



## Top Dog: The Story of Marine Hero Lucca

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**Top Dog: The Story of Marine Hero Lucca** *Maria Goodavage*

**The New York Times** bestselling author of *Soldier Dogs* returns with the incredible, true story of K-9 Marine hero Lucca, and the handlers who fought alongside her through two bloody wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In *Top Dog*, Maria Goodavage takes readers into the life of Lucca K458, a decorated and highly skilled military working dog. An extraordinary bond develops between Lucca and Marine Corps dog handlers Chris Willingham and Juan Rodriguez, in what would become a legendary 400-mission career. A Specialized Search Dog, Lucca belongs to an elite group trained to work off-leash at long distances from her handler. She served alongside both Special Forces and regular infantry, and became so sought-after that platoons frequently requested her by name.

The book describes in gritty detail Lucca's adventures on and off the battlefields, including tense, lifesaving explosives finds and firefights, as well as the bravery of fellow handlers and dogs they served with. Ultimately we see how the bond between Lucca and her handlers overcame the endless brutalities of war and the traumas this violence ignites.

Here is a portrait of modern warfare with a heartwarming and inspiring conclusion that will touch dog lovers and the toughest military readers.

## Top Dog: The Story of Marine Hero Lucca Details

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Author : Maria Goodavage

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## **From Reader Review Top Dog: The Story of Marine Hero Lucca for online ebook**

### **Jean says**

This is the story of Marine Corps hero Lucca K458, a German shepherd-Belgian Malinois mix, off-leash IED-detecting military working dog (MWD). Lucca conducted 400 missions over three deployments during her six year career and saved countless soldiers and marines without injury except her own. On March 23, 2012, with a dozen Special Forces soldiers in the Nahr Saraj district of Afghanistan, Lucca detonated an IED and lost her left forelimb.

Lucca had two handlers in her career, Marine Staff Sgt. Chris Willingham and Cpl. Juan "ROD" Rodriguez, who saved her life after the explosion. Goodavage captures the pure essence of the handler-dog bond when she writes of Willingham's extended transfer of the leash to Rodriguez. Lucca is retired and was adopted by Willingham and his family.

The DOD does not give dogs awards, but the Marine Corps League of Tuscaloosa gave her a Purple Heart plaque, the VFW in Fairfax, Virginia gave her an honorary position in its organization.

The book is a beautifully told story told through the eyes of the handler. I enjoyed this true story and if you are a dog person you will to. I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. Neil Shah narrated the story.

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### **Beth says**

I love stories about service animals - there's just something heartwarming and utterly amazing about what these animals are able to do. It was especially interesting to get a peek into the world of Military Working Dogs (MWDs), in terms of how/where they are bred and trained, and exactly what they do when they are 'on the job'. I would've liked to have known a bit more, but I suppose some of the training strategy and tactics are a bit classified. Regardless, this was an excellent story - a bit slow in the middle, but don't let that deter you. I already knew some about Lucca's story -- as my company (American Airlines) helped transport her to her retirement (which is a happy-tear story in itself) -- but it was really interesting to learn more about Lucca's life and her special skills. I knew these dogs were amazing, but wow. I dare you not to be impressed once you read what they really do bring to the fight. I definitely have a greater respect now for MWDs, along with those who train them and those who bond with them and fight the hard fight with them.

To supplement the photos in the book, here's a video of Lucca's sendoff to Helsinki and her reunion with her original handler up on her retirement:

<http://vimeo.com/46908687>

and

<http://hub.aa.com/en/ju/christopher-w...>

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## **Maggie Franz says**

A book about man's best friend? We're in. A book about man's best friend keeping our service men and women safe, becoming a hero and selflessly risking it all? Yea, now we're blown away. You will be too if you read Maria Goodavage's *Top Dog*. *Top Dog* is the story of one amazing Belgian Malinois, her journey and her handler's in one of the most inhospitable places she could ever serve. Mama Lucca is one loving, hardworking and intelligent dog who through out her military career has sniffed out weapons caches, explosive devices and particulates, and even enemy combatants. As dog owners and advocates we hear many stories about the incredible things that our four legged friends are capable of. Mama Lucca's story, well...it's so incredible that you have to read *Top Dog* for yourself.

For More: <http://www.blackdogspeaks.com/top-dog/>

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## **Steve says**

"Over her career," Lucca K458, a German shepherd-Belgian Malinois mix, "protected untold numbers of soldiers and marines on four hundred missions with no injuries other than her own. A war buddy like no other."

While it may have been true that "most people in the military didn't realize the work that dog teams do," thanks to author Maria Goodavage, that should no longer be the case. Certainly we have no excuse not to know that there are dogs serving in the military.

Goodavage got to know Lucca Kilo 458 up close and personal. "Lucca chose to become (the author's) part-time roommate in the spacious basement guest room (Lucca's owners) generously provided during (Goodavage's) eleven days with them."

In her six-page acknowledgment section to this canine biography, Goodavage notes "It's hard to describe being in the presence of Lucca. You look into her eyes and realize how much this dog has seen, smelled, heard and experienced." Within these three hundred pages, Goodavage documents Lucca's youth in the Netherlands, her formative months in Israel, her two tours in Iraq, her war record in Afghanistan, the death of her best friend, losing a leg, her support of wounded warriors, her family life.

This is a fun read. An easy read. Except for the "mortars, the scent of firefights and fear, the IEDs and IEDs and IEDs." Except for the loss of life and limb. In the tradition of *Lassie* and *Rin Tin Tin*, the story of the Marine Corps' best bomb sniffing K-9 would make a terrific, box-office busting Disney movie!

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## **Dana says**

Because I am beginning to share the idea with many that dogs are far better people than most of us, and because the combination of Audible and my daily opportunity to explore new horizons on my long bus ride made reading this possible, I was pleased to learn how dogs serve in the military. How a special dog managed to survive. It was interesting, sad, upsetting - but ultimately OK.

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### **Bomi Chae says**

I love love Lucca and will always remember her! What an amazing book to remind us that "sometimes it takes a dog to remind us of our humanity." It was great to be educated on the marine dog handlers and their Specialized Search Dogs (SSD). They have an unbreakable, strong bond of loyalty, friendship & love. RIP Bram, Kory Wiens, Coopalop & Grief. It was amazing to read about you. Thank you to all the military dog handlers and their intelligent dogs for your service, courage, dedication and bravery.

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### **Rossi says**

The book Top Dog by Maria Goodavage is a nonfiction biography about the relationship between Lucca, a very skilled and decorated military bomb dog and her handler Chris Willingham in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The book covers life for Lucca and Willingham both on and off deployment, At home and in the field. Lucca and Willingham served both as regular infantry and special forces that tackled over 400 missions throughout their journey. Mama Lucca is very skilled at what she does and has been since she started training. "Lucca was head of her class-Excelling in basic obedience and scent work" (Goodavage 15). She is and always has been very intelligent, hardworking, and loving dog that truly loves her job, her handler and her family. Lucca and Willingham traveled through Iraq and Afghanistan searching for countless bomb and weapons caches that helped keep other natives and soldiers safe from the Taliban.

The book covers themes such as friendship, sacrifice, love and courage. And is truly a heartwarming story of this incredible dog and her handler. And how they stood by each other even through the some of the word times imaginable. "He wrapped the tourniquet strap around her shoulder, twisted the plastic stick. The bleeding slowed" (Goodavage 7). The two are like a match made in heaven and stuck with each other through it all.

This book is recommended for anyone who likes a good old fashioned war book, or for people who enjoy a good true story and are interested on what it's like inside the war zone from the perspective of specialized search teams. This is also a good book for animal lovers and for people who enjoy a good old non fiction story. This book is definitely one to read!

### **Bibliography**

Goodavage, Maria. *Top Dog*. Penguin Group, 2015.

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### **Lanette says**

This book! I devoured it! The author really hooks you right away and you just can't wait to find out what happens. I laughed, I cried (quite a bit actually) and I remember why I love animals so much. If you love dogs or have a loved one in the military, this book is a must read.

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### **Michael Barker says**

Absolutely lovely book that calls much deserved attention to not just all our brave service animals but one particularly courageous Belgian Malinois who sacrificed a lot so that many men and women could be safe while in war zones.

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### **Clint Priest says**

One of my favorite books ever. In full disclosure, several of the main players in the story - The Chris & Jill Willingham Family - I'm proud to call friends. Having a relationship with the Willinghams certainly contributed to an added layer of connection with the tale. And having met Lucca is every bit of an honor. But the story of Lucca and her service transcends this reader's personal experience with her family. This enjoyable book shares her heroism as a brave Marine that served dutifully to keep so many service men & women safe in the fight for freedom across the globe. The book uses thorough research and accounts to bring the reader to the front lines of Lucca's service, from her first days being chosen to serve to her present-day retirement. It is a reminder of the pains of war. Of the endurance and support of families back home awaiting their loved ones to return from battle. It is a peek into the impact of service on those families. And it is a reminder of the humanity that lies within the entire experience. This book made me smile. Laugh. Cry. It moved me in a way few books have, detailing real human (and animal) emotion. And any book that can solicit that range of emotion effectively is surely worth high praise. Interesting how a story of one amazing animal can give a perspective we fail to sometimes recognize otherwise. Cannot say enough good about this book. Highly, highly recommended. And a big 'Roll Tide' to my friends, the Willinghams...and, of course, to Marine hero Lucca.

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### **Eva says**

This book did for me what American Sniper didn't do. I checked out American Sniper from the library thinking it would be much like the movie, except with more imagery and emotion, but it wasn't. It was written by Chris Kyle himself, a bad ass marine who made you feel just that. That he was a bad ass with little to no emotions. I respect him and what he did for our country but I didn't connect with him like I did with Lucca or Chris Willingham.

The story of Lucca is entirely different.

Lucca's story drew me in and made me feel as if I too were in Afghanistan right alongside her and her handler Willingham. It was an emotional book, the type that sits with you for days after you read it. It makes you enjoy the freedom we have and the reasons why we have it. It is because of great men like Wiens, Rod, Willingham and Donahue and dogs like Cooper, Lucca, Bram and Posha.

When Willingham loses a friend, KIA, you too feel as if you lost a friend. When a handler (no spoilers thus no names) loses a dog or a limb, you too feel as though you lost a dog or a limb. To be able to make you feel not only like you are in the scene but that you are the person you are reading about is one of the hardest things for any writer to do. Maria Goodavage managed to do this flawlessly.

This is much more than a story about a dog in war. This is a story about sacrifice, love, guilt, accomplishment and friendship.

This beautiful story encouraged me to read about "The Lost Dogs of Vietnam". A thousand and one roses for Lucca. Her story of courage and determination is one that everyone should hear about, especially dog lovers. : )

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### **Jennifer says**

Incredible story about Lucca and her fellow military working dogs and their dog handlers. Have tissues handy - I cried through most of this book. I didn't give the book 5 stars because I didn't think the writing was spectacular. The author acknowledges that the dialogue in the book portrays conversations that she was told second hand and that the dialogue provided isn't direct quotes, etc (obviously). Something about this style didn't work that well for me - or maybe it was just an over use of dialogue in a biography. Regardless, it's a great story worth reading and everyone should learn about these dogs and their handlers.

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### **Jane says**

Another book about a wonderful dog!! This is a great story!

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### **Bea Charmed says**

3.5 stars

I love animals and I come from a military family so this book called to me when I saw it on NetGalley, Plus, look at that cover, that expressive, handsome face. How could I resist? Obviously, I couldn't.

I'd heard of military dogs before of course and had a vague idea of what they did. There are different jobs, all of them (at least the ones in this book) relying on a sense of smell. Lucca is a German Shepherd and Malinois mix, bred in the Netherlands specifically for military work. She was purchased by the US Marines to train. Her story starts in Afghanistan with her second handler then quickly jumps back to when she meets her first handler, a Marine named Chris Willingham. We see her training and we see the bond forming between her and Willingham. Lucca's job is to sniff out IEDs and other weapons. She's so good at it that during her Marine career she saves hundreds of lives both military and civilian and doesn't lose a single man out on patrol with her.

The story is not just Lucca's but that of her handler Chris Willingham. A long-time dog man and devoted Marine, he believes strongly in the work that Lucca and other military working dogs do. He's a passionate supporter and spreads the word both within the military and later in the civilian world. We see his loyalty to the dog handlers that he trains and that he works with. He takes on their well-being as his own and struggles when one is killed in action. He and Lucca served two deployments together and were partners for several years. Goodavage does an excellent job showing us Willingham's passion, loyalty, and struggles, and his pride in and love for Lucca. When he makes the difficult decision, for both his sake and his family's sake, to give up dog handling, we feel his pain at losing Lucca and losing the work he loved so much. He gets to personally choose her next handler, Rod Rodriguez.

Although Lucca misses Willingham, it doesn't take long for she and Rod to bond. He knew of her and had met her before so he was excited and honored to be chosen as her new handler. But, he knew from the outset that when Lucca retired, Willingham would adopt her. Lucca was Rod's only while she served. Still, he came to love her just as much as Willingham did. When she's injured on duty, he follows her to the different hospitals and even sleeps with her in her kennel to keep her company. I admit, I teared up at times.

Goodavage did a fantastic job of describing the missions, the set up, life overseas, and of relaying Lucca's personality. Lucca's friendly, affectionate, serious on duty and silly off duty. She's proud of doing a good job. At times, Goodavage goes overboard and anthropomorphizes Lucca and some of her canine peers but for the most part, she manages to skip that pitfall. The humans are not neglected either. I felt as if I knew Willingham and I fear that if I ever meet him, I may start talking to him as if we're already acquainted. We don't get to know Rodriguez quite as well which is unfortunate but I liked what I saw of him. Especially the love and care he gives her when she's injured. I was glad to see that military changed it's policy and no longer abandoned or euthanized dogs who finished their service. By the time Lucca was injured, she was treated and then retired. I teared up again when Rod had to hand her over to Willingham and his family but some of the tears were happy tears. Willingham knew how much Lucca meant to Rod and took extra care to include him.

I had a few gripes about the story. The first was that at times it was over the top on the 'rah rah America is great and wonderful and we're here to save everyone' mentality. Granted, given the story, I expected some of that but I hoped that Goodavage as the author and biographer would have been more objective than the people involved and might have cast a more critical eye. I also wish that the book had included photographs; I assume none were put in for security reasons but they would have added immensely to the story. My other gripes I already mentioned - the occasional anthropomorphizing and that we don't get as full a picture of Rodriguez as we do of Willingham.

There's a happy ending for Lucca, Willingham, and Rodriguez. Well, considering they're all still alive, that state is subject to change but the book ends on a high note for all three of them. I enjoyed meeting Lucca, her canine boyfriends, her human handlers, and the other dog handlers. I enjoyed seeing and learning more about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and learning about military working dogs. The dogs, their handlers and everyone who's on the frontlines has my respect. I enjoyed the book and definitely recommend it for dog lovers, animal lovers, and anyone wanting a closer look at the wars.

ETA 7/3/2015: In a nice bit of serendipity, this news article showed up on my Yahoo page shortly after this post went live - <http://news.yahoo.com/retired-militar...>

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### **Charlie says**

This is a true story about Lucca, a war service dog, and her handlers, Chris Willingham and Juan 'Rod' Rodriguez. Lucca was highly sought after for her outstanding work that led to an extraordinary career of some four-hundred missions in the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lucca was the top dog in sniffing out IEDs and weapons and saving many, many lives.

Her dedication and devotion to her handlers became an inspiration to all those she came in contact with.

Dog lovers - this is your kind of book.

I did receive this free book thru Goodreads.com.

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