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SERVICE DOGS

There's an urgent need for service dogs, and trainers are stepping up to the challenge.

Y

ips and barks boom through one of the bustling terminals at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York. Pitt, a 5-year-old Belgian Malinois, races toward a battered suitcase tucked behind a row of chairs. But there is no need to panic. Pitt is just going through her daily training session of sniffing out unusual items.

"Go, Pitt, go!" exhorts her handler, Officer Kurt Reichel, an eight-year veteran of the Port Authority Police Department of New York and New Jersey.

Within seconds, Pitt's ears twitch, her tail wags — and then she sits. She had detected the scent of explosives that Reichel planted in the luggage."

"Good girl!" hollers Reichel, tossing Pitt her reward, a rubber toy.



Dedicated to the People
of Western New York



JOSEPH BLUTCH MACQUEEN

The drive to play is what keeps service dogs like K-9 Air Buddy working. These special dogs disregard whatever they are doing and go after any object the trainer tosses.

Pitt is one of the newest weapons in the PAPD arsenal. She and 10 other canines completed the agency's intensive 10-week bomb- and drug-detection training program. In March, they received their diplomas.

Bomb-sniffing dogs such as Pitt are invaluable tools for police departments, the government and airports — and the public loves them.

Meeting the Demand

Since the World Trade Center and Pentagon tragedies, people have more respect for these skilled canines. The events of Sept. 11, 2001 intensified the importance of service dogs to our national safety, and federal guidelines require all airline bags be checked for explosives. Officials and trainers say demand for bomb dogs has more than tripled.

Search-and-rescue and cadaver canines, such as the ones that scoured the World Trade Center for the living and the dead, are in high demand. Companies and individuals are also requesting trained service dogs. From the FAA

these trained canines is creating a shortage. Dave Kontry, head of the FAA's Explosives Detection Canine Team Program in Washington, D.C., says that regional and municipal facilities are inquiring about bomb-sniffing dogs.

"The demand for bomb-sniffing and police dogs has skyrocketed to levels never seen before in history," says Russ Hess, executive director of the U.S. Police Canine Association in Springboro, Ohio.

"Everyone is scrambling to get his hands on these canines. That has resulted in a major shortage of dogs. There just aren't enough dogs out there right now."

Sgt. Vincent Oliva, commander of the PAPD's K-9 unit, adds: "The dogs are the number one line of defense, and that's become even more apparent as the public at large has become more sensitive and aware of potential security risks since Sept. 11. The dogs are keeping people safe, bottom line."

Trainer Steve Phillips works with K-9 Zilly, a 2-year-old female German

"It's almost impossible to keep a bomb dog once we get one trained," says Scott Mueller of The National K-9 School for Dog Trainers in Columbus, Ohio. "We're getting many calls and e-mails about our dogs and our handler training," says Mueller.

The nation's airports are the largest employer of bomb-detection canines. These dogs sniff out unattended luggage and suspicious packages, scour terminals after bomb threats, search airplanes and nose around vehicles left at the curb. The FAA taps America's top dogs for the explosives-detection canine program, which began in 1972.

By the end of 2003, the FAA is scheduled to increase its crew to 315 dogs at the country's 80 biggest airports — at a cost of an additional \$5 million — up from its current force of 200 dogs at 40 facilities. To meet the requirements, the FAA changed its training course to 11 weeks, and its classes now accommodate 14 dogs.

Breeding Special Dogs

The FAA has launched a breeding program at its primary center for bomb dog training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. The government started the program with five Labrador Retriever puppies, all gifts from Australia.



JOSEPH BLUTCH MACQUEEN

Studying the Dogs of 9-11



In the first study of its kind, researchers are evaluating the dogs involved in the search-and-recovery efforts at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to determine whether they suffered any long-term health effects from toxins at the sites.

The University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine at Philadelphia and New York City's Animal Medical Center are conducting two studies by monitoring the health of about 300 search-and-rescue dogs deployed by the New York City Police Department, the Federal

Emergency Management Agency and private owners.

The American Kennel Club Canine Health Foundation awarded two grants totaling \$400,000 for the two- and three-year studies.

Tracking the canines' health may provide knowledge to protect the dogs in future tragedies — and the dogs may serve as medical sentinels for future illnesses.

"This is very important because this kind of research has never been done before," says Cynthia Otto, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Critical Care Veterinary Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania, who heads one of the studies.

The research monitors the service dog Servus, a Belgian Malinois who nearly died after debris lodged in his throat and nose while searching for survivors at the World Trade Center. Another subject is Anna, a German Shepherd Dog who recovered a dozen bodies in 10 days at Ground Zero.

Last October, veterinarians diagnosed 4-year-old Anna with a bone infection in her spine. As a result, her body was sore, she was lethargic and at times unable to walk. For 2½ months, doctors treated Anna with antibiotics. "Today, she is doing pretty well," says her handler, Sarah Atlas of Barrington, N.J. But Sarah said she still gives Anna aspirin with Maalox whenever Anna is sore.

"For a long time, she wasn't doing well, but now she's so much better," says Atlas. "She's a very special dog."



JOSEPH BLITCH MACQUEEN

Lynn Jackson of Bradford, Pa., and K-9 Jett, a mixed breed, check a car for explosives while trainer Steve Phillips looks on.

"The demand for the dogs is tremendous right now, and it's only going to get bigger," says Kontny. "It's just really hard to find enough qualified bomb dogs. That's why we have initiated our breeding program."

Kontny says the government had planned to expand the program before the events of Sept. 11. The agency spends about \$40,000 a year per dog to run its K-9 units. This includes food, veterinary care and a subsidy for the dog's handler. Larry Myers, DVM, Associate Professor, Anatomy, Physiology and Pharmacology and researcher at Auburn University in Auburn, Ala., and an FAA consultant, says the government, including the military, Department of Energy and FAA — will double the 8,000 bomb dogs it currently employs by the end of 2003.

Despite millions of dollars spent on high-tech explosive-detecting machines, canines remain the most powerful, most sought-after and most cost-effective tool for investigating bomb threats. With their super-sensitive noses, these biological detection systems can find trace amounts of explosives in minutes. "They're the number one weapon in detecting explosives and drugs, and searching for bodies,"

says Gary Lafollette of Lafollette K-9 Training Center in Springfield, Mo.

"They're far superior than any machine or person, and they're very mobile. A dog's nose is the most sensi-

tive-piece of equipment there is." (A dog's nose is one million times more sensitive than a human's nose).

Instructors usually select Belgian Malinois or German Shepherd Dogs for training because they have an innate hunting drive and excel at patrolling, tracking and detecting explosives and drugs. But trained Malinois and German Shepherd Dogs are scarce and their price has skyrocketed. "Well-trained German Shepherd Dogs can bring as much as \$20,000," says Myers.

There is also a shortage of trained Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers — two breeds trained for bomb sniffing. This shortage has prompted the use of breeds less suited to the task, such as Border Collies, which are highly intelligent and trainable, but are naturally cattle and sheep herding dogs.

Selecting Power Dogs

Because of the shortage, the United States is getting most of its dogs from Europe. Training to become a bomb-drug-sniffing dog begins at 1 or 2 years of age. Before a dog undergoes training, of course, trainers test it for personality and temperament. Ideal canines are playful and people-friendly, and have high energy levels and superb stamina.



JOSEPH BLITCH MACQUEEN

Trainer Steve Phillips and Mary MacQueen of Kinzua Search Dogs, Inc. in Frewsburg, N.Y., work with K-9 Buddy, a male Golden Retriever.