

# Palaima: What Austin could learn from watching ‘Canine Soldiers’

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**By Tom Palaima**

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Front-page stories continue to trumpet Austin as one of the fastest-growing cities in the country. What does this mean for us, our children and our children’s children beyond pollution, wasted time in traffic and decreasing racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in the city proper?

Alexander Pope, while meditating four centuries ago on who we are as human beings, wrote that “the proper study of mankind is man.” We see ourselves better when we look away from the high-rise mirrors — metaphorical and real — that our capitalist society puts in front of us and look instead at the creatures who share this planet with us.

This planet. Not our planet. Recent scientific thinking among, for example, multispecies ethnographers about how poorly we share the earth with other species confirms the prophetic warning that Bob Dylan sounded 30 years ago in “License to Kill”: “Man thinks ’cause he rules the earth / he can do with it as he please / And if things don’t change soon, he will.” Well, they haven’t. We seem to be enacting Dylan’s punch line: “Man has invented his doom.” And our doomsday behaviors affect other sentient creatures.

Donna Haraway, who studies the interconnections between human beings and dogs, emphasizes our ineluctable bond with nonhuman creatures in her book (available free at [projectlamar.com/media/harrawayspecies.pdf](http://projectlamar.com/media/harrawayspecies.pdf)) “When Species Meet”: “If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming with — in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake.” From Haraway we learn that humans do not become who we are on our own. All along we have been interacting with microorganisms she calls tiny “messmates” and with other living creatures. Only human arrogance, akin to our myopic pride in a monstrously expanding Austin, keeps us from respecting our interdependence with other creatures.

Fortunately creative storytellers like filmmaker Nancy Schiesari, professor of Radio Television Film at the University of Texas, help us to think, feel and see what we might otherwise miss in the world around us. For four years, Schiesari and her dedicated collaborators have been working on a documentary movie about the heroic military working dogs (MWD) who each on average have saved the lives of 150 American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will premiere at the Austin Film Festival on Saturday. It is called “Canine Soldiers.”

The title may sound like sentimental anthropomorphizing. It is not. Watch the film whenever it comes your way. Listen to MWD handler Sgt. Eric Morales speak — or rather, barely speak — through tears about a fallen comrade: “The most honorable trait he had was how he stood by me, even as we were posted so far away from backup. He always had to help. He put his life in my hands and I trusted him with mine. Unfortunately, everything that has a beginning has an end. So rest easy, my buddy. I am proud to have called you my partner.”

Morales’ heartfelt words describe the canine soldier with whom he lived 24/7 during their tour of duty. He is speaking at a funeral. Thirteen states now recognize Canine Veterans Day.

It took me six hours to watch a preview of Schiesari’s 65-minute film, taking it in, pausing, meditating upon what soldiers who worked with these bomb-sniffing dogs had to say about their virtues and about their eventual fates, and getting to know the dogs themselves.

As reported by “National Geographic” in May 2014, we sent around 4,000 military working dogs to Vietnam. There they saved the lives of 10,000 American soldiers. When we left Vietnam, we left these dogs behind — discarded and categorized as now useless equipment.

Nowadays MWD’s are brought back, but not necessarily to happy endings. Some suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. Others understandably mourn for their human handlers who are not redeploying with them.

Schiesari’s film is not heavy-handed, Michael-Moore-like fare. It lets human and canine soldiers express who they are and how they are in our anthropocentric world. They do so through their own actions and interactions and in their own voices. Like her fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, Schiesari lets dogs we have made into soldiers and the soldier handlers who love them tell their own stories.

If we watch and listen, they tell us lots about ourselves. “Canine Soldiers” may prompt new thoughts about our lives in the concrete, metal and glass jungle of Austin and about what kind of friends we have been to man’s best friends.

Palaima is a professor of classics at the University of Texas.

There was this, by coincidence, in the NY Times: Learning From Dogs as They Sniff Out Their World By JAN HOFFMAN. OCT. 10, 2016

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/science/dogs-can-train-us-to-have-a-better-sense-ofsmell.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20161011&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=19973006&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/science/dogs-can-train-us-to-have-a-better-sense-ofsmell.html?emc=edit_th_20161011&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=19973006&_r=0)