike Ritland has gone on to train working K-9's for some of the most elite units in the U.S. Special Operations community. These dogs are integrated into Special Operations at all levels of mission planning. They HALO parachute from high altitude, chase enemy squitters, and detect explosive booby traps, to name just a few tasks. If you want to learn about these amazing animals, the sacrifices they've made, and their effectiveness in combat, then read *Navy SEAL Dogs*."*—**Brandon Webb, former Navy SEAL, New York Times bestselling author of *The Red Circle*, and Editor-in-Chief of SOFREP.com**

Mike's two passions that began in childhood and became interwoven in his adult, professional life are the threads that run through each part of this book: his lifelong desire to serve his country and his lifelong love of dogs. Mike tells how, by following these passions, he was able to realize and create his life's work: training dogs for the navy and others. He tells how determination and desire can lead you to accomplish your goals in life through his own story and by sharing the experiences of some rather unique Navy SEAL dog handlers and the dogs in their care. At the center of the action-filled book is the incredible amount of heart that each SEAL possesses—both the two- and four-legged ones.

### Prologue

The prologue sets the stage by drawing readers immediately into the combat zone with Chopper, a MWD; his handler Brett; and their entire combat unit. Readers get a glimpse of what it's like to be on a mission in enemy territory in Afghanistan and see the value of having a MWD as part of the team.

### **Chapter 1: A Visit to Chopper and Brent**

This chapter flashes forwards three years; Chopper and Brent are “retired” and living together in Southern California. It shows how their bond has endured and even strengthened over time. Mike, who trained Chopper, plays a visit to the duo, partially for pleasure, but also as part of his work for the Warrior Dog Foundation that he created to help check up on and take care of Navy SEAL human and canine veterans.

### **Chapter 2: A Lifelong Love of Dogs**

Mike describes his “typical suburban childhood,” growing up in Waterloo, Iowa, where he was fascinated by dogs: neighbor’s dogs, hunting dogs, and farm dogs alike. He learned at any early age that dogs seem to be happiest when they have a job to do and also that they will work for rewards. The family’s first dog Bud became his best friend and was an extremely loyal companion to everyone in Mike’s family.

### **Chapter 3: A Desire to Serve and Defend**

Two grandfathers that served in the military during WWII were among the strong influences that led Mike to consider a career in the service. But so were his strong sense of right and wrong. He recalls a powerful incident that solidified for him the importance of justice and self-defense and that led him to transform himself from a scrawny kid into an incredibly fit athlete who eventually joined the navy and was accepted into the SEALs training program.

### **Chapter 4: Combining Passions**

This chapter flashes forward to the U.S. military takeover of Tikrit, Iraq in 2003 and Mike’s participation in that historic event as a navy SEAL. Mike also describes the first time he saw a MWD in action and the life-changing moment it became for him: he immediately knew that he wanted to train those dogs. He tells how his own career path dovetailed with the U.S. military’s decision to ramp up its MWD program.

### **Chapter 5: Not Your Typical House Pet**

Mikes provides a detailed description of the qualities needed for a dog to become a MWD. The majority of the dogs he selects and trains are Belgian Malinois, a breed well suited physically and in temperament for the main jobs a MWD must do: detection (of people, explosives, narcotics, etc.) and apprehension (of individuals). He explains that only a small percentage of dogs are capable of being trained to be successful MWDs.

### **Chapter 6: Well Trained**

Mike relives his participation in the largest operation in Naval Special Warfare at the time—the take over of two oil terminals in the Persian Gulf before the beginning of the ground war in Iraq. He describes how intense practicing and repetition made him and all SEAL team members ready and able to perform the mission, which resulted in zero U.S. casualties. He talks about how the principles of training required for human SEALs to successfully complete a mission are the same he applies to his training of MWDs.

### **Chapter 7: Prep School for Puppies**

Within several days of their birth, Mike begins training puppies for the jobs they will do when they grow up. The early training is as much fun as it is work for all involved. It involves maximizing each puppy’s natural abilities and exposing it to a variety of situations, people, and sounds in order to enhance the likelihood of a good outcome once a mature dog is deployed.

### **Chapter 8: Detection Training: Passing the Sniff Test**

A detailed insider look at the rigorous, repetitive training a MWD goes through in order

to detect specific odors, including initial exposure to and imprinting of scents, point-to-point exercises, and placing objects in various scenarios. The chapter also includes an explanation of the amazing scent abilities a dog possesses.

### **Chapter 9: Apprehension Training: Sinking Their Teeth into It**

This chapter provides detailed information about apprehension training and work. Mike makes it clear that apprehension work for a dog is all about getting to bite the person or object they apprehend as a reward. He presents bite studies that show that a dog has roughly three times the biting force of a human, but also stresses that apprehension training is about teaching the dog to be a non-lethal force. The chapter opens with Arras and his handler Matt as an example of the effectiveness of apprehension training and closes with a letter to Mike from a grateful handler deployed with a dog Mike trained to do both detection and apprehension work.

### **Chapter 10: Distinct Personalities**

Every handler and every dog has a distinct, unique personality. Matching the right personalities of handler and dog is an important component of the training program. Mike shows two strong personalities, Luke, the dog, and Wayne, Luke's handler, at work during a water training exercise, and also talks about one dog he never bonded with and one named Rocket, that the entire platoon in the field adopted as their mascot.

### **Chapter 11: The Bond at Both Ends of the Leash**

It all comes down to a handler and his dog sharing trust, understanding, and respect. Lives depend upon it. Aaron and Castor's story is a template for the kind of hearts and minds that are necessary for a successful SEAL team member—be they human or canine. From the age of 13, Aaron wanted to be a navy SEAL. The extraordinary bond and trust between him and Castor is revealed, from training to deployment in Afghanistan.

### **Chapter 12: Cairo and Lloyd: Among the First**

Cairo was the first West Coast Seal Team warrior dog to be deployed. He and his handler Lloyd did duty in Iraq, where Cairo did both apprehension and detection work. This chapter also takes a look at some of the early training methods employed to get dogs ready for combat with the SEAL. In theater, the dogs provide a little bit of the feeling of home. Cairo and Lloyd are now retired and together.

### **Chapter 13: Samson and Dave: Undeterred Underdogs**

Samson was an unlikely looking MWD, with a slight frame and huge head. Dave had overcome many obstacles to become a Navy SEAL. Together, the two deployed to Afghanistan where, one day Samson detected a trigger switch to an enormous IED. Dave is home now, but Samson has one more deployment ahead, after which, Dave plans to adopt him.

### **Chapter 14: Rex and Dwayne: Foiling Insurgents**

Rex was a slow starter; he sat in a kennel for a year without getting any of the basic MWD training. But once he was in Afghanistan with Dwayne, who himself was somewhat notorious for not finishing what he started, Rex successfully detected people, explosives, and weapons. Rex is now working for the San Diego County Sheriff's office.

### **Chapter 15: Poncho in Pursuit**

In Fallujah, Iraq, Poncho chased down an insurgent on a moped, and apprehended him by biting hard on his leg. The man had detonated an IED that destroyed a NATO truck. This chapter explains the prevalence of IEDs in combat. It also talks about how Poncho's mellow personality made him an ideal MWD for the kind of work he's doing, which

entails sitting still for hours, undetected, while observing the enemy. Mike cites how the success rate for finding and clearing IEDs went up dramatically shortly after dogs began to be deployed; he believes the dogs have played a role in that rising success rate.

### **Chapter 16: Kwinto’s Nighttime Raids**

In Afghanistan, Kwinto excelled on night missions, apprehending Taliban fighters and centering in on large IEDs. This chapter includes a brief look at how a handler has to check out a dog before a mission to make sure the animal is in top working order, just like any other piece of equipment.

### **Chapter 17: Carlos and Arko at Ease**

This chapter provides a look at Mike’s life today, training dogs in east Texas for the military and private contractors. Readers are introduced to two retired MWDs, Carlos and Arko, both of whom were badly wounded in battle but neither of whom let their injuries stop them from their doing their jobs.

### **Appendix: A Brief History of Canines in Combat**

From ancient Egypt to the post-9/11 world, dogs have participated in war and defense efforts. This appendix briefly outlines some of the highlights in the long history of dogs in the military, including their roles in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

## **QUESTIONS FOR CLASS**

*Note: The following questions are based on the Common Core English Language Arts Standards for reading informational text. They are modeled after the standards for grade 7, but can be applied to higher grades as well, especially for reluctant readers.*

1. In the Author’s Note at the beginning of the book, Mike makes this statement: “I love dogs as pets and companions.” Reread Chapter 2 and cite at least three sentences or passages that provide evidence of or support this statement. (CCSS ELA-Literacy RI.7.1)
2. In the Author’s Note, Mike says he has two passions. One passion is his love of dogs. Reread the Author’s Note and identify the other. Then, find at least three places in the book that support the theme. Also, write a short summary about how this theme appears throughout the entire book. (RI7.2)
3. Reread pp. 22-24 and summarize the event that Mike witnessed concerning the marines and their military working dog. Describe the effect that this event had on Mike. (RI7.3)
4. On p. 33, Mike says that a dog that “launches itself like a rocket” after an object exhibits an important quality for a military working dog to have. Describe what he means by that descriptive expression and why you think he chose those words? (RI7.4)
5. On p. 35, Mike says that when selecting a dog to train, he places a high priority on the dog’s “olfactory ability.” Explain what he means by this term, using details from the text. (RI7.4)
6. Chapter 8—and every chapter that follows, with the exception of Chapter 11—begins with an account of a dog in action. Why do you think the author chose to start

chapter(s) this way? How does the beginning of Chapter 8 contribute to the rest of the chapter? (RI7.5)

7. Reread pages 48-50 to determine Mike's point of view about the best approach to training a dog. Point out several examples and explain how Mike's point of view differs from that of some other dog trainers. (RI7.6)

8. Reread Chapter 7. Mike claims that it is important to begin training dogs when they are very young. What does Mike say that supports this reasoning? (RI7.7)

9. On page 45, Mike says that the "key to training and working with a dog is to establish a bond of trust between you and him." Find at least one text passage in each of Chapters 12-16 that supports this statement. (RI7.1)

10. On page 163, Mike describes what his dogs are doing in the kennel in the early morning: "The dogs are all up . . . [some] do their morning yoga, and a few others sound off though there's been no reveille." What does this choice of words and the tone of the description tell you about how Mike feels about the dogs? Go back through the book and find other examples of this tone. (RI7. 4)

## ACTIVITIES

1. From the time he was a kid, Mike was interested in dogs and in the Navy SEALs. Ask the students to write about the things they are most interested in and ask them to include how they might turn their interests into a career one day.

2. Have the students make a list of the qualities that Mike looks for in a dog he is going to train.

3. Have the students pick the story of the dog and handler that they like the best and write about it, including why it is their favorite story.

4. The dogs and the handlers face many dangers. Ask the students to make a list of what challenges the pairs face in theater.

5. Becoming a Navy SEAL—whether you're a human or a canine—involves a lot of discipline. Have students write about something in their lives that could use more of their discipline and attention. Ask them to include a plan on how they are going to try to improve in this area of their lives.

6. A Navy SEAL dog, like any dog, has a lot of personality, and at the end of the day, it's a friend to its handler. Have the students write about an animal they've encountered that has a lot of personality. It could be a family pet, an animal in a zoo or on a farm, etc. It could even be an animal they've read about or heard about on the news. Ask them to also write about an animal they'd like to have or see someday and be sure to include why.

### **Navy SEALs**

<http://www.sealswcc.com/>

The U.S. Navy's official site for the SEALs offers a wealth of information and resources for classroom use or individual study: a history of the unit, a community forum where specific questions can be answered, public domain photos and videos, and public domain audio interviews with SEALs. *Ethos*, the official SEAL magazine, is also in the public domain, and all issues are available as downloads. The site also offers an extensive reading list for further study.

### **Navy SEAL Dogs**

<http://navyseals.com/2163/the-dogs-of-the-navy-seals/>

For students eager for even more information about and stories of the dogs that serve with the elite Navy SEALs.

### **Warrior Dog Foundation**

<http://warrriordogfoundation.org/>

This is the official website for Mike Ritland's foundation, established to ensure that every military working dog receives support and care upon "retirement."

### **Operation Iraqi Freedom**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/invasion/cron/>

This site, based on PBS "Frontline" documentaries, includes a historical perspective, a timeline, interviews with eyewitnesses, and teacher's guides based on television shows about the war in Iraq.

### **The War in Afghanistan**

<http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/us-war-afghanistan/p20018>

The Council on Foreign Relations' website includes a detailed timeline of the war in Afghanistan.

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