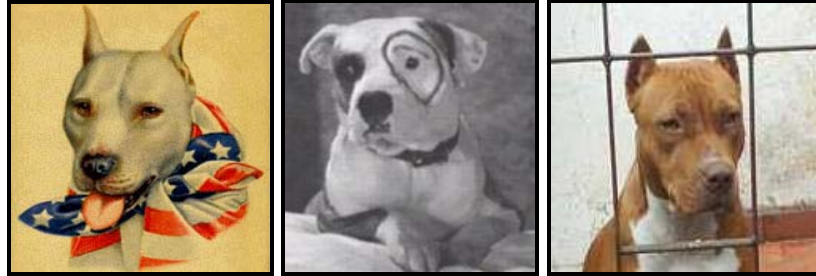


## *A Fall From Grace: The Story of the Pit Bull*



*“There is not a more misunderstood canine on the planet than a Pit bull.”*

J. Dunn author of *Pit bulls: Warrior...Hero...Loyal Friend*

I felt obligated to write this article because I live in a city that is currently addressing the pit bull issue. As an owner of pit bulls since 1990, I felt that it was important for me to shed some positive light on the history of the breed. The average person’s knowledge of the pit bull is usually limited to biased urban myths aimed at destroying the dog’s reputation. What most people do not realize is that pit bulls, up until the last twenty years, have enjoyed over a century of respect and admiration. It has only been in the recent history of the breed that that they has been tagged with the stigma of “problem



dog.” Their troubles started in the 1980’s when they became the icon of the criminal underworld. The public soon began to correlate pit bulls with the bottom dwellers of society, and because of being “guilty by association”; the breed’s image went from respectable to detestable. To dissuade responsible people from owning one of these “problem dogs” outright lies such as “locking-jaw” attributes, inherent human aggression, and

unpredictable temperament, quickly spread. In the 1990’s, legislation against pit bull ownership began to accelerate in the U.S. and around the world. Politicians and governmental officials have attempted to solve irresponsible owner issues by banning, restricting, or killing mass quantities of pit bulls. Radical animal rights groups, such as PETA and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), have also been behind the push to banish the breed. PETA has publicly referred to pit bulls as “*weapons*” and have stated that no one should own one, but the true underlining goal of the organization is to eliminating all human ownership of pets. Add in the media’s assault on the dog to the mix and what is left is a monstrosity of spun tales, which leaves the public with little room in their hearts and minds to accept anything good about pit bulls. This article is an attempt to separate fact from fiction by trying to set a very complicated story straight. This story is not just for the owners of pit bulls and other targeted breeds, such as Rottweilers and Dobermans, but serves as a testimonial for lovers of animals everywhere.

One thing I would like to point out in the beginning is that the term “pit bull” does not refer to a particular breed, but is often used in a generic sense to lump together a combination of similar breeds. The exact definition of a “pit bull” is somewhat confusing

to understand and is open to much debate. The three breeds that usually fall under this definition include: American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and the American Staffordshire Bull Terrier. The American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) and the American Staffordshire Terrier (Am Staff) are essentially the same breed but are registered differently by their respective kennel clubs. The United Kennel Club (UKC) and the American Dog Breeders Association (ADBA) allow dual registry of both the American Staffordshire Terrier and the American Pit Bull Terrier, while the American Kennel Club only recognizes the Am Staff. The third breed usually included with the group, the stocky and short Staffordshire Bull Terrier, is the English version of the pit bull terrier. This breed is usually listed as a pit bull in the U.S. and Canada, but is exempt from England's "Dangerous Dogs Act" as the "Staffy" is one of the countries most



popular and loved dogs. To add to the confusion, lawmakers in the U.S. and other countries, have come up with the term "pit bull type dogs", and may include in this definition both the Bull Terrier (Spuds MacKenzie) and the American Bulldog. Also, some legal definitions of pit bull type dogs may include any mixes of these breeds, any mix of these breeds with a different breed, or any dog that has the physical appearance of a pit bull: stocky build, blocky head,

thick neck, and wide jaws. This vague classification of pit bulls, which often lends itself to much misinterpretation, has led to over a dozen different breeds of dogs being erroneously reported in the media, police reports, and studies as "pit bulls." The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which many adversaries of pit bulls reference, lumps all the data of pit bull type attacks under the heading of "pit bull", which again, is not a breed. There is no way of telling whether the attacks can be contributed to an American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, mix of the breeds, mix of the breeds combined with another breed (APBT / lab mix), or a dog that physical resembles a pit bull but is of a totally different breed. Unfortunately, the public's perception of a pit bull is usually limited to the image of a muscular dog, with a big blockhead, and a mouth full of sharp teeth. Sadly, this has led to a multitude of reports falsely attributed to pit bull breeds, when the real culprits have been different breeds. Owners of an APBT, Am Staff, or Staffy, usually prefer to use the specific name of the breed in reference to their dogs, as the slang term "pit bull" has grown into a negative term.

I would like to emphasize the point that contrary to what is portrayed in the media, we are not being overrun with vicious pit bulls. Since the 1960's, pit bulls have been responsible for about three human fatalities a year in the United States. We live in a society where 2,000 parents kill their children each year through domestic violence and drunk drivers kill another 25,000 people. We have to ask ourselves if the pit bull issue is truly a safety issue or is it just hype! I have chronicled in this article the strange and sad saga of the pit bull terrier. At one time in our history the pit bull was the most popular and respected dog in America, but it has since fallen from grace, and has received a black eye. Today, Criminals are trying to pervert its character, backyard-breeding dens are trying to change its genetics, and the media is trying to sell stories hyped with sensationalism. While entire communities are trying to ban the breed, the pit bull

remains the same dog today as it was a hundred years ago, a faithful and loyal friend to the end. This is a story of how we as a society have betrayed man's best friend.

In 1835, the English government outlawed the brutal sport of bull baiting. A tradition for hundreds of years, this blood sport required a bulldog to latch onto the lip of a bull and hang on until the bull died of exhaustion through blood loss. The carcass of the bull



was then sent to a butcher's shop to be slaughtered and sold as prime meat. It was widely believed that bulls, when stressed and tortured in the ring, produced the finest cuts. Bull and bear baiting were very popular form of past time in England between the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This bloodily debauchery between beasts was witnessed with eagerness from all levels of society, from the Staffordshire coal miners with their blackened faces, to the upper echelon of royalty. The parliamentary ban on the sport did not

stop the public's desire to witness blood sports, and as a result of the new law, the sport of "ratting" came into existence. Rats were placed in a pit ring and bets were placed on how many a dog could kill in a certain amount of time. The bulldog, which had been used in bull baiting, was too big and bulky for the confines of the small pit ring, and it was decided that a new breed of dog was needed. It is believed that breeders crossed the old style bulldog with the now extinct English White Terrier to create the origins of the breed. This new type of dog was agile, athletic, and persistent in chasing its game. However, absent of an identity, the dog took on several nicknames including: bull-and-terrier, half-and-half, bull terrier, and pit dog among other names. It was not long before ratting grew out of style and owners of the breed put the focus on setting dog against dog. The gambling sport of dog fighting in a pit ring instantly became a hit through out all of Great Britain. It was this cross of the bulldog and terrier that formed the ancestral stock of today's: American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Bull Terrier, and the American Bulldog.

Originally bred as a bull-and-terrier pit-fighting dog, in Great Britain in the 1830's, the breed found a new lease on life in the U.S. as a working dog. As settlers moved westward in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, English immigrants who had brought their dogs over with them, found them to be exceptional in herding cattle and sheep, protecting livestock, and guarding the family home. It was not long before the breed, nicknamed the "Yankee Terrier", became the dog of choice for a young and expanding nation. The breed's hard work ethic, combined with its solid reputation as a family dog, made them much revered and in demand. Its special devotion and love for children earned it the beloved title of "the nanny dog." In 1898, the United Kennel Club (UKC) was founded and the American bull-and-terrier became its first registered breed under the name of *American Pit Bull Terrier*.

In 1914 Europe became the battleground for nations pitted against each other in a massive war unparalleled in history. The United States declared its neutrality, but realizing its neutral status might be challenged, the U.S. began to prepare itself for the unimaginable, the possibility of being drawn into an all out world war. The American military began prepping the nation for the possibility of war by printing patriotic posters that were in part meant to rally the nation, and at the same time, serve as a warning to

unfriendly adversaries—to leave a sleeping giant alone. The various posters featured the image of an American Pit Bull Terrier draped in the American flag with words such as



“Watchful-Waiting” and “The American Watch-Dog.” The military chose the pit bull as a representative of the country, not just because the dog was the most respected of all the breeds, but because the feisty canine symbolized everything the country stood for: bravery, loyalty, patience, and a willingness to defend itself if provoked.

The military’s choice of selecting the pit bull as a mascot proved to be ultimately prophetic, as a dog of the breed named Stubby, was to become a hero of the war. An Army Private, J. Robert Conroy, had originally found him as a stray pup on the campus of Yale University, and the two soon developed a strong bond for each other. However, a few months later, the private received his orders to depart for the war in Europe, but he couldn’t bring himself to say goodbye to his new friend, so he smuggled him under his coat as he boarded a U.S. troop ship for France. When the ship finally landed, Conroy’s superior officer discovered Stubby. The officer was outraged that Conroy was trying to bring a pet into a war zone. He told Conroy to get rid of him, as dogs had “*no business being on a battleground.*” Just as it seemed that Stubby would be abandoned at the next French village, a strange and wonderful thing happened, the dog raised one of its paws up to its eye and saluted the officer. The officer stood silent in amazement, until he could no longer control himself, then he busted out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. After calming down, he told Conroy that he could keep the dog, as it might prove to be a good morale boost for the troops. It was a fortunate thing for Stubby that Conroy had taught him the trick.

The 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, along with their new mascot Stubby, reached the trenches of the French war front in February of 1918. The first thirty days of action were a constant bombardment of shelling that continued day and night. The soldiers in the unit were amazed by the coolness that Stubby demonstrated under such horrendous conditions. They were further surprised when he took it upon himself to leave the relative security of the trenches and boldly wander out into “no-man’s-land.” Undaunted by exploding mortar rounds and machine-gun crossfire, he braved danger to locate injured American soldiers. On Stubby’s first exposure to mustard gas, he became gravely sick and required the services of the field hospital. After this, he became very sensitive to the gas and would bark excitedly even when he sensed the smallest amount of its presence in the air. Several times he saved the entire platoon by warning them in advance of incoming gas attacks.

During his time in France with the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, Stubby took on the duties of: night



sentry, carrier of intelligence between the trenches, and search and rescue. On one particular night, Stubby single-handedly captured a German spy who was gathering intelligence on the Allied position. Stubby rooted him out of his hiding place, and chomped onto the seat of his pants, and refused to let go—much to the delight and cheering of his platoon. The Commander of the 102<sup>nd</sup> was so impressed by the heroic deed of the brave dog that he put in a request for a military promotion. The request

was granted and Stubby was promoted to a Sergeant. He became the first and only dog in United States Armed Forces history to ever receive a military rank.

Towards the end of the war, the loyal pit bull was severely injured in a German attack on the American position at St. Mihiel. The enemy rushed the Allied trenches and a grenade exploded next to the dog. The soldiers of the 102<sup>nd</sup> rushed to the aid of Sergeant Stubby, but he appeared lifeless after the blast. The men were almost certain he was dead, as he had taken a near direct hit, which imbedded a large amount of the metal shrapnel in his chest and right leg. Although bleeding and broken, he was still alive, and was rushed to the field hospital. As his situation was deemed critical, he was transported from the field hospital to the American Red Cross, where doctors performed surgery to save his life. Once fully recovered, he was returned to the front where he continued to serve and protect the men of the 102<sup>nd</sup>.

After having served in seventeen battles in WW I, Stubby returned home to the U.S. in April of 1919, to a hero's welcome. The French government, in recognition of Stubby's courageous service, presented him with four medals for bravery, including *the Republic of France Grande War Medal*. The United States Military also presented Stubby with several medals, the most prestigious being the *Purple Heart*, for injuries received in combat while serving his country. On his victory tour, Stubby met President Wilson at the White House, and he gave the Commander in Chief his now famous doggy salute. Stubby became the mascot for the University of Georgetown football team and split his time between charity events and various parades. After his death, the Smithsonian Institute erected a permanent display to honor the most decorated dog soldier in U.S. Military history, a distinction that he still holds to this day. Prior to WWI, dogs were not involved in military service, but it was Stubby who inspired the creation of the military and civil law enforcement K-9 units.

Soon after the end of the war, a group of rambunctious kids, along with their four legged friend Petey, captivated the nation in a series of short films called *Our Gang* and later titled *The Little Rascals*. The dog used in the films had the beginning of a natural ring around its left eye and the rest was filled in with ink by make up artist Max Factor. Petey the Pup was to go down in history as the most famous pit bull of its breed. Petey's popularity, then and now, has made him easily one of the most recognizable dogs to date. He is able to take his place in the celebrity dog world next to the likes of Lassie; however, unlike Lassie, who bit her trainer several times, Petey the pit bull displayed nothing but a loving nature while working on a movie set involving many children.

The popularity of the pit bull exploded during the period prior to WWII. *The Little Rascals* put the pit bull in demand just as *101 Dalmatians* later made the Dalmatian the dog every child desired. Advertisers joined in on the popularity of the pit bull by placing



the breed in their ads. Buster Brown Shoes chose Tige, a pit bull for their mascot, as did RCA, whose pit bull / Fox Terrier mix, Nipper, sat next to a phonograph machine in their ads. It was during this time the breed became known as the "All-American Dog" and became the choice pet. America had fallen in love with the pit bull and the dog became the darling of the nation. The pit bull represented everything that was good and desirable in "man's best friend." The dog became the icon of the nation and the

essence of everything that was Americana. In 1936, the American Kennel Club (AKC) added the APBT to its registry under the name of the *Staffordshire Terrier*. The AKC wanted to disassociate the breed from its pit name and create a separate bloodline devoted to displaying the dog in the show ring. The AKC in 1972 changed the Staffordshire Terrier's name to *American Staffordshire Terrier* (Am Staff) to distinguish it from its English cousin, the *Staffordshire Bull Terrier*. The word "Staffordshire" is synonymous with the breed as it is believed that the pit bulls of today evolved from a breed that was first standardized by coal miners in Staffordshire, England, in the mid 1830's (who wanted to fight dogs after bull-baiting was outlawed).

When the United States found itself involved in another world war, it turned once again to an old friend for support—the pit bull. The military printed up patriotic posters featuring a U.S. Marine and a pit bull next to the American flag with the inscribed words, "Defenders of Old Glory." After the war, the United States Postal Service printed a stamp of Helen Keller with her companion pit bull at her feet. The popular pit bull, the all-American dog, was to grace the cover of *Life* magazine three times during this period. For the next forty years, the pit bull's solid image was to remain untarnished

Beginning in the 1980's, the one hundred plus years of respectability for the pit bull began to end. Just as the Rottweiler and Doberman had once been negative status symbols, the pit bull became the macho dog for every criminal, gang member, and rebel who wanted a big dog to bolster their self-perceived bad ass image. As a result, the pit bull was once again the dog of choice, but this time with negative connotations attached. During this time, backyard breeders churned out as many \$50 pit bull pups as possible to feed the demand, and gang members reinvented the old sport of dog fighting to subsidize their drug business. Dogs are animals, and there is always the factor of unpredictability in them; however, dogs that are properly trained and nurtured are much more likely to develop a stable temperament. It is only when a dog has trained for human aggression or pushed to extremes by being abused and neglected, that it may turn on a person. Likewise, any large breed of dog in the hands of an irresponsible owner has the potential, although not always the probability, of being a dangerous animal. To give an analogy, a gun in the hands of a responsible person is a good thing, a device for recreation and protection, but in the wrong hands, it can be used as a weapon. We should not ban all guns because someone used one for a criminal purpose, just as we should not ban all pit bulls because someone was irresponsible as an owner.

We must face the stark realization that we live in a culture of perpetual violence. In the past thirty years, we have seen an alarming increase in many aspects of crime. When a society becomes riddled with drug use, desensitized to murder, and lawless in manner, effects and consequences are abounding. Unfortunately during this period, the true nature of pit bulls has been hijacked along the way. What was once a forty-pound dog is now bred for 100+ pounds, instead of guarding the family home, they are guarding drug dens, and instead of promoting their exceptional qualities, we make up damning myths and lies about their character. The result is that the pit bull has been forced to be a participant in the cultural and criminal battles of our society.

So began the fall from grace of perhaps the most beloved and respected dog in the history of our nation. To add to the problem, the media has jumped on the issue and has projected the pit bull breeds in the worst possible light. Unscrupulous and biased reporting has unfortunately driven various media outlets to unjustly portray the pit bull as

a monster ready to devour anything in its path. To fight back, advocates of pit bulls argue that it is not in the genetic make up of the breed to attack a human. The original Bull-and-Terriers were not allowed to show any signs of human aggression in the dog-fighting ring. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century sport of dog fighting required the owners to be in the pit during the fight, and any dog showing human aggression was usually killed. However, I do not endorse this line of reasoning, as it is genetically unreasonable to assume this conclusion. The overall number of pit bulls that have been raised, trained, and engaged in dog fighting throughout history, has been relatively low compared to the total number of the breed. The small percentage of the total that are bred for this activity is not going to affect the overall inherent traits of the larger gene pool. Indeed, something has gone terribly wrong when one of the breed attacks a person, however, we must look to environmental factors in the case as opposed to genetics. If we entertain the lie that the dog's genetics plays a large part in aggressive cases, then we have

As a pit bull owner I face the realization that society wants to put a bandage on the vicious dog issue by severely restricting or banning various breeds. We must come to our senses and realize that it is the irresponsible owner who is truly at fault. It has been



proven by numerous studies that the pit bull is no more inheritably aggressive than any other breed. In August 2002, the Alabama Supreme Court upheld a decision that pit bulls were no more inherently dangerous than any other breed in *WAF/Sheila Tack v. Huntsville, Alabama*. In 2000 the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC), joined together to investigate whether or not breed specific legislation (banning individual breeds, such as pit bulls) is effective. Dr. Julie Gilchrist of the CDC Injury Center in Atlanta concluded that, "We learned breed specific legislation is not the way to tackle the issue of dog bites. Instead, we should look at the people with the dogs responsible for the bites." As recently as March 7, 2006 the Sixth District Court of Appeals in Ohio ruled that BSL violated several constitutional rights of owners. The court also ruled that there was no evidence to prove that pit bulls were any more dangerous than any other breed, thus restrictions on pit bulls were found by the court to be "unreasonable and discriminatory."

Organizations against breed specific regulations include: American Veterinary Medical Association, American Kennel Club, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, National Animal Control Association, and the Humane Society of the United States. According to a December 2005 test of 122 dog breeds by the American Temperament Testing Society, Pit bulls (APBT, Am Staff, and Staffy breeds) achieved an above average passing rate of 83.8% based on the temperament of 1,077 dogs of the breed tested. Golden Retrievers received an 83.7 percent score, Beagles 79.7 percent, and Standard Schnauzers scored a 66.1 percent passing rate.

Here a few stories from various media sources that chose to highlight positive news about pit bulls:

- **Three family pit bulls are credited with saving the lives of a Weld County couple who woke to find their mobile home on fire** (The DenverChannel.com 9/8/2005)



- **Pit bull's Courage Saves City Couple:** The dog is shot and killed while protecting his family from three mask intruders (Richmond Times-Dispatch 4/2/2005)
- **A Pit bull for a Hero:** Raised the alarm when the owner collapsed at home (Toronto Sun 2/27/2005)
- **Pit bull Leaps to the Rescue:** Saves a child attacked by two Akitas (Miami Herald 11/30/2003)
- **Breed Specific Laws Even Target Heroic Pit bulls** (Post-Gazette 11/11/99)
- **The Pit bull Who Fights Drugs** 1997 Dog Fancy Magazine
- **Pit bull Saves other Dogs with its Blood** (Inland Valley Daily Bulletin 10/18/99)
- **Dog Helps Youngster to Safety....** A three year old black and white Pit bull, resembling Petey the Pup from the 'Little Rascals' shows, grabbed the back of a girl's jacket and helped her out of a burning home (Fairbanks Daily News 12/6/03)
- **Hero Pit bull Finds Newborn** (New York Post 10/14/2004)

Million of people across the U.S. have pit bulls who they consider part of their families. Current owners of pit bulls love them for the same reasons that the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century immigrants loved the bull-and-terrier: loyalty to its owner, bravery under fire, gentleness with children, and a clown-like personality that make us laugh. According to an article by Scot E. Dowd, Ph.D, in the *Encyclopedia of the American Pit Bull Terrier*, owners of pit bulls have included: Laura Ingalls Wilder, Thomas Edison, Fred Astaire, Humphrey Bogart, Barbra Eden, Mary Tyler Moore, Mel Brooks, Madonna, Rick Springfield, Brad Pitt, Michael J. Fox, Serena Williams, Steve Irwin "Crocodile Hunter", and Alicia Silverstone. The pit bull has not changed, society has changed with an over abundance of irresponsible owners. Let's give man's best friend the due he deserves, and do the right thing, by punishing irresponsible owners and not the breed. I leave you with a 2002 news story from Reuters that hopefully puts a little comical spin on the whole pit bull thing: "*Poodle Attacks Pit Bull, Sinks Teeth into Owner.*"

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