



Dogs of War Inside the US military's canine corp.

for National Geographic News
By Maryann Mott
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Since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the U.S. security forces have stepped up efforts to train and deploy explosive-detection dogs. This year about 350 canines, nearly double the regular intake, will go through a five-month long training program at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

The base is the only facility in the country that trains dogs for the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. Canines are dual certified in explosive detection and patrol, which means they will attack on command, or, to protect themselves or their handler. After training, they are posted to military installations worldwide. Right now bomb-detection dogs are being used by coalition forces in the Iraq war. Details, though, on how many canine teams are in the Middle East, and what kind of work they are doing, are secret because of security concerns, according to U.S. Central Command, in Doha, Qatar.

Major Frank W. Schaddelee, commander of the 341st Training Squadron, which procures and trains all military working dogs, said explosive detection dogs are not used in direct combat situations. Instead, they may be used at "points of entry" or for "VIP sweeps," where buildings and cars are searched for bombs

before dignitaries arrive. On average, these four-footed soldiers are 98 percent accurate in their detection abilities, he said, and depending on the task and climate, can work up to 12 hours a day.

Belgian Malinois (pronounced MAL-in-wah) and German shepherds are used because they are intense, intelligent, and known for their ability to work hard. At first glance, a Malinois might be mistaken for a shepherd. Both breeds are the same size and have similar coat coloring and markings.

Peace of Mind

The majority of these medium sized dogs are bought from European breeders. About four times a year military personnel travel overseas and look at hundreds of animals, ranging in age from 12 to 36 months. About one third of the dogs viewed are purchased. Each dog costs U.S. \$3,100, said Schaddelee, but once trained, they are worth about \$11,000. He's quick to point out, though, that their value is much greater. "I don't think you can put a real price on their heads because of the peace of mind that they give the troops with their capability of detection/deterrence," he said.

During the hundred-day training program at Lackland, the dogs are worked five days a week, using a repetition and reward system. As a reward, they are given a ball or rubber chew toy. "It all turns into a great big game for the dog," said Technical Sergeant Curtis

Schaddelee would not say how many, or what types of explosives the dogs can detect. But in a war situation, for example, he said if there is an unfamiliar substance being used, they can quickly be trained to detect it. Handlers are also taught at the base and go through an 11-week course.

The Nose Knows

Dogs rely on their sense of smell much the same way humans rely on their eyesight. And for good reason. "The number of smell receptors in a human's nose ranges from 5 million to 15 million, whereas in a dog, it can range from 125 million to 250 million," said Donald Perrine, a veterinarian at Parkside Animal Medical Center in Fountain Hills, Arizona. In addition to more scent cells, Perrine said the olfactory portion of a dog's brain is four times larger than a human's. Their wet, black noses are so sensitive they can detect minute odors. In fact, researchers at Auburn University in Alabama discovered dogs can pick up scents as little as 500 parts per trillion.

At Lackland, canines are also trained for drug detection. In the future, Schaddelee said, dogs may be taught to sniff out land mines and chemical/biological agents. *Webmasters Comment: Dogs trained to detect land mines date back to the Vietnam War.*

Man's best friend has faithfully served in wars since 1939 as scouts, sentries, messengers, and much more. During Vietnam, the United States War Dogs Association estimates these brave animals and their handlers saved more than 10,000 lives. But the country hasn't always shown its gratitude. For decades, veteran dogs deemed too old to serve (ten years and older) were euthanized. Now that's starting to change, thanks to a law passed in 2000, which allows retired military dogs to be adopted by their current or former handlers, law enforcement agencies, or individuals capable of caring for them.

"Our goal is to eventually retire about 50 percent of working dogs," said Schaddelee. "They're good soldiers and served their country well. We want to see them get a good retirement package."

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