Press Release

Release No. 2412-02

December 4, 2024

Fort Drum Public Affairs

Home for the holidays: Former Fort Drum MP reunites with retired military working dog

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- The holidays were made a bit more joyful for Staff Sgt. Payton May, a former Fort Drum military working dog (MWD) handler, when he was reunited with his battle buddy Yyacob on Nov. 25 at his home in San Antonio, Texas.

The MWD team separated in 2022 when May left for a new assignment at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas, and Yyacob, a Belgian Malinois, remained at Fort Drum until retiring from service.

“The reunion was bittersweet,” May said. “He came up to me right away and started sniffing and jumping on me. It was like we picked up right where we left off. It definitely makes the holiday season that much better having him back.”

May said it was rough leaving his military dog, especially after all they had done together. Initially enlisted as an infantryman, May decided to become a MWD handler in 2019 and joined the 8th MWD Detachment, 91st Military Police Battalion.

“I grew up with dogs my whole life,” May said. “At a young age, I was raised around pit bulls and dachshunds, which contributed to me wanting to progress my passion for dogs in a positive manner within the military.”

He was paired with Yyacob in June 2020, and they immediately connected.

“Yyacob is a dog that is easy to love,” May said. “Our bond grew due to our work ethic and personalities matching. He had a very high drive, and he’s a little on the crazy side when it came to doing patrol work. I saw him as a challenge and took it head on.”

May said he knew all of Yyacob’s quirks and capabilities, and they became an effective explosives detection team.

“He had a switch that could be turned on and off,” he said. “I enjoyed that since I was similar within a work setting. He knew when it was time to play and when it was time to work.”

The MWD team deployed in 2021 to Iraq in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, which only solidified their bond.

“My favorite and memorable recollections of Yyacob are the nights while deployed,” May said. “As a Soldier, it can get lonely overseas. Luckily for handlers, we have a dog to share those moments with, someone who is there for you even though they can’t speak back. Yyacob grew more into the role of my best friend as time passed.”

May left for his new assignment shortly after returning from deployment. He said attempts were made to pair Yyacob with another handler, but to no avail. Unable to certify, Yyacob would retire.

That’s when May began working with American Humane, a non-profit organization that reunites MWDs with former handlers.

“A buddy of mine in the Marine Corps connected me with American Humane,” May said. “He also got his MWD back from Japan using the non-profit organization.”

An animal care specialist with American Humane worked with Yyacob at Fort Drum to prepare him for retirement and the trip to Texas. Although Yyacob was stationed at Fort Drum much longer than his handler, May said he appreciated his time as a Mountain Guardian with the 8th Military Working Dog Detachment.

“The 8th showed me the ropes as a new handler and made me into a more effective leader within the Military Working Dog Program,” May said. “I am grateful for Sgt. 1st Class (Robert) Citrullo and my peers for all the guidance I received there.”

May currently serves with D Company, 701st Military Police Battalion, as the Block II noncommissioned officer in charge for the Military Working Dog Handler Course. Having just spent Thanksgiving together, May said he looks forward to many more holidays with Yyacob as part of his family.

“Having him home for the holidays is everything I could have asked for,” May said. “My family is very excited about Yyacob retiring, and they are excited to meet him. My friends here in Texas have met him and already love him.”

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Photo Captions: Staff Sgt. Payton May is reunited with his military working dog Yyacob on Nov. 25 in San Antonio, Texas. The former MWD team trained together at Fort Drum and deployed to Iraq in 2021 before separating due to a reassignment. (Photo by Chris Saucedo/Getty Images for American Humane)