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**SPECIAL RESPONSE
TEAM PROGRAM**



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MEET THE AGENTS—CANINE AND HUMAN—WHO MAKE UP THE AMAZING FORCE OF PROTECTORS WITH THE BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES SPECIAL RESPONSE TEAM CANINE PROGRAM

BY BLAINE NOVAK AND PORTIA STEWART

Heroes are born every day. And some of them sport fur and enhanced senses of hearing and smell above their human counterparts. Such are some of the heroes of the Special Response Team (SRT) tactical canine program, a unique program developed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). While many law enforcement agencies use canines in police and security roles, the ATF says they take it a step further by training the dogs to deploy in high-risk tactical environments, as well as socialize in numerous functions where the dogs show their very gentle nature.

ATF SRT canines work with their handlers in a variety of fashions, including working with tactical teams to clear buildings and other target locations in search of violent criminals, performing searches for hidden suspects, conducting tracking and large area search missions, and, as a last resort, attacking violent criminals who pose a threat to the public. One of the benefits of deploying with a canine, says Jeffrey Perryman, the Special Response Team Canine Program Manager/Handler, is the dog's ability to use its senses—the dog's sense of smell, hearing, and overall instincts—to locate or apprehend criminals, which Perryman says in turn enhances safety for the agents and the public. Here are some of the amazing canines and handlers who protect us every day.



“No program, division, or agency is ever built on the back of one person. It’s built with a collection of dedicated, hard-working, talented people. I may get a large amount of credit for building this canine program, but it would never have existed without my supervisor Roger Guthrie, without a group of executive level agents within ATF who have tremendous vision and believed in our idea, and most importantly a group of very talented handlers and dogs. That’s why we’re successful.”

—Jeffrey Perryman,
Special Agent,
Special Response
Team Canine Program
Manager/Handler



A CANINE PROGRAM IS BORN: BOOMER AND JEFF PERRYMAN

In 2000, the agency tested a pilot program whereby an ATF special agent would train with a canine. This canine team would then be attached to SRT 1, which covered 14 states in the Midwest, and assist in the mission to fight violent crime across the country. ATF was the first organization within the Department of Justice to have a full-time handler and canine attached to a federal team.

Special Agent Jeffrey Perryman was selected as the first handler, and was paired with his first canine partner—a remarkable dog named Boomer. Perryman and Boomer were trained by two very talented K9 law enforcement officers named Terry and Diane Shoenbach. Over the years, Perryman and his dogs have also trained at the K9 Advanced Training Facility in Taylor, Michigan, and Cher Car Kennels in St. Johns, Michigan. In their first year together, Perryman and Boomer were involved in numerous operations, but two in particular highlighted the unique talents of an ATF handler working in harmony with a canine partner. The first example was a case where a suspect who'd seriously assaulted an individual in Lincoln, Nebraska, was reported to be holed up in a house. After a thorough search, human agents found one individual but found no sign of the primary suspect. So Perryman requested to let Boomer search the house. Perryman thought it would be a good piece of training for Boomer to search a structure he'd never seen.



Perryman & Boomer in Washington, D.C., in 2000

“We let Boomer search and he ends up getting into this walk-in attic. We all looked in there and it appears to be totally empty. There's nothing in there. All of the sudden Boomer is just ripping into the insulation. I'm looking at him wondering what he's doing. In the law enforcement canine community there is an old adage that says you should always trust your dog. As a new handler, I didn't fully grasp that concept just yet,” Perryman says.

“And then I hear the suspect, who had cut a slit between the insulation and drywall where he secreted himself, start screaming. Boomer had him. This guy was a very skinny guy. So if you looked in there, you didn't even see the bump in the insulation, but Boomer knew he was there.”

Boomer's find was a great circumstance, because once the SRT departs the house, a group of agents are assigned to come in and search the premises. If Boomer hadn't found this known violent criminal, there very likely would have been a serious confrontation between



Ike & his good friend Lacey at the hospital

the suspect and the follow-up agents once they started the search for evidence. Boomer potentially saved their lives, as well as, ironically, the suspect's life. “Luckily Boomer was there and we found him. That was the first time executives in Washington, D.C., started hearing about what he could do,” Perryman says.

The second big break for the ATF SRT canine program occurred a few months later in Pensacola, Florida. The ATF was working with Customs, DEA, and local law enforcement to hit a large compound where illegal methamphetamines were being produced. It was a massive operation spread across several acres of land, which included a barn, a house, and about 40 junked cars.

The agents and officers converged on the property and took five people into custody. Once the property was secure, one of the forward observers, or snipers, notified the SRT Team Leader, Special Agent Don Brougner, that he had observed an individual in a dark sweatshirt fleeing one of the buildings, and that this individual was not currently



Jager



Borra



Jack



Cisco visiting patients at a New Orleans hospital after Hurricane Katrina hit the region



Niko; right, Pat and Niko



Born in Pecs, Hungary, as a young dog Brody traveled to Detroit, Michigan, to fill a special role: canine partner and family member to Special Agent Jeff Perryman. For the next several years, Brody and Perryman would participate in more than 250 high-risk operations to take violent criminals off the street. As Brody neared the end of his working dog life, Perryman recognized it was time to let his partner retire. With a heavy heart, he began the process of training a new canine partner Ike. When Perryman began deploying operationally with Ike, he had to leave the now-retired Brody behind in boarding facilities. "This was one of the toughest decisions in my life," Perryman says. "But Brody is a hero to me and many others, and he deserved more from me than putting him in a boarding facility every week while Ike and I were away for work." So Perryman reached out to

his cousin's family—a dog-loving family with three teenagers and a yellow Labrador named Bodey. Brody and Bodey became fast friends. It was the retirement Brody deserved for a lifetime of service. Recently, at age 13, Brody peacefully passed away. He was surrounded by loved ones and his best buddy, Bodey, who wouldn't leave his side.



Brody, Perryman's cousin Kris, and Bodey



in custody. So Perryman requested through Special Agent Brougher to take Boomer around the property to see if the canine would catch the scent of anyone who might have left the property.

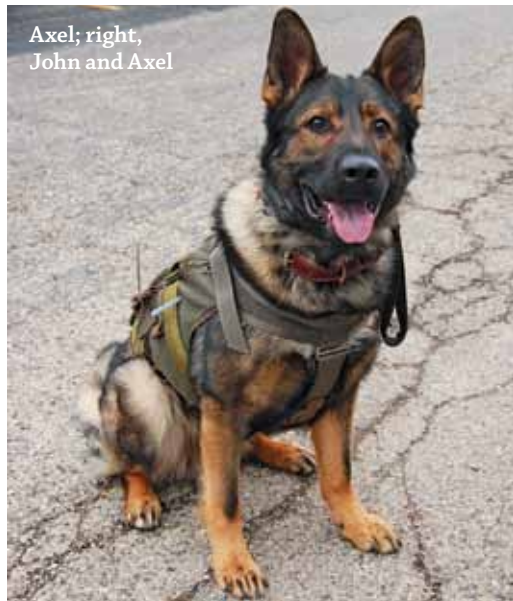
“So I take Boomer and—again, I’m a new handler—I’m trying to take him to the wood line so we can check to see if Boomer can pick up a track into the woods. Boomer keeps pulling me over towards these junk cars and I’m like, ‘Come

on buddy. We’ve got to check for a track.’ And he keeps pulling me. Well, then I start to think back to the house, and I think, you know, trust your dog. So I unhook him and let him go,” Perryman says.

Boomer shot straight for the rusty junk cars with the flat tires and began circling a full-sized van. The tires were blown, and grass had grown up around it.

“I didn’t see a thing under there,” Perryman says. “Again I thought, ‘OK,

I’ll play along,’ so I call Boomer back and I say, ‘You under that van, come out.’ And I see this guy lower himself. He had pulled himself into the lower frame of the van. So if you look under it you can’t see him. So he lowers himself and comes out and he was the guy who fled the scene, dark sweatshirt. After this operation, people in Washington became true believers in these talented dogs.”



Axel; right, John and Axel



Maas



Reno; right, Jeff and Reno



Rip



NASH AND JEFF KUNZ: PARTNERS AND FRIENDS

Nash, a Belgian Malinois, was part of the family from the moment he was presented as a potential ATF SRT canine partner for Special Agent Jeff Kunz. “My wife and son actually picked him out,” Kunz says. “The vendor, Ivan Balabanov, brought two dogs out, Nosco and Nash. I actually liked Nosco, but my wife and son were with Nash, looking at him. And Nash would bring a toy right to my son.”

Kunz was impressed, and he took Nash home. While Kunz underwent a knee surgery, Nash bonded with Kunz’s wife. “From that time on, he was basically part of my family. You know, a working dog but he’s also a family pet,” Kunz says.

Kunz and Nash bonded as partners,

too. They had deployed on over 200 high-risk operations together. On Dec. 11, 2012, Kunz and Nash were on assignment in the process of arresting a very violent home invasion robbery crew. Kunz and Nash were part of the arrest team in a hidden location.

“So the plan was, if the suspects did run, Nash would stop and apprehend them,” Kunz says.

On the signal, Kunz and Nash came out, proceeded to their hard right, and saw four suspects running. But two were running right up the middle aisle.

When Nash saw the fleeing suspects, he began pulling. Kunz called for the suspects to stop, but they didn’t stop. So Kunz released Nash. Then the unthinkable happened. One of the suspects took a hard left and pulled out a gun and began shooting at a group of SRT agents who were blocking his path.

When the suspect saw Nash coming at him, he stopped shooting at the agents and targeted his gun and his gunfire towards Nash. “And then he shot Nash and then he shot a couple rounds toward us,” Kunz says. “At that time, myself and two other guys shot at him, and the suspect dove to the ground and surrendered. But Nash obviously diverted his attention. One of our medics was in the line of fire driving the blocking vehicle. He was getting shot at and he said the rounds were coming closer and closer to him until

Nash got the guy’s attention.”

Nash’s actions likely saved lives that day—and his heroics cost him his own.

“Some people think I sent him after the guy who was shooting. That’s not our policy,” Kunz says. “It’s not my policy as a handler to send him after somebody who’s shooting at us. The suspect I sent him at was unarmed, fleeing from us. Nash acted to protect us on his own.”

Nash’s instinct to protect his team of human agents may have been a result of the team-building activities the canines and their handlers engage in together, it may have been his canine pack instincts, or it may have been a combination of both. Kunz was devastated that the suspect pulled out a gun and started firing before he could call Nash back.

When Nash died in the line of duty, Kunz knew he couldn’t tell his family, at home in south Florida, over the phone. So his supervisor put him on a plane for home immediately.

“My wife was devastated, my son was devastated. It took—I can’t even say they’re over it yet. The dog was basically a family pet, a working dog, and he left and didn’t come back. They didn’t get a chance to say goodbye.”

In the time since Nash’s act of heroism, Kunz has been partnered with a new canine officer, Jager. Jager is becoming part of the family, Kunz says, and they’re taking time to integrate him properly with their other canine family member, a Golden Retriever.

Nash was memorialized with a plaque in ATF’s D.C. headquarters courtyard, and will be memorialized further with a life-sized replica statue that will be placed in the new auditorium and conference hall at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Brunswick, Georgia.

PART OF THE FAMILY

While the dogs are owned by the government, they live—and stay in the house—with their handlers. “When these canines retire, we do whatever is best for the dog. If that means retiring to the handler’s family, that’s exactly what we do. We want this hero to know they will always be cared for, and a member of the family,” Perryman says.

Including Ike, there are nine canine teams spread across the country in ATF’s tactical canine program. The agents behind the dogs are heroes in their own right. Thomas Brandon, the Deputy Director for the ATF, is pas-

sionate about the brotherhood that exists amongst this group of humble public servants who work diligently to protect and serve. These are the best of the best law enforcement agents working to fight the worst of the worst criminals.

Brandon says, “There’s a quote from Winston Churchill—and I really believe this—‘You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give.’ I’ve been privileged to be put in this position. I’ve been trying to give back, to help focus on our mission. And if you can help people along the way, sometimes that’s what money can’t buy.”



PICKING THE RIGHT CANINE OFFICER

Most canines for the SRT are selected when they’re between 1 and 3 years old. By that age they are more agile, mature, and beyond the puppy stage. Agent Perryman says they look for nuances in the young dogs. For example, he says in a group of puppies you watch for the pup that wants to venture out further first or chase after something you’ve thrown to see what it is. Good canine candidates will often be comfortable in new environments such as going up and down stairs, jumping over obstacles, and walking on slick surfaces.

Many of the ATF’s canines have been bred from working dog stock in Europe. During the selection process, the vendors will bring out a number of dogs to meet Perryman, who uses fun tests to get a feel for the dog’s temperament and level of curiosity, courage, and drive.

One simple test they can use is to throw the dog’s favorite toy into the woods. Will the dog hunt like crazy to find that toy, demonstrating hunting drive, or will it go into the woods and come out without the toy looking happy with an expression that reads, “What am I here for? What am I doing?”

“My hope has always been that we as an agency do our part to protect the public and reduce violent crime in this country. I’ve always felt very honored to work as an agent for ATF. I think our agents and employees within ATF and the SRT are very unique people because we all look forward to the days when we go head-to-head against some of the most violent criminals roaming the country. We’ve been very fortunate to have a group of courageous dogs by our side to help us fulfill that goal. Our dogs who had a long working life and have passed away are Boomer, Cisco, and Brody. Our dogs who have retired and are living comfortably are Poncho, Maxx, and Titus. Our dogs currently deploying with the SRTs are Reno, Niko, Axel, Rip, Maas, Borra, Jack, Jager, and Ike. And finally, our dog who made the ultimate sacrifice to save others is Nash. The public may never see us. They may never know who we are or the many hours our dedicated people work, but I promise that we and our brave dogs are out there, doing our part to protect them from violent crime.”

—Jeffrey Perryman, Special Agent,
Special Response Team Canine Program
Manager/Handler