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He was found by an American flier in a bombed-out kennel in France, born to assist the German war effort in World War One. But life had an extraordinary alternative for the German Shepherd puppy.

Smuggled back to America aboard a troop ship, his intelligence and ability to leap great heights won him a part replacing a camera-shy wolf in a silent movie. And his hugely expressive face made him a hit.

Soon, the dog was the most popular of nearly 50 German Shepherds working for the camera in Hollywood. He saved Warner Bros. studios, led the German Shepherd to become one of the most popular dogs in America and was even nominated for an Academy Award for best actor.

You've no doubt heard of Rin Tin Tin, but you probably don't know all there is to his story....

On Sept. 15, 1918, an aerial gunner with the U.S. Army Air Service was reconnoitering the French village of Flirey looking for a potential site for a new flying field. Corporal Lee Duncan came across a badly damaged kennel which had been used to supply the Imperial German Army with [German Shepherd](#) dogs, a relatively new breed created by the army in 1899.

Duncan's background made what happened next inevitable. He'd spent five years in an orphanage as a boy. When he went to live with his grandparents later on, it was on an isolated island. The lonely boy's best friend was his dog.

The only living things in the bombed-out kennel were a starving mother dog and her litter of five nursing puppies who were so young that their eyes weren't yet open. Duncan rescued them all. When they were weaned, he adopted a boy and a girl German Shepherd and named them Rin Tin Tin and Nanette after lucky charms the French children handed out to American fighters.

"I felt there was something about their lives that reminded me of my own life," Duncan later wrote of the puppies. "They had crept right into a lonesome place in my life and had become a part of me."

Smuggling them home on a troop ship, Duncan temporarily placed the two young immigrants in the home of Mrs. Leo Wanner while they were processed. She raised police dogs. While there, Nanette caught pneumonia and died, but Wanner replaced her with a female who Duncan named Nanette II. Duncan took them cross country by train to Los Angeles where he planned to start his own German Shepherd kennel.

At the time, most U.S. homes didn't have dogs as pets. They were farm animals, working dogs, and not prevalent in cities. In the 1920s, the public was first learning about German Shepherds from film performers like Strongheart and dozens of others used because of their trainability, intelligence and strong presence. The illusion was maintained that they were superdogs when, in reality, they were heavily trained, something few dog owners of that day did or knew much about.

Duncan, the founding member of the Shepherd Dog Club of California, began teaching Rin Tin Tin tricks, thinking he'd take him on the show circuit and boost his desirability as a stud

dog. But Rin Tin Tin had a temper and, in fact, really didn't care much for strangers. After a couple of snapping incidents, his future looked dim.

But Rin Tin Tin could leap. At a show, he cleared an obstacle 11 feet 9 inches high while a friend of Duncan's who'd just invented a slow-motion movie camera filmed the feat. Watching the replay, Duncan saw Rin Tin Tin could be another Strongheart, who had his own house in Hollywood Hills just a block from Roy Rogers.

Duncan began pitching Rin Tin Tin to the B-movie studios on Hollywood's Poverty Row, where a director was having trouble getting the performance he wanted from a trained wolf. In 1922, Rin Tin Tin got his first role in "The Man From Hell's River," easily responding to his master's voice commands off camera.

In an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, best-selling author Susan Orlean, who wrote "Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend," said, "He performs not just as a dog responding to commands but as if he had a sense of what he was trying to portray.

"I don't think you can teach that; I think the dog had to have had a sense of being observed, of needing to put his heart into his behavior. Once you seen those early films, you can't help but think he was an actor."

After bit parts playing wolves in other films, Rin Tin Tin got his first starring role the next year opposite silent screen star Claire Adams. It was quickly followed by roles in a string of movies. A star was born.

Soon, Rin Tin Tin was called the “the mortgage lifter” at Warner Bros. studio, which came back from bankruptcy thanks to the shepherd’s popularity. Then a young screenwriter, Darryl F. Zanuck became involved in crafting stories for Rin Tin Tin and their success propelled him to become a respected film producer.

Warner Brothers was worth \$16 million in 1928. Two years later it was valued at \$200 million. Much of this success was thanks to Rin Tin Tin.

Rin Tin Tin became a worldwide sensation. He was given the key to New York City by Mayor Jimmy Walker, won endorsement deals selling top dog foods of the day and got his own star on Hollywood Boulevard.

There were reports that Rin Tin Tin wore a diamond collar and had his own mansion in The Hills, but these were spun by the studio PR people. In fact, Duncan didn’t pamper Rin Tin Tin. He respected him deeply and regarded him as a soul-mate.

Orlean said in an interview, “I think he just saw it as, ‘This is the creature who I understand, and he understands me, and I need no one else.’ They had a closeness that’s different from the person you might see pushing their dachshund down the street in the baby carriage.”

One night during a stage show demonstrating Rin Tin Tin’s talents, writer Francis Rule said Duncan began by calling Rin Tin Tin, and then, for laughs, scolded him after he strolled lazily onstage, stretched, and yawned.

“There then followed one of the most interesting exhibitions I have ever witnessed,” Rule wrote, in *Picture-Play Magazine*.

As Duncan led Rin Tin Tin through a series of acting exercises, “there was between that dog and his master as perfect an understanding as could possibly exist between two living beings,” wrote Rule.

Rin Tin Tin was nominated for an Academy Award as best actor in 1929, but the committee went with Emil Jannings, a German actor, instead. On the *second* vote. Rin Tin Tin won on the first round, but the committee thought a dog winning Hollywood’s top award might downplay its reputation.

The canine virtuoso appeared in 27 films, including four “talkies.” Duncan had to retrain Rin Tin Tin to respond to hand signals given just off camera.

It came to an end on Aug. 10, 1932 when Duncan was at home and heard Rin Tin Tin give an odd bark and then go silent. Duncan found him lying on the lawn, where he died seconds later.

The nation mourned. One radio announcer said on the air, “Last night a whole radio network and thousands of radio fans paid homage to a great dog, a gentleman, a scholar, a hero, a cinema star — in fact, a dog which was virtually everything we could wish to be.”

The Depression had hit and Duncan was financially strapped, so he buried his friend in a plain casket in his backyard. But he felt that was not nearly enough. Duncan sold his home and returned Rin Tin Tin’s remains to France where he was laid to rest in the famous pet cemetery [Cimetiere des Chiens et Autres Animaux Domestiques](#) in a Paris suburb.

If you grew up watching Rin Tin Tin on television as I did, you know the story didn't end there...

Rin Tin Tin and Nanette had 48 puppies. Duncan kept two of them and sold the rest or gave them as gifts. Greta Garbo and Jean Harlow owned descendants of the film legend.

"Rin Tin Tin" continued on in fictional stories in film, radio and eventually television in the 1950s series, "The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin." Some of the dogs were from Rin Tin Tin's line and some were trained by Duncan.

Throughout his life, Duncan was devoted to keeping alive the memory and legacy of the puppy who touched a special place in his heart and grew up to become like a second heartbeat to him.