



NICK WHITE

By Laura S. Jones

MAN ON A MISSION

Marine Corps veteran Nick White still lives the motto “semper fidelis.” Although now he is always faithful to his canine clients. Well to their owners, too, but his first love is dogs. White wants to help all dogs live their lives to the fullest, just as he has. As a Marine in Iraq, White’s mission was to protect our freedom. As a dog trainer, his mission is still to protect freedom: a dog’s freedom to enjoy life and an owner’s freedom from worry. His path from warrior to civilian dog trainer is interesting and unique and it shows how a love of dogs can unite many different fields.

White, 29, is the founder and owner of Off-Leash K9 Training, which he opened in March, 2009. A true dog lover, White says the dogs usually do better than the owners in his training classes. “It takes them longer,” he says of his human clients, in the kindest possible way.

In the Beginning, There were Dogs. And a Cock-a-too: White’s love of dogs didn’t begin in the military, although it certainly grew in that cauldron of intensity. Born and raised in a small town in Ohio where his parents and brother still live, his childhood dog was a German shepherd mix named Deputy. White enjoyed teaching him tricks, and he applied the same reward-based training principles to his cock-a-too with impressive results. Those skills lay dormant as he finished school and had to figure out what to do with his life.

As a child, White also enjoyed re-runs of “Lassie” and “Flipper” on television. This was a man meant to work with animals, to bridge the gap between them and us. Always a dog and animal lover, it was his experience with military dogs that showed him that dogs had nearly unlimited potential, and that opened his eyes to a path to helping people create their own wonder dogs.

The Marines and Secret Service: White joined the Marine Corps at age 18, just after graduating from high school. He was stationed at Camp Pendleton, California, and he also lived in Okinawa, Japan, for a time. But it was during his seven months in Fallujah, Iraq, where his unit was the first to go into the city for seven long months of combat operations, that White saw how amazing dogs could be. “Dogs are all over in Iraq, no matter what unit you’re in. I thought it was amazing that

Photo by Fuzzypants Photography



Nick and his beloved dog Duke.

dogs could sniff bombs in the ground,” he explains. White received the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal for his heroic actions in Fallujah, but he saw dogs as the true heroes.

Gen. David Petraeus would certainly agree. He has been quoted as saying the following about military working dogs: “The capability they bring to the fight cannot be replicated by man or machine. By all measures of performance their yield outperforms any asset we have in our inventory. Our Army (and military) would be remiss if we failed to invest more in this incredibly valuable resource.”

During his time in the Marines and after completing his duties, White would spend his off-time with the military dog handlers to learn everything he could about how they worked with their dogs. Military, police and personal protection dogs have to be well-behaved. They have to listen without question and without letting their own interest in a squirrel or other distraction deter them from complying with an order.

After serving four years in the Marines, White was hired to do executive protection, and then he went to work for the Secret Service, where he spent three and a half years protecting Vice President Cheney and President Bush. He subsequently served on President Obama’s detail. Dogs play a large role in the Secret Service too, and White continued his dog training education by working with the Secret Service canine handlers on the side. He was learning so much that he was able to informally help friends out with their dogs. His business simply grew, organically, out of what he saw and learned.

While in the Secret Service, White came to believe he could start training regular household dogs to have the same level of obedience, discipline, and instant responsiveness of the dogs he had worked with in the military and law enforcement. He began by helping even more friends and family, ending up training more than twenty dogs per week on top of his full-time work. White decided to take the leap and Off-Leash K9 Training was born officially in March, 2009. They now have numerous locations throughout the United States, and Yahoo News even flew a production crew from New York just to do a news story on them.

White attributes much of his success to his military training. Surely, that is where he was exposed to all that dogs could do, and how happy and confident training made them, and how well any of them could then fit into our lives. But he was happy to move on, taking the best of his time in the service with him.

Running a Business is Harder than Training Troubled Dogs: “Going from the Marines to the Secret Service wasn’t a big change,” White says of his first professional job change. “The big transition was going from being a government employee to running your own business.” He decided to make the leap into business because he realized he’d “much rather work with dogs all day than stand outside of a building watching the president give speeches for the next twenty years.”

He named his business Off-Leash K9 Training because that is a big part of his philosophy. He explains it succinctly on his website: “We specialize in private lessons, dog behavior consultations, and teaching the owners to understand why their dogs do the things they do. This helps create a strong bond between the owner and dog. Your dog will benefit tremendously! Most behavior problems (biting, chewing, jumping, etc.) are based off of a lack of exercise, discipline, and out of boredom! With this training, your dog is receiving top-quality obedience training, which in turn, allows you to give your dog freedom to run around OFF-LEASH and play! So by doing this training your dog is not bored because it is learning and being stimulated, it is running freely off-leash so it is getting exercise, and it is getting obedience/discipline! Not only does all of this greatly benefit your dog, but it also benefits you and your family!”

“Dogs are my full-time job,” White states plainly. They are also his life. “My personal dog now is Duke, a Belgian malinois. He knows over 30 commands in both English and German,” White says proudly. “He

is bite trained. He does pretty much everything a dog can do, all the basic and advanced skills, including barking on command and playing dead.”

Dogs are also clearly White’s passion, and he relishes the opportunity to be successful. He clearly applied his military training to his business and has a strong work ethic. (If one can manage in Iraq, they must have a good foundation for hard work!) While White invested a lot of time reading and listening to business books and CDs, he says his best business training has been “100 percent on the job.” And he humbly admits that he is “still learning and figuring things out.”

The hardest part, White says, was trying to “block out all the negative people.” People thought he was crazy to go from a job with great benefits and pay to relying totally on himself. So he had to cultivate in himself the same calm confidence he tries to help owners instill in their own dogs.

The second hardest part is that there is never an end to the workday, he adds. Still, he takes on even more work to help rescue dogs.

Giving Back: In addition to working with dogs in his business and working with his own dog, White makes time for helping homeless dogs in need. “We work with Prince William County [Virginia] animal shelter evaluating troubled dogs and helping people avoid surrendering dogs by offering significant discounts on training.” Well-behaved dogs don’t go to shelters and are not returned after adoption. So in a sense, White is still saving lives in a different type of war zone.

White also works with Southeast German Shepherd Rescue, an organization based in Raleigh, North Carolina, with a Virginia branch in Charlottesville. They have foster families throughout both states and pull animals from shelters in four states, explains Cassie Walsh, the treasurer for Southeast German Shepherd Rescue. Walsh connected with White on behalf of the rescue after using his training services to help her fearful dog.

The relationship started when Walsh was at her wit’s end. “I have two rescued German Shepherds,” she says, “and one was just terrified. She would stay outside for days, even in the snow, and not come to me. Honestly, some days I would just cry. I had seen about five different trainers, and Nick was the only one who could help me. [My dog] was so terrified of everything, and now her confidence is through the roof. Her demeanor after each training session is so great, I want to keep taking her.”

After her successful experience, Walsh talked with White about helping other dogs, those dogs who wouldn’t have a chance otherwise. Fearful dogs do particularly poorly at shelters, especially when they are dominant breeds like a German Shepherd. Fear is often exacerbated by a kennel environment, Walsh says, and it can manifest as aggression, leading to bad outcomes.

So White’s Jacksonville, North Carolina, office will be working with the rescue dogs taken in by Southeast German Shepherd Rescue who would otherwise be candidates for euthanasia. “It’s our rehab program,” Walsh says. “Nick is giving us an unbelievable discount.”

The partnership goes beyond training. White is working with Walsh to get leashes—from clients who don’t need them after completing training—donated to the rescue organization. One of the benefits associated with White’s business getting larger is that he can help more dogs. Looking into the future, White hopes that “ten years from now I will still be training dogs and have 30 to 50 locations.”

Down Time: In his precious down time, White enjoys boating, and because his dog Duke is so well-trained, he can accompany him. White also likes to maintain his marksmanship skills, and he takes shooting practice when he can. He keeps himself in good shape with Brazilian jujitsu, which even connects to being a good pet owner and trainer. “All my trainers are in good shape, and it certainly helps when training, especially [with] a feisty or stubborn dog,” White says.

Respect, high expectations, hard work and love. Those ingredients are the key to any kind of success with dogs or humans, and it’s White’s recipe for helping dogs survive and thrive. 🐾



For more information on White and his business, visit offleashk9training.com. White has published a book about training dogs, “Raising the Perfect Dog: Secrets of Law Enforcement K9 Trainers.”