

Abstracts

Not Only Human Lives – Part A: The Sense of Loss Among Oketz Unit Soldiers Whose Dogs Fell in Battle During the Iron Swords War

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This article explores the emotional impact of canine loss among soldiers in the IDF's elite Oketz unit during the Iron Swords war. Oketz is a specialized commando unit that trains and deploys dogs for operational missions, often in close cooperation with combat forces. During the war, 24 dogs were killed in action, a loss that deeply affected their handlers. The unique bond between soldier and dog is framed through Bowlby's attachment theory, suggesting that the dog serves as a secure base and attachment figure, especially in high-stress combat environments.

The grief experienced by these soldiers parallels bereavement following the death of a close human companion. The article applies the Two-Track Model of Bereavement to analyze both the functional and the emotional dimensions of this loss. It highlights the trauma-related aspects of combat death, including symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and disrupted emotional processing. The study also emphasizes the importance of ritual and recognition, noting that Oketz conducts formal funerals for fallen dogs, complete with eulogies, symbolic items, and memorial stones.

The concept of “disenfranchised grief” is addressed, underscoring the societal tendency to overlook grief for non-human companions. However, within Oketz, the loss of a dog is acknowledged and honored, providing legitimacy to the mourning process. The article concludes by advocating for tailored psychological interventions, including group sessions specifically designed for handlers who lost their dogs in combat. These interventions aim to validate the emotional experience and support recovery, recognizing the profound role that military working dogs play in both operational success and emotional resilience.

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