

Dogged determination

Police dogs play a vital role in the fight against crime. Their strong sense of smell and agility mean they are well adapted to help police officers in a whole array of scenarios including sniffing out bombs and explosives. Helen Gilbert reports on the dog unit in Surrey and how they are using their knowledge to help forces worldwide.

It would be hard to imagine the police service with out dogs. There are around 2,500 dogs in England and Wales and, since the end of the Second World War, the skills of these animals have been utilised by forces in situations ranging from murder investigations to bomb threats in public places.

But behind every good police dog, is an even better handler who will have been put through a rigorous training programme. The Surrey Police Dog Training School, set up in 1952, runs courses which have attracted the attention of police forces throughout the world.

Surrey's instructors have been instrumental in setting up dog sections in exotic places such as Kenya, New Zealand, Uganda and Barbados, as well as running courses for officers and dogs in the UK.

In the last three years alone, the school has trained up explosive search dogs for Russia and drugs dogs for Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Additionally, since 2002, officers have been flying over from Singapore to develop their skills with explosive search dogs. By next April more than 80 students and six trainers will have passed through the school.

So why are the courses at Surrey so popular? According to dog school manager Clive Knapp, it is due to the high standards they employ. The former officer of



Picture credits: Andrew Carruth

Put through their paces: Sangeetha Palachandran and Springer Spaniel

over 30 years says the school works to the same national standard as UK officers work to in order to achieve the Association of Chief Police Officers Explosive Search Dog Licence.

While Singapore officers do not qualify for the licence, as they are not from an ACPO force, they do receive a certificate. 'Singapore Police approached us because of our reputation,' says Mr Knapp. 'We put the officers through the same regime as we have over here. The certificate lasts for one year.'

That regime is an intensive eight-week course, which sees the dogs trained to seek out explosives in all manner of buildings from Guildford Cathedral and Twickenham Rugby Stadium, to railway stations and vehicles such as lorries and cars. All sorts of locations are used to ensure the dogs do not have a problem entering places. At the end of the course the students and dogs take an exam consisting of three parts: an inside search, an outside search and a vehicle search taken on different days.

As *Police* went to press, six officers were taking the inside search component at the Army Cadet Centre in Godalming, Surrey. The venue was chosen because it is well used by people, which is a feature the dogs have to get used to. 'We use this building because it's got bedrooms, food rooms, classroom, toilets, varying sizes of rooms that have had people in them,' Mr Terry Ashcroft explains.

Picture credits: Andrew Carruth



Officers from Singapore L-R: Lim Hon Liang, Gina Brutus, Raihan Bin Mansor, Sangeetha Palachandran, Arthur Chew, Ben Ang

The procedure for training the dogs is similar for all search dogs. In this case, explosives are placed in an open cage with a tennis ball, which the dog can see. Before the dog is released, the tennis ball is taken away without the dog's knowledge so it runs up to the cage looking for the ball. When the dog has found the explosives, the handler throws a tennis ball in the dog's direction, which it retrieves. This process is repeated over and over again, so the dog gradually picks up the scent of the explosives.

'Every time the dog finds the explosive the officer then bounces a tennis ball for the dog to play with and it thinks it has found a toy,' Mr Terry Ashcroft explains. 'Within a few sessions the dog starts to give a passive indication looking at the explosives and waiting for a tennis ball to appear. The dog is rewarded with playing.'

The method is simple, but effective and a variety of explosives including military, commercial, and homemade types are used during the eight week course so the dogs can pick up the various scents.

The inside search takes a minimum of 30 minutes but Mr Knapp says there is a great deal of pressure on the students because they are dealing with real explosives.

'This is an opportunity to see how they perform under that pressure. I come up with a scenario; they are expected to go through a question and answer routine demonstrating their depth of knowledge. There is a way to search and they will demonstrate their skills to work their dogs effectively through the search to

see if they can find the hides that have been placed out.'

Of the Singapore officers that have gone through Surrey's dog school, six have been identified as potential trainers and there are plans to develop instructors. This will enable a standalone dog unit to operate in Singapore, where the dogs can be continually tested and the handlers able to renew their licenses on an annual basis.

For the past two years Mr Knapp and Mr Terry Ashcroft have flown to Singapore to see how the dogs have progressed and to issue licenses. Next year is likely to be their last visit as long as the unit is up and running.

'We will go out for the last time to oversee the licensing process to see it is being done properly,' says Mr Knapp. 'They will be able to provide their own training so they won't have to come over here anymore.'

Insp Sandy Horvath, head of the Surrey police Dog Training School says the courses are of benefit all round. 'Courses like these give Surrey Police the chance to share its expertise with other forces in England and Wales and around the world, raising our profile and bringing in much needed revenue which is ploughed back into making the service we provide to the people of Surrey even better.'

As their work with Singapore draws to close, it will be both a happy and sad time for the instructors who have built up close relationships with their pupils. Mr Terry Ashcroft, who receives emails from ex-pupils on an almost daily basis adds, 'We are like one big happy family.'

The Singapore experience

Over the years the age of Singapore officers that go through training has fallen. The current students range from 21 to 25 years old. For many it is their first trip to England, their first time away from home and when they arrive in the winter they have to get used to a cold climate and learn how to use equipment such as radiators, which are alien to them. The officers stay in police houses at Mount Browne, the Surrey Police headquarters, throughout their eight weeks of training. They comprise a range of ranks. Some are corporates (constables) and sergeants and others are completing national service.

During the course Raihan Bin Mansor turned 21 and Mr Terry Ashcroft organised a trip to Thorpe Park for him and the other officers. 'It was fun,' he recalls. However, he does not like the cold weather. 'It was very cold in the first week and I got flu,' he remembers.

Sangeetha Palachandran is a sergeant and team leader of the current officers. They go to her if they have any problems, but they haven't needed to yet. 'It's very good here, England is a beautiful place,' she says. 'Some of the officers would like to stay on.' The officers have a close relationship with Mr Terry Ashcroft who takes them food shopping and also invites them round for meals at his house. He thinks it is important to make them feel comfortable, particularly when they are experiencing a new culture. And his efforts have not gone unnoticed. Ms Palachandran says: 'Terry is a very nice person, very jovial. He makes training not like training, but like another day out,' she laughs.



Clive Knapp, dog school manager (left) and Mr Terry Ashcroft

FACT BOX

- The dogs that are used for explosive searches in Singapore are Springer Spaniels and Labradors.
- They are trained from the ages of 10 months up to 2 years old. They retire around the age of eight or nine years.
- The dogs are either donated by members of the public or bought from a supplier and can cost up to £800. They then go back with their handler to Singapore.
- In the UK an average explosive search dog works for 25-30 minutes before being rested. In Singapore, due to the humidity and climate, the dogs work for 10-15 minutes. The dogs are bathed to cool down and given drinks.
- In Singapore the police dogs live in air-conditioned kennels and have the best food and veterinary treatment.
- In the UK German Shepherds, Rottweilers and Dobermans are used for general police duties such as dealing with public disorder, while search dogs tend to be gun dog breeds.
- The Surrey Police Dog Training school has six instructors, all ex police officers that come from a dog background. The school primarily caters for Surrey Police and sells off spare capacity. Both UK and overseas officers attend courses run by the school.
- More than 200 dogs are trained at the school each year.