

Taps for Tich



A Combat Comic, the Little Black Dog Won a Medal ~ and the Love of Britain's Famed Eighth Army

BY RAY KERRISON

A LONG COLUMN of mourners recently moved slowly toward a grave in a cemetery on the outskirts of London. At the head of the column, four solemn-faced young men bore a small, flag-draped casket.

Inside lay the remains of a unique, 18-year-old heroine of three bitter World War II campaigns. From El Alamein to Paris, thousands of Allied troops knew her and liked her. Many owed their lives to her.

They knew her as Tich, for she was nothing more than a tiny, black mongrel dog. But across the sands of North Africa, up and down the slopes of Italy, over the snowy ridges of Austria and across the plains of France, Tich fashioned a saga of canine gallantry. For her bravery and devotion to duty, she received the Dickin Medal, which is the animal equivalent of the Victoria Cross—Britain's highest award for gallantry in action.

Tich was born in the squalor of the African village of El Alamein with what many believe was a mark of destiny. On her back were two long slashes in the form of a cross. One day an enterprising Arab



scooped her up out of the gutter and took her to the First Battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, a part of Britain's famous Eighth Army, and sold her to Cpl. John Sainsby for the price of a mug of tea. A few weeks later, Sainsby was sent home.

Tich was passed on to an easygoing rifleman named Tommy Walker.

Pup and soldier soon became inseparable, and when the battalion went into action, Tich went too. In the months ahead, as the Allies pursued Field Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps across North Africa, Tich rode fearlessly on the hood of Walker's stretcher-jeep or Bren-gun carrier. The dog had an uncanny sense of danger which helped save the lives of her master and dozens of others.

"Tich could always tell when a shell was coming over," recalls Walker, "so we rarely took our eyes off her. She would follow the noise of an approaching shell with her head. If she didn't move her head, we'd hit the ground instantly—it was going to be a near thing."

In the desert, the little dog picked up odd habits. For relaxation, she nestled in the shade of the jeep to "smoke" a cigarette, rolling it from one corner of her mouth to the other. And since fresh water was often at a premium, Tich learned to drink shaving water. She developed such a taste for it that long after she had been discharged in England, she turned her nose up at fresh water and demanded the shaving left-overs. When Walker ran out of water, he would slake the animal's thirst with his saliva, and on another occasion, when Tich was bitten by a six-inch desert scorpion, he saved her by sucking the poison out with his own mouth.

Tich was invaluable as a morale-booster. Once, when Walker and the dog were out rescuing the wounded under heavy fire, a lieutenant found some troops cowering in a trench. "Get out of there," he bellowed.



"If that little dog isn't scared, why should you be?" Sheepishly, the men clambered back into action.

"It is impossible to gauge how much Tich did for the spirit of our men in their darkest moments," says the battalion's commanding officer, Brigadier C. A. Williams.

When the Allies invaded Italy, Tich celebrated by presenting the battalion with six pups, all adopted by soldiers. Then she went back to the front with Walker.

At Faenza, the heroic dog almost became a war statistic. Walker left her in a deserted farmhouse while he went out to bring in the wounded. When he got back he found her doubled up in pain. She had been hit by shrapnel. "Part of her nose was blown off and she was bleeding from wounds on her body and legs," says Walker. "I rushed her to the medical officer, but he told me, 'The kindest thing you can do is to end her pain with a bullet.' "

Walker refused. Instead, he returned to camp, cradling Tich in his arms. He sterilized a razor blade and removed every piece of shrapnel. Then he swathed her in bandages made from his shirts and nursed her day and night for two months. Tich was never able to breathe through her left nostril again, but she recovered quickly and plunged back into the war.

Shortly afterward, she took part in an action which won Walker the Military Medal.

One night near the Italian-Austrian frontier, the battalion came under heavy fire and casualties mounted rapidly. With Tich at his side, Walker began nine hours of daring rescue work. Together, they brought back 30 badly wounded men, two or three at a time.

"We were bringing in the last two when a shell burst just ahead of us," says Walker. "I went flying in one direction and Tich sailed off in another. When I came to, I started yelling for Tich. Then I heard a



muffled woof way off to my right. I dashed over and found Tich covered with rubble. I had to dig her out, but miraculously, she was not hurt badly.”

In 1945, after five years of almost continuous combat, Tich was discharged with her master. But when he went home to Newcastle upon Tyne, British law shunted Tich into quarantine for six months. Later, she toured Britain on exhibition, raising funds for animal clinics. Her final moment of glory came in 1949 at a dog show in Wembley Stadium, where 10,000 spectators saw Tich presented with her medal.

Subsequently, she was affected with malaria and stomach troubles, then lost her hearing and eyesight. Last fall Tich was put to death. As her coffin was lowered into the grave, an Army representative read the citation: “. . . Her courage and devotion to duty . . . helped many men in times of extreme danger. . . .” 