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Thunderbolt: A World War II Bomber Pilot's Canine Companion

Ian Morrison 00:00

[Music fades in] Lieutenant Earl Mazo is the reporter who wrote the Stars and Stripes article about Thunderbolt and Payne and so he's writing on May 14th, 1944, again to Lieutenant Robert A. Payne. Still in a POW camp despite his constant assertions that he will be out. So, he says to Payne, 'That dog is positively the most faithful animal I've ever heard about. When you all left, he almost went mad. He met the returning formation and when y'all weren't in it, things just seemed to pop.'

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:50

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:00

This is Cassie Cloutier and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:07

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections. In this episode, we explore the story of Thunderbolt, a dog that served as a companion to Lieutenant Robert Payne, an American bomber pilot during World War Two. Research Department intern Ian Morrison guides us through the story by highlighting the letters and photos that he discovered in the MHS collection.

Cassie Cloutier 01:49

Dr. Lorien Foote, Professor of History at Texas A&M University, who is currently writing about dogs in the Civil War, and MHS, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey provide us with more information on animals, specifically dogs during times of war.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:13

Ian Morrison, a junior majoring in history and francophone studies at Bowdoin College spent the summer of 2022 at the MHS. Among his assignments, we asked him to explore the Historical Society's collections and come up with a story he wanted to share with our podcast audience. We asked Ian where the story begins. Here is what he came up with.

Ian Morrison 02:37

I think the best place to start is in England. So, the owner of or the eventual owner of Thunderbolt joins the Air Force and starts obviously, his training in the United States, but then is eventually transferred to England. And so, where we started and where these two meet is on an airfield in England. For a bit more context, Lieutenant Robert A. Payne is part of a B-17 Bomber crew. He's the co-pilot. And his plane is the Gremlin Buggy is what they call it. And so, he's stationed at this airbase in England. By 1943, he has he has completed successfully 18 bombing missions.

Cassie Cloutier 03:30

So how does Payne come to meet Thunderbolt and what is their relationship after this meeting?

Ian Morrison 03:38

So that's actually a very complicated question because unfortunately, our sources don't have a unified story about how Thunderbolt and Payne initially met. One source has it that Thunderbolt ran onto the base, and he was just a stray dog that followed Payne around and Payne fed him and they became good friends after that. There's another story that says that Payne and his friends went out drinking at local pubs around the airbase. And they came back to the base and in the morning Thunderbolt was just there. But well, the origin story of this pair might vary. All of the sources are

very clear and very consistent. And that Thunderbolt and Payne were very, very close. Thunderbolt would be in meetings, as they were briefings as they're preparing for missions. He would watch Payne go out. He would, funnily enough, you would chase off the commanding officer that would come to wake up Payne to attend meetings and get ready for bombing runs and he would even, I don't know how true this is, but he would even go on practice runs with Payne and sit in the cockpit with him or be down with the bombardier.

Ian Morrison 05:13

So, Thunderbolts name, I would suspect most people who initially hear it would find it unusual, but he's actually named after the P-47 Thunderbolt, which is a fighter plane. And it stated that bomber pilots apparently had such admiration for these planes and the protection that they provided them. The bombers on bombing runs, that Payne was just so was so grateful to these planes that he named his dog in honor of the planes that protected him on his flights.

Cassie Cloutier 05:27

What breed was Thunderbolt and are there any descriptions of what he looks like?

Ian Morrison 05:59

So, Thunderbolts breed is disputed, as a lot of the facts in the story are. He's described as either having a mother that was a German Shepherd, or a Greyhound, but he he's essentially described as being a mongrel. He's 82 pounds. So, he's fairly large.

Cassie Cloutier 06:29

Do we have any photos of Thunderbolt?

Ian Morrison 06:32

Oh, we have several different photos. A lot of them come from newspaper clippings. And so, there's some from the war. For example, there's one where Payne is with Thunderbolt, and he is measuring a piece of ammunition against Thunderbolt's head. And so, from this picture, you can

see you know, Thunderbolt is a very big dog. He's kind of lanky, and he has a long face. And then there's other pictures of Thunderbolt with Mrs. Payne after he comes home, so we have several different pictures of Thunderbolt.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:21

We also asked Ian to speak with experts on the topic of animals in war. Ian interviewed Professor Lorien Foote and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey, about dogs in the military. Here are some selections from those conversations.

Ian Morrison 07:35

So, I guess my first question, just to help give listeners more of an understanding of how animals are employed in war is, what are the different tasks that they have performed over time and how have those tasks evolved from say, the Civil War to today?

Peter Drummey 07:58

I think to understand animals in the Civil War, there's a long history going back, essentially, to or before recorded history of animals, especially horses and dogs in what are aspects of military service. But we're talking about dogs and dogs have even a longer relationship to people. And out of that long relationship to people comes, they're kind of two important roles as in military operations. And one is as simply companions. The dogs of warfare over time, a largely the activity of young men and sometimes very young men are people who knew dogs as companions and as hunting companions, and early times. And then over time, dogs who were specific breeds of dogs bred for military service or used for special services. At first dogs who could both guard and fight to some extent. And then over time, more narrowly specific services, scent dogs use to track or detect enemy soldiers. I think probably even companion dogs, who are not functional military dogs served a secondary but really important service is being essentially watchdogs. It's interesting that dogs will bark at strangers. Well, if you're the strangers are your enemies, it's very valuable to have a dog as a companion. But I think this companion role is really important to understand and an interest into what I think is really the important thing to think about in Thunderbolt's story.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:55

Now that he had learned about the different roles that dogs have played in the military, Ian wanted to know more about how their use in war has changed over time. Ian spoke with Professor Lorien Foote to learn more.

Ian Morrison 10:08

So, what other roles have dogs played in war and how have their roles changed over time?

Lorien Foote 10:18

That's a great question. I'll try to give a brief overview because dogs have been used in warfare since the ancient times. So, dogs have actually been used in combat and attack formations. They were used during the conquest of North and South America by Spanish conquistadors as they would use dogs to track indigenous peoples and then also to tear them and really kind of they were used as terror weapons because indigenous peoples were very afraid of these huge dogs that the Spanish brought very different from dogs that were native to North and South America. So, to tear them apart to publicly kill them. Dogs are used, then frequently after that, as trackers. They're used as guard dogs. They also have a role in hunting. So, a lot of times when parties go to war, even with the U.S. Army in the antebellum period, they take dogs because they'll go off and hunt deer while they're marching to supplement their rations or things like that. So, dogs continue to have that hunting role. And then dogs do play a companionship role. They're regimental mascots. There's a surgeon in the 55th Massachusetts, a black union regiment that takes the dog with him on a sick round. So that the just to kind of cheer up the men that they see this wonderful little dog Myth. Dogs are also used as messengers. So in World War One, in particular, the British had a special program where they trained dogs to carry messages because sometimes even in modern war technology breaks down, advances go beyond the lines of communication. And dogs can run more quickly than people they can get through areas that people have trouble moving through. And then finally, another way that dogs are often used as mine sniffing dogs to detect dangers on the battlefield or especially post battlefield.

Lorien Foote 12:18

What happens by World War Two is there starting to be a transition where pets and companion dogs aren't allowed to the same extent. I mean, they consume rations, they, they are a distraction. So, a lot of times soldiers like in Vietnam, and even in the Gulf War, I mean, soldiers will secretly adopt dogs and you know, like, feed them outside the base or something. But, you know, in many places, those kinds of dogs aren't allowed. What's allowed on base are the working dogs, dogs that are guards for prisoners or guards that are guard dogs who are guarding the perimeter, or guard dogs who are detection dogs. But these are working dogs and like all working dogs, they're not allowed to socialize. They're not allowed to play except for specific times. So, World War Two is this transition, where if you look at the 18th century and 19th century, and you go to a military camp, animals are everywhere. I mean, there's going to be I mean, literally 40 dogs running around, there's going to be cats. Guys have adopted birds; it was very common in the Civil War for men to tame mockingbirds and keep them in cages. And, you know, horses are everywhere. Pigs are everywhere. So, but as we move through the 20th century, more and more animals are excluded from military spaces, except if they're working animals. And you know, so what we have more now in the modern military is these working dogs who become very bonded with their handlers. And you know, after war is over handlers go to great lengths to try to adopt those dogs when they retire or be reunited with those dogs. But you're not going to have just dogs running everywhere, which I can understand that war is different now. But it's a big change.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:16

While Lieutenant Payne was serving in World War Two, the story of his relationship drew considerable media coverage. We asked Professor Foote; just how common this type of relationship was.

Lorien Foote 14:28

In every war, there's what I kind of think of as the celebrity dog. So, you know, Myth, the surgeon's dog in the 55th Massachusetts, nobody knew who he was, except the people in the 55th. He was

just a, you know, personally owned by the surgeon. And he went around, and he really visited the morale of the regiment, but then they're celebrity dogs like Sally from the American Civil War. So, she's a dog that at Gettysburg, she went and got people of the regiment after the battle was over and brought them back to where some wounded men from the regiment were. And so, she became a celebrity that boosted morale because it was this comforting look at how this dog made sure that these men were not left alone on the battlefield and, you know, kind of a feel-good story at a time that people didn't have that much to feel good about. And we see the same with a dog like Stubby in World War One that just particularly becomes a celebrity. This seems to be the typical dog's story. His master goes, the dog waits for him. I mean, there's a million stories in Harper's Weekly. I mean, clearly, I'm exaggerating when I say a million, but you know, they're ubiquitous and Harper's Weekly, in the mid-19th century, soldier goes to war dog sits by the gate every day until the soldier comes back. If the soldier doesn't come back, the dog goes and curls up eventually and dies of you know, sadness. This is very typical war dog coverage, there is a dog that demonstrates the loyalty that characterizes dogs, and how good that makes us feel that our pets love us so much, right? So, I just think that's interesting that that seems to be kind of a universal across American history way of portraying dogs and this is what makes this dog particularly special. It's particularly loyal.

Cassie Cloutier 16:26

So, after the pair form this bond, what happens during the war?

Ian Morrison 16:35

So, Payne survives eighteen missions, as I said. There's one mission where he's shot down, but he, his plane is very severely damaged, and they come in on two engines, but they're able to make it back but then in November 1943, so this is Payne's 19th mission. He and his crew are shot down. Now, some of the crew dies, but the rest, including Payne, are arrested, and taken to a POW camp where he's held for several years, until he's eventually liberated.

Cassie Cloutier 17:15

And how does Thunderbolt react to this, and does it affect the relationship in any way?

Ian Morrison 17:21

Thunderbolt is absolutely devastated. When Payne does not return. It said that when all the planes were coming back from this mission, that he waited and waited for the plane to return and it never did. It's actually quite sad he goes and lies in Payne's bed after being on the field on that November night for several hours. And he lays there and refuses to be touched in refuses to let Payne's stuff be touched. And his mood is described as changing for the worse. Because they describe that he becomes very hard and very angry that he refuses to be pet. They say that trying to pet him is a hazard that he growls at other dogs. I mean, they say that he kind of had an aristocratic air towards other dogs. But now he was more violent and angry towards these dogs. He becomes angry and very upset once Payne is gone. And you know, eventually he doesn't go to Payne's barracks anymore because he he's not there, unfortunately. But eventually he's adopted by another officer, Lieutenant Robert Lipsett, who's able to take him in.

Cassie Cloutier 18:57

Do we know anything about Payne's experience as a POW?

Ian Morrison 19:03

There are several letters written by Payne from the POW camp to his wife. And, you know, he makes some mention of camp life. For example, he makes several references to the poor mail service how you know, he's all you know, he writes a letter and then it arrives months after it was written. But he also talks about how he's only given three letters a month and he asks for supplies from his wife. And interestingly enough, there are textbooks, German textbooks that are in his collections, which is not surprising because while POWs were in these camps, they often took classes, and the Red Cross would deliver textbooks for them to learn while they were there. There's also indirect references to the discipline. There are some German signs from the camp, detailing what would happen if POWs didn't follow the guards' orders. For example, there's one sign that says, 'If the air raid sound goes off and a POW, doesn't go to the designated area that they're supposed to be in, that they could be shot.' So, we get some glimpses of what camp life is like.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:39

Did Payne ever mention Thunderbolt while he was writing to his family and friends while he was a POW?

Ian Morrison 20:47

Yes, he does. He makes several references to his dog. He asks how he is when a story a news story comes out about him and Thunderbolt. He says to his wife, at the end of a letter, it's a very quick line, 'That was me and Thunderbolt in that article you read.' He even it's interesting, he writes letters inside of letters. So, he will write a letter to Rosamond Payne. And inside the letter, he will write another letter, which I guess his wife was supposed to pass along to Lieutenant Lipsett. And in those letters, he writes, you know, to ask Lipsett to take care of his dog and, and then in other letters, he's talking to his wife, and he says, you know, 'Oh, Thunderbolt is very sweet, and you'll like him.' And they're not very long, like he never goes on commits to a whole letter to Thunderbolt, but there are, at least, and there's probably more that I missed 14 references throughout his POW letters to his dog.

Ian Morrison 22:02

So, Professor Foote, what is the significance of Lieutenant Payne, writing about his dog, and his letters to friends and family?

Lorien Foote 22:10

One of the things that animal scientists talk about is, you know, dogs are the oldest domesticated animal. And there's something about dogs and humans that they've had a special relationship that goes back a long, long, long, 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of years. And I love Alexandra Horowitz, who's an animal scientist that wrote a wonderful book called, Inside of a Dog, about how dogs think and process and she says, one of the things that's interesting about dogs is they're the only animals that watch and observe humans on a level that they can figure out human social interaction and integrate themselves into that social interaction. And that that's one way that dogs have

survived in abundance, the way that they have, in addition to their adaptability that they can be in any climate, but I think about look at what Thunderbolt was able to do, right? He can create a bond with a human that is going to be so strong that that human will spend a precious line of his POW letters trying to take care of Thunderbolt.

Cassie Cloutier 23:21

And so, while Payne is going through this really horrible experience, what is Thunderbolt going through? Does he see any action in Europe?

Ian Morrison 23:33

Well, that's again, another complicated question because Lieutenant Robert Lipsett and I'm not saying that he lied, but there's no there's not really any other sources to corroborate what he says. But according to Lipsett he takes Thunderbolt overseas when he's transferred from England, first of France, and Thunderbolt is supposedly present at the Battle of Normandy, the Normandy invasion, where he falls off a ship and they believe he's lost. But then he comes trotting back to Lipsett and then he's eventually goes into Germany with Lipsett and a young medical officer, and they make it to the Battle of the Bulge, but unfortunately, Thunderbolt is wounded. And he's taken to a medical facility and operated on, and his life is saved. Again, there are not many sources that corroborate this. There is one reference in a letter written by another servicemen that says that it is likely that Thunderbolt was in France with Lipsett that there are no at least in our records, no references to the Battle of the Bulge, of Thunderbolt's presence there, of the surgery that supposedly takes place. So, it's very hard to know if this is true or not.

Lorien Foote 25:10

But here's what I would say about, and you know, for people who are listening, I mean, this is just a little interesting kind of insight into how historians have to tackle these problems, you know, of evidence. But, you know, to me, this is clearly something that would have circulated among veterans of this unit, right? That's probably one reason there's a photocopy, one reason that it was saved. And there has to be an element of truth in it, or the veteran community who's reading it is going to

say, 'Wait a minute, Thunderbolt wasn't in France.' So, there may be some specifics that nobody can really corroborate that might be not exactly accurate. But I think the outline of the story is this is something that was written as a history of this unit that circulating among the veterans of this unit, you can at least know that Thunderbolt probably ended up in France.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:05

Were there any reports of the story in American newspapers? How is it covered?

Ian Morrison 26:11

Yes, so there are actually a bunch of articles. So, there's one, as I said, from the Stars and Stripes, written in I believe, 1943, by a soldier, really about just Thunderbolt's loyalty after Payne disappeared and was captured. But there's a lot from when he was reunited with Mrs. Payne in New York after getting off the Queen Mary. There's one from Holyoke, because Lieutenant Robert Payne was from Holyoke, Mass. originally. And so, there's a picture of the pair in Holyoke after they got reunited, throughout the war, especially after 1943, is covered fairly widely.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:00

So, Peter, why would this story draw so much attention?

Peter Drummey 27:04

Thunderbolt captures the imagination is because he recapitulates a really famous animal story in British history, that is a dog terrier that belong to a man living in Scotland in the 19th century, the faithful companion to this person, a civilian in ordinary life, who after that man's death, the dog would refuse to leave his grave. This is Greyfriars Bobby as he's become known. And there's actually a monument to him at the cemetery, where for 14 years, he sat there at the graveside of his master, and after his master's death, and this sort of sense of loyalty to someone surviving over this long period of time. So, Bobby became the sort of the ward of Edinburgh, they took care of him, they got him a dog license they and collar, but they, they didn't try to force him to change his behavior, but cared for him and his loyalty. Well Thunderbolt, I think the important part of the

Thunderbolt's story is exactly the same thing, not for 14 years. But when Robert Payne doesn't return from a mission over Germany in November of 1943. It's my understanding that Thunderbolt remains at the airport at the airstrip on an American Army Air Force Base in England, and waiting for the return of Payne, sitting there loyally waiting for this return. And I think that and that connection with a long standing, well understood story of the faithful companion animal that captures the imagination of the public in England, and then carries forward.

Cassie Cloutier 29:02

After all of these events, possible events, do the pair Payne and Thunderbolt ever reunite?

Ian Morrison 29:10

Yes, they do. So, Payne, as I said, was liberated and he was sent down to Florida where he is serving. And so, there's this really convoluted story but about how Thunderbolt gets back to the United States. But essentially what happens is he is eventually put aboard this ship, the Queen Mary, which sails from England and goes to the United States. And there's this big to do. There's several news stories or news clippings that detail his journey on the Queen Mary to the United States. And when he arrives, Mrs. Payne greets him and then sends him down to Florida to Robert. The dog stays with the family for about, so this is 1945. So, he stays with the family for about six more years. The family in 1951 was living in Massachusetts and unfortunately Thunderbolt was killed while playing in the street after he was hit by a dump truck. So, one source actually remarked that what the Germans couldn't do a dump truck did. So that's kind of the end of Thunderbolt's story. But they are reunited for six years after the war.

Cassie Cloutier 30:34

What do you think that stories like this can tell us about times of war or history in general?

Ian Morrison 30:40

I think they can tell us a lot. I think, I think about war, and specifically, they can tell us that while war is very grueling, and deadly and all around horrible. I think it tells us that, well, it is all those

things that there are some bright spots, like this very strange relationship between this mongrel hound that just showed up on an airbase and, and American servicemen. And I think that tells us about war. For what it tells us about history. I think, the way the story is told, tells us perhaps the difficulty of history because, you know, obviously Thunderbolt can't speak. So, we're relying on the human participants in the story to provide us with information. And as I've said previously that there's a lot of discrepancies and differences in the story. So, I think it tells us that history is very, very complicated. It's not so easy to get a clear understanding all the time. And I think that it tells us that to get that clear understanding, it requires deeper research, to corroborate stories that might not have a lot of evidence to back it up. And further evidence to find out which stories which versions of this story and other stories are true.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:20

So, there are a lot of uncertainties in the story, unconfirmed reports, uncorroborated stories and claims. What do we know? What is the takeaway? Why are you telling this story? And what do you want our listeners to take away from it?

Ian Morrison 32:39

It's a really good question. Well, not that the details aren't important. But I don't think you should focus on the details. I think what's important is the takeaway that dogs and other animals were vital parts of the war effort, even in a war like World War Two that was incredibly mechanized. And I think that's important to keep in mind that these animals even today, as we learned, are still very important to the servicemen and women in the armed services. So, I think that's we really need the takeaway is not this specific fact about Thunderbolt or this specific fact about Payne, but the overarching and larger picture of their relationship and how important that was to Payne and the other servicemen and officers who had animals as companions. So, I think that's going to take away this important relationship.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 33:41

[Outro music fades in] The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. To view some of the items mentioned in today's episode and to learn more, visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. We would like to thank Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Dr. Lorien Foote, the Patricia and Bookman Peters Professor of History at Texas A&M University, and Ian Morrison, a student in the history department at Bowdoin College.

Cassie Cloutier 34:27

Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.