

DCU WAREHOUSE REVISITED

K-9 UNIT RETURNS FOR SECOND DEMO

Story and photos by Karen Santucci

SFC Wilson and SGT Struebing were welcomed back to the GS Class II DCU warehouse April 27th, this time for an explosives demonstration. Like last time, HCN's and Ex-Pats went about their daily business, pausing to admire the dogs in action.

“We like working the dogs in this warehouse; it's clean, laid-back, and everyone is very friendly,” Wilson says. “We have a good time in here, it's the best so far.”

And Supervisor Angie Carlile says she loves to have them. “Of course they can practice here - someday our lives might depend on them. We are here to support them; they are the ones protecting us.”

Once again, the dogs and handlers showed off their techniques with planted targets, small samples of likely bomb components. Four targets were set in areas of the warehouse, and allowed to sit for a period of time to create a workable atmosphere. The dogs are graded on their responses for certification purposes.



SGT Bassinger relaxes with Roy after completing their target finds.



SGT DeFelice leads Rocky to a search area.

The working dog will indicate the presence of a material by showing in interest the area where a scent is found. He will then work around the place in a pattern, narrowing down the established area bit by bit, kind of like playing the children's game “Cold-Warm-Hot.” When he hits “Hot,” it's game over! They alert their handlers to a found substance by sitting at the site.

The first team to perform was SGT DeFelice and Rocky, a German Shepard. Moving quickly through the rows of pallet racks, the duo demonstrated the canine's reaction to a substance he has been previously introduced to.

Next were SGT Bassinger and a second German Shepard, Roy, who loves to play with his working partner – and he's almost as big as she is! He identified the substance thresholds easily.

Last was a mixed breed, Sorbon, working with SGT Dean. Charging through the warehouse like a freight train, he showed a great amount of determination! His finds were fast and furious.

The U.S. Army used canines as early as 1835, as sentries, messengers and ambulance dogs, guiding medic teams to the wounded by bringing back a cap or glove to indicate their find. During the First World War, an Army Major was put on to the idea of using dogs to sniff out bombs, when he noticed his company mascot intently following a trail. The source was gunpowder, leaking out of a barrel on a horse-drawn supply wagon that had recently passed through the area. The wagon was located in the middle of an established camp and promptly unloaded. If it had not been for the mixed-breed runt, the situation could have ended in disaster!

It wasn't until 1942, however, that the first school for highly trained handlers and working dogs was opened. Professional civilian trainers visited the site to advise in the design of the buildings, the breeds of dogs favored and the ages and temperaments of both handler and canine. Lessons were plotted and tested, and manuals were written and printed in a borrowed newspaper warehouse. Starting with donated dogs and men who were only interested because they loved the animals, the school quickly grew into a huge establishment, with kennels for over 400 dogs at a time, and courses nearly a mile long. Almost 19,000 dogs were procured and trained from 1942 to 1945. Many were mongrels, and after WWII the school eliminated all but five pure breeds – German Shepards, Belgian sheepdogs, Doberman Pinschers, Collies and Schnauzers. After Vietnam, these guidelines were relaxed; bloodhounds, Labradors, Rottweilers and even French Poodles are accepted.



SGT DeFelice engage in a battle of tug-of-war. The dogs are rewarded with toys and play-time.

As with any military service, there are requirements on age, leight and weight that the dogs must meet before training begins. The canines are X-rayed for skeletal problems, tested for parasites, and pass hearing and vision exams. They must be in good physical condition, able to work for several hours at a time. Taught to maneuver in and around obstacles such as barbed wire, crates, tunnels, and ramps, the animals get plenty of exercise. In the field, dogs might have a collar with a message canister attached, and there are specially made bullet-proof vests and gas masks issued for canines in especially dangerous areas. Special boots may be worn to protect their paws in building wreckage where shattered glass is present.

Military working dogs are credited with saving thousands of lives each year around the world, in heavily mined areas like parts of Africa, Afghanistan, and Bosnia. Historians and analysts estimate more than 10,000 Army and civilian lives were saved by sentry and bomb-sniffing dogs during the Vietnam era. Their dedication and loyalty to their handlers and their jobs is amazing to watch. It is a special bond that serves as more than just companionship between human and beast; it is a duty that is an important part of the mission against terrorism, at home and overseas. Bravo, and thank you!