

Sidedoor (S10E09) – Tails of Bravery

Lizzie Peabody: Hey there, Sidedoorables. A quick note that this episode features descriptions of war, which does include some violence and death.

Lizzie: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Okay, pet people, think about how many pets you've ever had in your entire life. If you're like my dad, you've had a lot, but there's one that holds a very special place in your heart. For him, it was his dog in graduate school, a golden retriever named Tessie who attended every single class with him, and was so inseparable from him he did not even own a leash for her. He still has a photo of her above his desk, sitting in a patch of ivy in full sunlight.

Lizzie: Chris Willingham says he's had this bond too, with a dog named Lucca.

Chris Willingham: *If you've ever seen a dog do, like, the puppy dance where they kind of like lower their front half and kind of bounce around, or they even do the—kind of the funky chicken where they lay on their back. So she did that. So she had the ability of just being a silly dog.*

Lizzie: Lucca was a German Shepherd, and she wasn't just a pet. Like Chris, she was a Marine.

Chris Willingham: *When I would kit up, she would start getting excited. I'd put her vest on, the guys knew no more petting at that point. And she knew it was game time.*

Lizzie: See, Chris was a dog handler in the US Marine Corps for 20 years, where dogs serve important roles. Lucca's job was to sniff out buildings and roadways for improvised explosive devices, or IEDs—essentially homemade bombs.

Chris Willingham: *She'd be out in front of me 20 yards, searching on the left hand side of the road, and just look back at me and not move until I put my hand up. If I put my hand right, she walked across the road for me, and if I didn't she would stay straight for me. So she—she would have these little triggers, like "Okay, I'm gonna check in with dad." And right on cue, like it was incredible how we were able to work together.*

Lizzie: Chris remembers when he and Lucca first arrived in Iraq. This was 2007—the height of the war. And he found himself stationed in a base on the south side of Baghdad.

Chris Willingham: *It was an area called the Triangle of Death, and there was a lot of insurgents, a lot of IEDs in that area, and they started launching a lot of car bombs and rockets*

into Baghdad.

Lizzie: Insurgent fighters had buried IEDs along the roadways as booby traps, and it was Lucca's job to sniff out those explosives. Chris remembers leading a patrol with Lucca, a group of Marines following not too far behind, when they arrived on a stretch of road with several "chokepoints."

Chris Willingham: *And a "chokepoint" is a vulnerable area where it kinda gets a little more narrow, and it's a prime place for IEDs. And the first two that Lucca searched that day were clear. There was nothing there.*

Lizzie: But at the next chokepoint, Lucca's behavior started to change.

Lizzie: *What did that look like?*

Chris Willingham: *It's more intense sniffing. The tail starts going. Now all of a sudden, it's like more intent, detailed searching in the area because she's starting to get trace odors of something she's been trained to locate.*

Lizzie: So Chris warned everyone to stay back while the bomb team got a better look at whatever Lucca found. This meant spraying a high-pressure water hose at the road to clear away any dirt that may be covering a bomb.

Chris Willingham: *And when they set off the water charge, the IED detonated.*

Lizzie: The explosion left a huge hole—five feet deep by 12 feet wide. Big enough to fit a Volkswagen Beetle.

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh!*

Chris Willingham: *And we were about to walk through that area if it wasn't for the detection capabilities of Lucca.*

Lizzie: *Wow! Oh, wow!*

Chris Willingham: *That saved several flag-draped coffins from going home to their families.*

Lizzie: But Chris knows firsthand that the story doesn't always end this way. He says that while he was in Iraq, a fellow dog handler and his dog were killed by an explosion. He and Chris had been roommates, sharing a tent with their dogs. And after getting the news of his friend's death, Chris returned to his tent at the end of a long day.

Chris Willingham: *That was the first time it kind of hit me, and, you know, I broke down and started crying. And Lucca was across the tent from me. She saw me breaking down, and she got up and came over and put her head on my leg and just knew, like, in that moment of weakness, like, I needed some, some comfort.*

Lizzie: *Was that typical of Lucca, to lay her head on your leg?*

Chris Willingham: *Oh, no. No, ma'am. I think that's what makes it more special. Like, it wasn't a typical behavior from her, but it was indicative of how in tune that dog was with my energy, my emotions and, you know, when her handler's having a tough time, like, she's—you know, gives some comfort. Let me help this guy out. That's my Marine, and we take care of each other, and just that teamwork.*

Lizzie: Lucca led over 400 patrols in both Iraq and Afghanistan. None of the soldiers in her squad were ever injured when she was on duty, although she lost her front leg in an explosion. And when she retired, Chris adopted her.

Chris Willingham: *She would still do the puppy dance with three legs. She would still do the funky chicken with three legs. She still just embraced life. You could see her at her happy spirit, her happy energy. Didn't slow her down a bit.*

Lizzie: This time on Sidedoor, the stories of furry and feathered war heroes memorialized at the Smithsonian, told over three chapters. From dogs to birds and cats, we explore how animals can remind us of our own humanity in some of life's most trying times. Those animal "tails" are coming up, after the bark—I mean, break!

Lizzie: Chapter One: For Heaven's Sake, Stop It!

Lizzie: Frank Blazich knows a lot about birds. Well technically, one type of bird.

Frank Blazich: *I've kind of become Mr. Pigeon. But I have a doctorate. I guess, Dr. Pigeon maybe?*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Frank's official title is curator of military history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. He's showing me a pigeon from the museum's exhibition, Price of Freedom. And because I don't want to be rude, I'm gonna let Frank describe it to you.

Frank Blazich: *This pigeon, he's seen better days. If you saw him on the sidewalk, you'd probably go, "Oh, gross!" You know, he's not a healthy-looking, robust specimen of the homing pigeon. Instead, you see this kind of gaunt pigeon lacking a right—half a right leg. His feathers are missing in some cases, or have kind of fallen off.*

Lizzie: *They're, like, tufty. Yeah.*

Frank Blazich: *He's got a ratty tail.*

Lizzie: *But he's got a smart look about him. He looks like he knows what's what.*

Frank Blazich: *He's noble. He has kind of a noble gaze on him.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Frank Blazich: *And yet this is one of the most beloved treasures in the entire Smithsonian Institution.*

Lizzie: *This bird's name is Cher Ami. And he, my dear friend, is a decorated war hero. But how did this scruffy little bird accomplish such a big feat?*

Frank Blazich: *So our story really needs to begin on the darkness of the early morning hours of September 26, 1918.*

Lizzie: *These were the final days of World War I. Brits, French and Americans were fighting their way through eastern France towards the German border. It's what's known as the Meuse–Argonne Offensive—the deadliest military campaign in American history.*

Frank Blazich: *Over 26,000 Americans killed, averaging something like 550 or 559 killed in action every day for 47 consecutive days.*

Lizzie: *Among the many American soldiers in this offensive was the 77th Division, known as the Metropolitan Division because most of the soldiers came from New York City.*

Frank Blazich: *And it was said that the members of this division speak 42 languages, not including English.*

Lizzie: *Oh!*

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Frank Blazich: *That these are quote, "hyphenated Americans." A lot of first-generation Americans, a lot of children also of immigrant families.*

Lizzie: These Americans were on a mission to fight through the Argonne Forest in France, and cut off a vital German supply route. But this forest was filled with German soldiers, and the Metro Division would have been facing all sorts of deadly obstacles, including poisonous gas ...

Frank Blazich: *Hidden machine guns, perhaps snipers, unknown obstacles. This is very, very difficult terrain. Very, very difficult terrain.*

Lizzie: And the soldiers were ordered to only move ...

Frank Blazich: *Forward! The key here is once you capture ground, you will not retreat. You must continuously move through the forest. You must continuously move forward.*

Lizzie: The Metro Division was broken down into smaller groups called battalions, each with as many as a thousand soldiers in them. Of all the battalions that made up the Metro Division, one of them was so successful at moving forward through the dense woods that it actually left all the others behind.

Frank Blazich: *What they discover is that they so far outpaced their supporting flanks that the Germans have been able to infiltrate behind them and are beginning to surround them.*

Lizzie: The commanding officer of this battalion was Major Charles Whittlesey, a lawyer from New York City. He was tall and slender, bookish and quiet.

Frank Blazich: *Not the kind of person that one would think of as a courageous leader.*

Lizzie: And yet, Whittlesey's battalion was moving faster than any other, which is how he found himself surrounded. And when Whittlesey realized his battalion was alone, he told his men to hunker down on the steep slope of a ravine while he called for backup. But you have to remember this was 1918, and calling for backup wasn't so simple. Radios were cutting-edge technology back then.

Frank Blazich: *They can work in the perfect condition, but the trenches and the combat of World War I, you have mud, you have water, you have concussion and shock. Radios aren't really built yet to withstand these, so they're not a hundred percent reliable.*

Lizzie: Wired forms of communication, like a telephone or a telegram, those existed at the time. And they were reliable—but those wires could be cut.

Frank Blazich: *And literally they can be wiretapped. You can go right over to that wire, clip another wire to it, and listen in on your call and just tap the line.*

Lizzie: So most communication was done the old-fashioned way: a string of men were positioned every few hundred feet, and they'd run messages and back and forth like a relay race. But Whittlesey's battalion had been cut off and surrounded by German soldiers, so they only had one form of communication left.

Frank Blazich: *That's the homing pigeon. It's a one-way form of communication, so it's limited. You know, the pigeon can get from A to B, but it can't necessarily go back from B to A.*

Lizzie: That's because these pigeons have an uncanny ability to find their way back to their loft from just about anywhere. But once they're back at their loft, they're home. They stay there. So the message only goes one way.

Frank Blazich: *But as a communication method of last resort, they are really reliable.*

Lizzie: Now Whittlesey's battalion had a couple of men specialized in pigeons, what are known as "pigeoneers." They carried pigeons in a basket on their backs as they marched through the forest with other soldiers. When Whittlesey took stock of how many pigeons they had, he counted eight. Eight pigeons. Eight shots at getting a message back to headquarters. He sent the first one off with a message requesting that headquarters shoot some artillery into the woods around them to keep the Germans away. When no artillery came, he assumed the pigeon never made it back to base. As the day wore on, the situation got worse. Germans were shooting mortars at Whittlesey's battalion, so he sent another pigeon. This time saying ...

Frank Blazich: *Look, we're taking heavier casualties, we're running low on ammunition. We need medical supplies, we need food. The situation's very serious, and the German attacks are getting more and more and more ferocious.*

Lizzie: And still, no help arrived. The trapped men had no choice but to wait as food and ammunition dwindled, shells exploding around them. Whittlesey told his men to "hold their positions at all costs."

Lizzie: On the second day of being trapped, Whittlesey sent out more pigeons, not knowing if any had made it the 25 miles back to headquarters. By this time, there were only a few birds left. The message he sent with the sixth pigeon showed just how bad the situation had become.

Frank Blazich: *He says, "Situation is cutting into our strength rapidly. Men are suffering from*

hunger and exposure. The wounded are in a very bad condition. Cannot support be sent at once?"

Lizzie: Back at headquarters, nobody knew what had happened to Whittlesey's battalion, until a pigeon arrived from another unit's commander. It had a message with coordinates on it, and headquarters figured those coordinates were the location of the Germans attacking Whittlesey's battalion.

Frank Blazich: *And the idea is, okay, well let's drop artillery around the Americans to kind of push the Germans back, right? Give these guys some protection.*

Lizzie: But there was a problem with these coordinates. What the headquarters didn't realize is that it didn't have the coordinates for the Germans, it actually had the coordinates for Whittlesey's battalion. And this was a big problem.

Frank Blazich: *Since they have the wrong position ...*

Lizzie: *Oh no!*

Frank Blazich: *... instead of dropping the shells around the Germans, they dropped them right on the Americans.*

Lizzie: *Oh no!*

Frank Blazich: *So after everything that the men had been going through, all of a sudden the world literally is exploding around them.*

Lizzie: *Oh!*

Lizzie: Just when they thought it could not get any worse, this lost battalion was being shelled by the Americans—friendly fire. Surrounded by smoke and flying dirt, bleeding from a piece of shrapnel that had hit his nose, Whittlesey yells for one of the pigeoneers and grabs a notepad.

Frank Blazich: *And jots off a very succinct message that reads simply, "We are along the road parallel 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake, stop it!"*

Lizzie: The pigeoneer, a man named Omer Richards, rolls the tiny piece of paper and stuffs it into a little metal cylinder about the size of a pen cap. And he then looks in the pigeon basket. There are only two left. He grabs one to tie the message to.

Frank Blazich: *For whatever reason, it's not entirely clear, maybe a shell exploded right then or*

something, the bird freaked, and Richard's grasp wasn't firm enough. The pigeon broke free and took off.

Lizzie: [gasps]

Frank Blazich: *At this point, according to accounts, Whittlesey glared at Richards and uttered an uncharacteristically rude word.*

Lizzie: He dropped his own bomb—an F-Bomb.

Frank Blazich: *At this point, Richards apparently apologized to his commander and very carefully removed the last pigeon, although I'm presuming he probably had a death grip on that bird.*

Lizzie: Yeah. Yeah.

Lizzie: Richards attached the letter to the last pigeon's leg and tossed it up into the air, all eyes on this little bird. A private named John Nell later wrote quote, "We knew without a doubt that this was our last chance. If that one lonely, scared pigeon failed to find its loft, our fate was sealed."

Frank Blazich: *Shells are falling, and here this tiny little pigeon, this one pound of flesh and feathers, this savior, wings are outstretched, the bird rises into the air, it circles two or three times, and then lands on a tree limb a short distance downhill.*

Lizzie: What?

Lizzie: The pigeon stopped in a tree to preen its feathers. The world was exploding all around, but the pigeon was in no rush. It was like, "Self care, people!"

Frank Blazich: *Richards is yelling at the bird. Whittlesey, according to some, yelled, "Boo!" Men are throwing sticks and rocks and anything they have nearby to get the bird to move. And what does the pigeon do? Hops to a higher branch. At this point, Richards, who's openly swearing, gets out of his protective foxhole. Mind you guys, again, artillery's still falling all over. And Richards begins climbing up the tree.*

Lizzie: Richards shakes the tree as he climbs toward the bird, probably shouting some choice words at it. Still the pigeon does not budge.

Frank Blazich: *He reaches up, and is able to grasp the perch where the pigeon is, that limb, and he shakes the branch. And at last, the pigeon flies off.*

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Lizzie: The pigeon flies up above the treeline and circles a couple times to get its bearings. And just when it starts to turn toward headquarters, a shell explodes directly beneath it.

Frank Blazich: *And the people saw it flutter to the ground near the bottom of the ravine.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh!*

Frank Blazich: *So at this point, it seems like, well, there's—there's that.*

Lizzie: The last pigeon had been blown out of the sky. The battalion was taking fire from all sides, out of food, scared for their lives, and out of hope. But then something miraculous happened. About an hour after Whittlesey and Richards released their final pigeon, a bedraggled bird dropped out of the sky back at military headquarters.

Frank Blazich: *And kind of flopped on the roof of the loft. And when the loft attendants checked on the bird, they found the message tube hanging from the remains of the right leg, just by like the skin or ligaments.*

Lizzie: Someone grabbed the message and then grabbed the phone. Meanwhile, medics quickly bandaged up the bird's wounds.

Frank Blazich: *As to quote the poetic phrase, "For this bird, the war is over." Because of the wounds.*

Lizzie: When the officers read the message, they realized what they'd done.

Lizzie: The next morning, back in the ravine, Whittlesey's battalion woke up to silence, not knowing if or when the artillery attacks would resume. But at 10:00 am ...

Frank Blazich: *More artillery begins.*

Lizzie: *[whispers] Oh my God!*

Frank Blazich: *And so for those there, it's like, "Well, this time we're gonna be wiped out, we're gonna be annihilated."*

Lizzie: They listen as the shelling moves closer and closer to their battalion. And then suddenly, it stops, skips over them ...

Frank Blazich: *And hits the Germans on the other side of the ravine.*

Lizzie: The lost battalion realized their last pigeon must have made it. And with the Americans now bombing in the right place, the rest of the battalions were able to finally catch up to Whittlesey and his men. Within days, the Germans were forced to retreat. Whittlesey's lost battalion was now free to leave the ravine and walk out of the Argonne Forest, nearly a week after being trapped behind enemy lines.

Frank Blazich: *Of the 687 men that we know entered the ravine between the 2nd and 7th of October, only 194 walk out. So we're talking of a casualty rate of—of 72 percent.*

Lizzie: But that casualty rate could have been even higher. In fact, Whittlesey's battalion has become known quite famously as "The Lost Battalion"—not because headquarters didn't know where they were, but because everyone assumed none of the men would survive.

Lizzie: And who deserved credit for saving these lives? Well, back in America, a few months after the Lost Battalion was found, a military officer stepped off a ship coming from the front lines. He grabbed a pigeon, held it high for reporters to see, and said ...

Frank Blazich: *"This little pigeon, known as Cher Ami, this is the pigeon that quote, 'Saved the Lost Battalion.'"*

Frank Blazich: *Right there at the dock of Hoboken, this pigeon passes into legend. Cher Ami becomes legend. And now we have this little, little hero that is linked to the heroism of the Lost Battalion, and the public have kind of a face if you will—albeit a pigeon face ...*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Frank Blazich: *... and a name, Cher Ami.*

Lizzie: Major Charles Whittlesey was awarded the medal of honor in December, 1918. He and the rest of the Lost Battalion became national celebrities back in America. Their story was told and retold in countless books, news articles and movies. One historian equated the significance of the Lost Battalion with the Alamo. There's even a physical memorial in the Argonne Forest where the men were trapped. And if you look closely at the monument, you can see a pigeon carved into the rock: Cher Ami.

Lizzie: Still ahead: how cats found their sea legs, and how a little dog won the hearts of both France and America. We'll have more on that after the break.

Lizzie: Chapter Two: Happy Birthday, Lieutenant Whiskers]

[NEWS CLIP: Attention Mr. Coastguardsman, Herman the Cat is on the prowl. In Baltimore, Herman is fingerprinted—or is it paw printed—so he can get an official Coast Guard pass.]

Lizzie: This is a newsreel from World War II. Herman the Cat is drinking milk from a spoon, and jumping onto a boat.

[NEWS CLIP: And Herman gets the ranking of EM, that's Expert Mouser. After noontime rations, the ambassador of ill will to rats starts out on his first tour of duty, a prowl of his pals' boats.]

Lizzie: This newsreel has actually been circulating on my social channels lately, and it's pretty popular because well, a cat joining the Coast Guard is pretty darn cute. But when I first saw it, I was like, "How can a cat join the Coast Guard? Don't cats hate following directions and also, you know, water?"

Scot Christenson: *They're actually better suited for life on the sea than humans are.*

Lizzie: Really?

Scot Christenson: *Yeah, cats make their own vitamin C, where humans don't.*

Lizzie: This is Scot Christenson, author of the book *Cats in the Navy*.

Scot Christenson: *And cats don't need too much fresh water. They get most of the moisture they need from the food they eat. And they can drink a little bit of seawater and be okay because they have a really good filter system.*

Lizzie: Scot says cats are, in fact, the perfect seafaring animals. Go figure! And they've been sailing off to sea as long as humans have—which is a pretty long time.

Scot Christenson: *There are ancient Egyptian tomb paintings showing cats on boats on the Nile being used to hunt birds in the reeds.*

Lizzie: Sailors love cats because they eat rats, and rats have always been a problem for ships.

Scot Christenson: *They eat the food, they chew through the materials such as the ropes, the sails, and they spread disease. A crew that's become incapacitated by disease will disable an*

entire ship.

Lizzie: Cats became essential members of the crew of any ship. In fact, it was sailors who spread cats around the world.

Scot Christenson: *The Phoenicians adopted them from the Egyptians and spread them throughout the Mediterranean.*

Lizzie: Wow!

Scot Christenson: *Then the Vikings took them, spread them throughout Europe.*

Lizzie: Really? There were viking cats?

Scot Christenson: *Oh yeah, absolutely.*

Lizzie: Oh, man!

Scot Christenson: *And then the British, the French, the Spanish-Portuguese during the age of sail spread them throughout the Americas and through the Pacific.*

Lizzie: The British sailor Captain Cook recorded an exchange he had with Islanders in the South Pacific back in the late 1700s.

Scot Christenson: *They brought all these gifts for the Islanders: textiles and jewelry and hardware, but the Islanders were just fixated on the cats. They didn't want that junk. They wanted the cats. But Cook wrote in his diary, he says, "We could not afford to give up a cat." Because cats were considered part of the crew, and it would be like giving up a cook or something. In the end, the captain acquiesced, gave the locals a cat, and he said they paddled off with an abundance of joy. From then on, whenever ships came through the area, the locals just wanted to know if they had any cats to trade.*

Lizzie: Even Navy ships throughout history always had at least one cat on board. When America entered World War II, you could expect to find at least a dozen cats on any one ship.

Scot Christenson: *Some of the larger ships could have up to 20, 25 cats, and they would divide up the ship among themselves.*

Lizzie: Some cats even had their own uniforms and hammocks to sleep in so they wouldn't get seasick. It's adorable, and you should definitely Google 'cats in hammocks on ships.' You'll thank me later.

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Lizzie: And cats adapted as warfare changed. Scot told me that these seafaring felines were still expert mousers, like Herman, but sailors found that cats could serve as early warning signals for air raids or gas attacks.

Scot Christenson: *So they became very good at watching how they twitch their ears or how they would eat their food. So in the days before radar, it was an indication that maybe there were aircraft coming in to attack, or small boats coming to attack.*

Lizzie: But after World War II, the military started phasing out the use of cats on ships. With new fumigation methods, rats weren't as much of a problem anymore. But the real reason might have been more political.

Scot Christenson: *After the war, there was a great bit of downsizing, and the Navy was being greatly reduced.*

Lizzie: During a 1953 debate over military spending, Navy admirals were like, "Hey, don't cut our budget. We need every penny we can get!" But one congressman was like, "Oh, you don't have enough money, do you?"

Scot Christenson: *Well, we have here this report that there's a ship that has a three-man committee to plan a birthday party for a cat.*

Lizzie: The admirals were like, "Well, isn't this just purr-fect? Torpedoed by a cat's birthday party." Combine that with stricter quarantine laws at seaports, and you'll be hard pressed to find a cat on ship these days. But that doesn't mean there's not a cat-sized hole—or 20—on American naval ships. I know a cat birthday party sounds frivolous, but Scot says that was at least partly the point—it helped ease sailors' minds when they were facing death on a regular basis.

Scot Christenson: *Sailors would be filled with anxiety, they'd be stressed out, but having a cat around and to give them some affection that's going about the day as if nothing is happening gave them a nice distraction.*

Lizzie: Chapter Three: Is That a Terrier in Your Coat, Private?

Lizzie: We know from stories about dogs like Lucca—you know, the search dog we met at the beginning of this episode—that dogs, like cats, perform vital roles in wartime. But sometimes, the most vital role a dog can play is to just be a best friend.

Lizzie: I want to share the story of one dog who was never officially trained. In fact, he was a stray who snuck into the ranks of the American armed forces and stayed there. And even

though he never officially joined the military, he's now part of the military exhibit at the National Museum of American History.

Jennifer Jones: *We are in the World War I section, right across from our World War II area. You can hear all those videos. We have military equipment, we have the little trench periscope, and we have a dog.*

Lizzie: Jennifer Jones is curator of military history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Lizzie: *Who is this little doggie in the window?*

Jennifer Jones: *[laughs] Well, this little doggie in our window, in our exhibit here on World War I, is Stubby. And Stubby is a brindle terrier.*

Lizzie: Stubby sort of looks like a pitbull with the face of a boxer, but not nearly as big as either of those dogs. Maybe 25 pounds. And it took me a second to realize, but this is the *actual* Stubby.

Jennifer Jones: *He's been stuffed. I think he is just the brindled skin of the dog, and he actually has his cremated remains on the inside.*

Lizzie: So how did this little dog, who's not even a trained military dog, earn his way into this glass display?

Jennifer Jones: *His exploits.*

Lizzie: During World War I, college campuses across America were being transformed into military training grounds. Soldiers used the fields to practice marching, shooting and digging foxholes. In early 1918, shortly after America entered the war, Yale University became one of these boot camps, with more soldiers arriving every day.

Ann Bausum: *As more and more soldiers arrived, and you've got more and more cooking going on, and more and more mess tents serving food, this camp attracted quite a few friendly dogs.*

Lizzie: This is Ann Bausum.

Ann Bausum: *As my dad would say, "'Bausum' rhymes with 'awesome.'"*

Lizzie: And Ann is author of the awesome book *Sergeant Stubby*. She says neighborhood dogs came from all around to snack on the soldiers' food scraps.

Ann Bausum: *And one of those dogs was this about two feet tall, two feet long, white chest, white on its face, white paws, seemingly a stray dog.*

Lizzie: This dog's tail had been docked—or cut—as was the practice back then for this type of bull terrier, so he had this little stubby tail that wagged around when he begged for food. The men started to call him Stubby, and one of the soldiers at Yale, a 25-year-old named James Robert Conroy, he found that Stubby particularly liked him.

Ann Bausum: *And pretty early on, Stubby adopted Conroy as his human, and the two of them began to bond in this training camp where the men are literally learning how to be soldiers. And Stubby just starts to learn how to be a soldier dog.*

Lizzie: Stubby and Conroy went through training camp together—literally. Whatever Conroy did, Stubby did. When Conroy ate, Stubby ate, when Conroy slept, Stubby slept, and when Conroy marched, Stubby marched.

Ann Bausum: *When the marching band would be practicing, he would follow along. And he was learning the commands, so he knew when they were gonna turn, he knew when they were gonna stop, and he would mimic that behavior.*

Jennifer Jones: *And Conroy during training, taught him his one lovely little trick that would get him out of a lot of trouble.*

Lizzie: *What's that?*

Jennifer Jones: *And that is to sit up and salute. He would put his little paw up next to his face. He would sit on his hind legs and sit up like he was gonna beg, but he would put his little paw up and he would wait apparently until the salute was returned. So that he would then, you know, get back down on all fours.*

Lizzie: *No!*

Jennifer Jones: *It's a great trick.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Conroy and Stubby became inseparable, but after a few months, basic training was over. Conroy was being shipped out to France, and there was no ticket with Stubby's name on it. Remember, Stubby wasn't an official military dog—he was self-taught.

Ann Bausum: *When it came time to it, Stubby didn't want to say goodbye, and neither did Conroy.*

Lizzie: Conroy just had to figure out how to sneak Stubby onboard a ship to Europe. So he sniffed out an ally.

Jennifer Jones: *He enlisted the help of someone who was a crewman on the ship, and they put him into a coal bin, smuggled him into the ship's hold in the coal bin.*

Lizzie: *What?*

Jennifer Jones: *And he stayed there until they were pretty far out to sea, so that had he been discovered, it would be too late to send him back.*

Lizzie: Stubby made it all the way to France without ever being discovered. But once they got to shore, Conroy had to figure out a way to get Stubby *off* the ship. And this is a caper I can almost envision playing out in a Three Stooges film. Conroy wrapped Stubby up in his jacket ...

Ann Bausum: *And some of the soldiers bunched up around him and they got off the ship together.*

Lizzie: Of course, eventually Conroy's commanding officers discovered he had snuck a dog into France. But when they went to confront him and Stubby ...

Jennifer Jones: *You know, what does Stubby do?*

Lizzie: *He salutes?*

Jennifer Jones: *He salutes.*

Lizzie: *Oh!*

Jennifer Jones: *They just say, "Okay, he's your mascot."*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Jennifer Jones: *So everybody was in on it. Everybody sort of said, okay.*

Sidedoor (S10E09) – Tails of Bravery

Lizzie: Stubby was now on active duty. But France in the fall of 1918 was a far cry from New Haven, Connecticut. Conroy had no idea just how dangerous and deadly the fighting would be. Like most of his unit, he'd never fought in a war before.

Lizzie: *So he had no idea what to expect.*

Jennifer Jones: *No. They had no idea what to expect, and I don't even think that the professional soldiers knew.*

Lizzie: Tanks. Fighter planes. Deadly chemicals. Razor wire. Even machine guns to an extent. World War I was the first time all these instruments of destruction were used on the battlefield.

Jennifer Jones: *And this was a very defensive war. It wasn't troops meeting in battle on a battlefield. It was you're dug in, these are your positions and you're basically, you know, lobbing artillery towards each other. That's where the chemical warfare is coming in, and it's really a war of attrition in many ways.*

Lizzie: Stubby and Conroy found themselves in the middle of trench warfare.

Jennifer Jones: *And the conditions were pretty bad, you know? No sunlight, lots of mud, lots of rain, rats.*

Lizzie: Conroy left behind a scrapbook from the war that includes sketches of their living conditions. One picture shows him sleeping in his underground bunker.

Ann Bausum: *And if you look closely, you can see Stubby's head drawn into this picture that another soldier had created just to document daily life at the front lines.*

Lizzie: *Wow, so he would sleep in the bunk with Conroy?*

Ann Bausum: *Seemingly, according to this illustration.*

Lizzie: Despite the fact he was a self-taught military dog, Stubby proved to be handy on the front lines. He caught his fair share of rats, kept soldiers company while they stood guard, and he even served as an early warning system for gas attacks.

Jennifer Jones: *He had a really good sense of smell, so he could sense before the soldiers could that there would have been rounds of chemical munitions. And so he would start barking,*

and once he started barking, the alarms would go off in the trenches so that people would go and get their gas masks.

Lizzie: Stubby even had his own little gas mask that Conroy had made for him.

Jennifer Jones: *But Conroy, of course, had to be there, or somebody needed to be close by when they would put the mask on Stubby. But he tolerated it, so he was a good little soldier.*

Lizzie: But the dangers of trench warfare caught up to Stubby in the spring of 1918. Weeks after they arrived in the trenches, there was a pause in the fighting. And during the calm, Stubby rushed out of the trench and into no-man's land. And then ...

Ann Bausum: *A late shell or grenade came in. I don't know whether it was in reaction to the dog or just a fluke, and exploded.*

Jennifer Jones: *And they heard him yelp, and so Conroy went up to get him and saw that he was bleeding.*

Ann Bausum: *And Conroy reportedly carried the dog to the medics. Everybody knew Stubby. He was a valuable dog.*

Lizzie: Conroy found the shrapnel that had torn into Stubby's chest and leg. He did what he could to stop the bleeding and said ...

Jennifer Jones: *Let's put him on an ambulance and take him back to a regular hospital because they'll know how to fix him up a little bit better.*

Lizzie: *Oh, wow!*

Lizzie: When Stubby got to the hospital, doctors did everything they could to save his life. And they did! Stubby made a spectacular recovery, spending the next six weeks recuperating at the hospital.

Ann Bausum: *And even there, you know, not surprisingly, became useful by once he could walk around again, just being a cheerful presence, visiting the other soldiers who were also recuperating.*

Lizzie: Once Stubby's injuries healed, he reunited with Conroy. And at this point in the war, the fighting had shifted from the trenches to the fields of France. This is where Stubby learned a new skill. Stubby was put to work finding lost or injured soldiers. When he sniffed someone out, he'd bark to alert the medics.

Ann Bausum: *You know, come over here, bring your stretcher, I've got somebody. Or even if someone was alive but might not survive long enough to be rescued, Stubby would stay with them, and be their final companion.*

Lizzie: But one day, Stubby made an unexpected find.

Ann Bausum: *Stubby was on one of his little doggy prowls, and he comes across a German soldier.*

Lizzie: Ann says it's unclear what the soldier was doing. He might have been lost.

Ann Bausum: *Maybe he was deserting. Maybe he was out marking the troops and, you know, spying to figure out the size and the movements. Stubby knew that he was someplace he did not belong. Stubby started barking at him.*

Lizzie: Remember, Stubby was just 25 pounds—basically the size of two cats stacked on top of each other. But this German soldier wasn't about to mess around and find out what Stubby was capable of, so he tried to hightail it away, but Stubby caught him.

Ann Bausum: *Grabbed him probably by the seat of the pants, and hit him with such force that the man fell face forward onto the ground with the dog standing on top of him.*

Lizzie: Nearby troops heard Stubby barking his head off, and ran to see what all the commotion was about. When they found him, he had an enemy soldier pinned to the ground.

Ann Bausum: *Per the protocol of the day, if you captured a soldier and they were decorated with medals, those would become yours. And this soldier apparently had an iron cross, and that became Stubby's Iron Cross.*

Lizzie: Stubby was kicking butts and taking names, or biting butts and taking medals. Stubby's exploits made him a hero in France. People greeted him with an abundance of joy as he walked through their towns. The village of Chateau-Thierry went one step further.

Ann Bausum: *The women who were there were so delighted by this dog and so grateful for the help that the dog was providing to the soldiers that they made him a little leather uniform. And that became Stubby's official uniform.*

Lizzie: Stubby's trip back to America was the polar opposite of his voyage to Europe. There was no more stowing away in coal bins for this little pup.

Ann Bausum: *Exactly. He's got a uniform on, he's got medals on it. The uniform had been decorated with his name.*

Lizzie: *He's got his name on a ticket.*

Ann Bausum: *Yeah, exactly. Exactly. He is already becoming a hero dog.*

Lizzie: Conroy and Stubby returned to America together, marched in victory parades. Stubby was racking up medals, winning people's hearts. Even the head of the entire US military, General John Pershing, honored Stubby for his service.

Ann Bausum: *And there are people there with photographers with flashbulb cameras going off as he's, you know, with great dignity trying to pin a medal on Stubby's little uniform.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh!*

Lizzie: But that's not all. Stubby was invited to the White House to meet President Calvin Coolidge. And when Conroy went to Georgetown Law School, guess who became the university's new mascot for football games? A schnauzer named Kevin.

Lizzie: I'm just kidding! It was Stubby, of course!

Ann Bausum: *He would run out at halftime and push the ball around on the field. And I wouldn't be surprised if it is not totally an exaggeration to say this was the origin of the halftime show.*

Lizzie: *What?*

Ann Bausum: *For Stubby to be the entertainment while the teams recovered.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Everybody loved Stubby, so when he died of old age in 1926, the nation mourned.

Ann Bausum: *He's got lengthy obituaries in The Washington Post, The New York Times, because everybody knows about Stubby. And I think, Lizzie, it kind of makes sense because this was a very traumatizing war. It was traumatic for the soldiers, it was traumatic for the family that welcomed back men who did not resemble themselves either physically or emotionally or both, and Stubby was a good story.*

Sidedoor (S10E09) – Tails of Bravery

Lizzie: Condolences poured in from all over. One editorial said, quote, "Stubby was the concentration of all we like in human beings, and lacked everything we dislike in them." But nobody grieved the death of Stubby more than Conroy. For him, Stubby was much more than a story.

Ann Bausum: *Stubby was family. Stubby was a fellow soldier.*

Lizzie: Ann says that after Stubby died, Conroy made sure the dog's exploits and heroics would be preserved for history. Not in Arlington National Cemetery—although there was talk of that—but at the Smithsonian. Conroy never had another dog after Stubby.

Ann Bausum: *That was the dog of his life. He married twice, but he only had one dog. And he lived to be 95. So, devoted to Stubby to the end. He would say, 'Stubby got me through the war.' And I think he was eternally grateful for that.*

Lizzie: Throughout history, animals in war have often served two purposes. One is their official duties, you know, like sniffing out explosives or catching rats. But the second is to be a friend—or even a family member—who can provide support through some of life's most difficult times.

Chris Willingham: *When you deploy with a dog, and you live with them seven days a week, and they're sleeping wherever you're sleeping, and you're going through everything you're going through together, it's a relationship between a dog and a handler that's unlike anything out there.*

Lizzie: Like Conroy, Chris says his dog Lucca got him through the war, and helped him when he got back home. But unlike Conroy, when Lucca died in 2018, Chris adopted another dog. It's the same type of dog that belonged to his fellow dog handler who died in Iraq, a yellow Lab.

Chris Willingham: *He's goofy.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Chris Willingham: *I love him, but he's goofy. But he means the world to me.*

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. To learn more about Cher Ami, Stubby or any of the other war hero animals in our collection, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at SI.edu/sidedoor. We'll be sure to include plenty of photos, including some of Lucca and Chris, as well as a few cats in uniform. We'll also include a link to an episode of the AirSpace podcast that has some new information

Frank Blazich discovered about Cher Ami. For instance, the pigeon's name might have actually been Big Tom at one point!

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Jennifer Jones, Frank Blazich, Scot Christenson, the awesome Ann Bausum, Chris Willingham and Veleska Hilbig.

Lizzie: If you want to know more about Stubby, you can see the actual dog at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. You can also read Ann's book: *Sergeant Stubby: How a Stray Dog and His Best Friend Helped Win WWI and Stole the Heart of the Nation*. She also has a children's book called *Stubby the War Dog*.

Lizzie: Scot Christenson's book is called *Cats in the Navy*, and it's full of amazing pictures. He's also got a new book called *Dogs in the Navy*—also worth checking out.

Lizzie: Chris Willingham's organization is called the US War Dogs Association if you want to look it up and learn more.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard.

Lizzie: Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda, and our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have any animal stories you want to share with us, you can do that right in the Spotify app. We'd love to hear from you. And if you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor(@)si.edu! If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship (@) prx.org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Frank Blazich: *Stuffed pigeons, those little plushies I have in my office. I have pigeon stickers. I have pigeon cartoons, pigeon books that I've been kind of building my library over the years.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh, there's a pigeon right there on your bookshelf.*

Frank Blazich: *There's more pigeons. I have—yeah, there's like pigeons everywhere. People love pigeons.*

Lizzie: *Do they really? I wasn't aware of that.*

Frank Blazich: *They get a bad rap, they get a bad rap!*

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