

THE LOWDOWN

Charles S. Blackwood

I am proud of my hardworking staff. Collectively, we strive to provide ethical, efficient, modern law enforcement to Orange County, and we focus on building relationships and providing excellent service. That hardworking staff includes our remarkable K9 unit, and I am excited to introduce them to you in this month's edition of *The Lowdown*.

Our K9 unit includes three humans, two German Shepherds from Poland, and a Dutch Shepherd from the Czech Republic. All six team members are dedicated, enthusiastic, and committed, but frankly, the dogs have no idea they go to work. They are motivated by a simple desire to please their handlers and the chance to earn playtime with their favorite toys.

A K9 team attends a training school before they begin their patrol duties. It generally takes between 10 and 16 weeks for the team to complete school and "graduate." The goal of this initial training is two part. The first is to begin creating a dog's resume, documenting all training and usage records - these are what make a dog a police dog. A dog's resume is used to establish probable cause for search warrants and to establish the dog's legitimacy when criminal cases go to court. The second goal is to certify with a nationally recognized organization because there is no state level training certification available in North Carolina. We certify with the International Police Working Dog Association, which focuses on the working capabilities of the dog team, including off-lead obedience, article search for evidence, tracking, narcotics detection, searching buildings for suspects, and apprehension of persons of interest.

Once a team graduates from school, intensive training continues. Each team receives over 300 hours per year of training, primarily concentrated in weekly group training sessions. This session always includes all three teams, and they often train with K9 teams from other agencies. Each handler also completes additional training activities each work day to keep the dog's skills sharp, build the handler's confidence, and allow problem-solving opportunities. These all increase the likelihood the team will be able to navigate successfully the challenges that arise during their patrol shift.

K9 teams are an incredible asset to our agency. A dog's powerful sense of smell helps locate people in building searches. Moreover, when the handler announces a dog is about to enter, often a suspect is so afraid of the dog that he or she will voluntarily come out of hiding. These dogs are also highly efficient. They can locate in minutes a stash of narcotics it might take human searchers hours to find. Using that same sense of smell, they are able to track a missing person or an individual who runs from a vehicle crash or investigative stop, even if the person runs into thick woods or underbrush. A human alone does not have that capability; the dog serves as a force multiplier.

These assets are absolutely worth their cost, which is between \$7,000.00 and \$10,000.00 per dog, plus \$3,500.00 per dog for other initial costs, such as a kennels and special patrol vehicle safety systems. Ongoing costs are about \$100.00 per year per dog to replace toys, leashes, and other training equipment. We also spend \$1,500.00 annually for food, treats, yearly vaccinations, and

preventative maintenance medication (wormer and flea and tick prevention) for each dog. If a dog gets injured or sick, there are additional vet fees.

I asked our handlers to describe our dogs. All agreed Callie, our Dutch Shepherd, is a very determined dog with a high drive to succeed. Not surprisingly, she is therefore our best tracking dog, despite the difficulty of this task. Time lapse, weather conditions, and scent contamination are factors that lead to a majority of tracks being unsuccessful, yet Callie completed one on her first night as a working dog!

Tres, one of our German shepherds, is also a terrific tracking dog. He got his name, which is the Spanish word for the number three, because it took that many tries to pair his handler with the right dog! Tres is the most social of our K9 team, and therefore a star at community events. Zar, our other German shepherd, has an incredibly sensitive nose and is determined to locate the source of the odors he detects. He once located over 200 pounds of marijuana.

If you have a chance to talk to our K9 handlers, please do. You will see their enthusiasm for their work and learn more about the incredible capabilities of their furry partners. But please remember - the dogs don't know they have a job. Let's keep that a secret!

Deputy Ashley and Zar



Deputy Winecoff and Tres



Sergeant Funk and Callie

