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Military working dogs are handlers' best friend

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Patrol teams help keep streets safe

Officer Eric Moe may be a cat person when he is at home, spending time with his adopted stray calico Chloe. But when he's at work on the Arsenal as a police officer and handler with the Military Working Dog section, he's all dog all the time.

Moe, a former MWD handler for the Army who served both stateside and overseas in Korea, is now an Army civilian police officer and handler. He and his partner Bruno, a Belgian malinois, work at the MWD Kennel facility at building 3544 on Kingfisher Road. The section falls under the Law Enforcement Division of the Directorate of Emergency Services.

The original facility was built in 1988 and consisted of only two small offices for a staff of six handlers. In 2012, a new facility was constructed, and now features several offices, a conference room, a small examination room, and a kitchen – a marked improvement, which kennel master

Capt. Jack Rush said makes him “very happy.”

Rush joined the Arsenal’s MWD section in 1996, after retiring from the Air Force, where he also served as a MWD handler, trainer and kennel master. His most recent partner is Bleckie, a black lab who came to the Arsenal by way of the Transportation Security Administration.

“Bleckie was a TSA bomb dog at the start of his career. He worked at the Orlando Airport,” Rush said. “But every now and then, he would show aggression, so the TSA turned him in to the Department of Defense. When I heard about Bleckie, we already had an order in for an explosive detector dog and they said he was available.”

So Bleckie was reassigned to the Arsenal, with Rush as his handler. Today, the pair conducts random inspections at the gates, looking for explosives that may be hidden in vehicles as part of the installation’s anti-terrorism measures. “He’s just the good bomb dog we need here,” Rush said.

Not every dog can hit the ground running like Bleckie did, however. Take Lako, the section’s most recent arrival. Like most MWDs, Lako arrived at the Arsenal from Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, home of the DoD’s MWD program.

“Lako is brand new and has been through basic training. He knows the odors of the explosives he’s trained to detect and he already bites,” Rush said. “But he’s just not that sharp at obedience. He’s at about 70 percent. And we need to take him to that 90 percent level, which is the street level.”

The process, he continued, starts with creating a strong relationship between dog and handler. “The handler has to establish a rapport with the dog, much like you would if you adopted a dog. You’re not going to be on the same page initially; it’s going to take both of you time to get used to each other,” Rush said.

After that, it comes down to patience and repetition to get the dog to certification level, which Rush said can take up to six months given the stringency of the certification guidelines.

“If it’s a patrol explosive dog test, on the explosive portion, the dog has to find 19 out of 20 training aids planted over three days and in five different venues,” Rush said. “It’s one of the toughest certifications in the U.S.”

The dog and handler also have to pass the basics of obedience, including running the obedience course by both voice commands and hand commands, bite work, field interviews, searches, standoffs and more. "All those are critical tasks," Rush said. "If they fail a critical task, they must go back into training for at least 30 days."

That's where the aforementioned patience really becomes important. "We don't easily give up on a dog. We try to figure out what it would take to get the dog to do the task we need them to do," said Rush, who compared the process to teaching children. "Some child may learn one way while another may not learn that way, so you may have to approach it differently with that particular child. The priority is getting the job done."

And that applies to the handler as well. "A lot of times, it is the handler. They may be doing something minor wrong," Rush said. "But once we match them up as a team, that's what they are. Whatever part of that we need to work on, that's what we'll concentrate on to get them to that level."

If it sounds high-stakes, it is. Once the team is out of the comfort and safety of the training facility, they are placing both their lives in the other's hands – or paws. Officer Billy Booth, the section's trainer, and his MWD at the time, German shepherd Jimmy, learned that the hard way one day when the Huntsville Police Department chased a suspect across the Arsenal fence line.

"Jimmy and I conducted a scout of the area and found the suspect. He had stuffed some stolen goods under a log and he was getting up to run," Booth said. "When I made eye contact and told him to get on the ground, he looked at me, then he looked at Jimmy, and then he lay down. I had my weapon drawn at the time and I don't think that made any difference to him. I put Jimmy in the down position and he stayed there while I searched. It worked out just like training."

Given the trust and affection that develops over time, through both training and real-life experiences like Booth and Jimmy's, it comes as no surprise that many MWDs end up spending their retirement in the homes of their one-time handlers.

For the MWDs on the Arsenal, however, retirement is a long way off. "We don't have an age limit. We let the dogs tell us. If he's 12 and can still do the job, then it's only when they just can't do the job anymore," Rush said.

So for now, he and Bleckie – Officer Moe and Bruno, Officer Booth and Lako, Officer Lee Riley and Cano, and Officer Michael Dorsett and Rony – will be hard at work. They may be MWD teams, unique in the Law Enforcement Division. But, said Rush, "We're police officers first; we patrol the

streets of Redstone Arsenal.”