

Dogged drug detectors

Consider this. Having spent hours plotting how to secrete a sub-machine gun in a side door of his pick-up truck, a potential assassin is thwarted at the Canadian border by the alert, well-trained nose of a detector dog. An hour later, the same nose is at work in a warehouse ferreting out the cache of a suspected drug smuggler.

The list of seizures made by the Canada Customs Detector Dog Service each year is impressive.

In 1981-82, the service made 383 "hits", seizing narcotics worth more than \$10 million on the street.

In 1982-83, the number dropped to 303 but the street value of the seizures rose to \$15 million (including a \$9-million heroin find in Montreal).

And in 1983-84, the service compiled its most impressive statistics to date — some \$30-million worth of narcotics after only 245 "hits" including the largest single seizure in the service's history, \$20-million worth of marijuana detected by a Canada Customs dog in Vancouver.

Permanent centre

The popularity of the Detector Dog Service has led to plans for the building of a permanent training centre at the Customs and Excise College in Rigaud, Quebec.

The new facility will streamline operations and allow for the preparation of trained teams with less cost and greater efficiency. And that makes John Steward and Terry Teigen very happy. As the program's national co-ordinator and head trainer respectively, they are avid believers not only in the program but in the method of training developed by Canada Customs.

Black lab popular breed

Both Teigen and Steward hesitate to endorse any one breed of dog although many of the service dogs are black laboradors which foster both the temperament and physical characteristics important in the dog service.

"Any dog can be trained," Teigen says, but according to his experience black labs are more adaptable. "They're lovers not fighters and we don't want aggressive dogs," he says.

A suitable dog would be about ten months to two years in age, bold ("but won't take your leg off"), of sound temperament, in good health and able to retrieve.

The dog's size is also a factor. There are German shepherds in the service but



Officer and well-trained nose of a detector dog.

since the labs are smaller and weigh less, it is easier for the dog to search a vehicle and for the handler to lift the dog into a truck trailer.

A male black lab weighs about 39 kilograms and a female, about two to five kilograms less.

And, since public acceptance is a bit of a concern, black labs look friendlier when compared to the shepherd.

Training

Sniffing out drugs, guns or lost people is not difficult for a dog, since a dog's sense of smell is many times more powerful than that of a human being. That ability means nothing, however, unless the dog is trained.

The method of training is the constant repetition of specific exercises designed to have the dog identify the drug, firearm or person. On success, the dog is showered with praise.

In training a dog to detect drugs, a small quantity of a narcotic is placed in a bag and tossed out for the dog to fetch. It gets progressively tougher — smaller amounts of different drugs are hidden in more difficult places. The dog, even in training, is always on a leash which allows the dog to tell the handler he's found something.

Each dog has a unique way of telling the handler. Some respond by scratching

with a paw or by barking. One dog responds by whirling his tail like a helicopter blade.

One misconception which seems to prevail is that the dogs are addicted to the drugs they are to detect. "If the dogs were addicted to the drugs, they would not be able to function let alone detect anything," Teigen maintains.

Positive public feedback

How does the public react to having its vehicles or luggage searched for narcotics or firearms? According to Teigen, the feedback is mostly positive.

"I feel our record speaks for itself. Out of the tens of thousands of vehicles we've gone through and all the warehouses and aircraft and ships we've searched, we've had two complaints about the dogs," he says.

Yearly operating costs, including a monthly allowance for the handler to care for the dog, amount to about \$7 000 a year. According to Steward, it's a bargain considering that a single dog has the potential to discover literally millions of dollars worth of narcotics and firearms each year.

"The dogs pay for themselves. It would take 50 officers a week to find some caches that a dog can unearth in 20 minutes," says Teigen.

(Article condensed from Carnet.)