

# **The Importance of Exposure Training**

## **The Importance of Exposure Training for Police Service Dog Teams in Relation to Sustained or Unusual Confrontations (1998)**

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Canine is generally a very small community in North America, most likely if you haven't actually met someone in the field, you have heard of them or know another member of their unit. So the stories get around pretty quickly, and everyone hears about that one in a million type incident where the suspect is actually willing to fight the dog to the death or the dog has little or no effect on the suspect, or where a well trained dog fails to perform in a certain circumstance. I had always realized that this was something that had to be considered, I knew it could happen. While I was on my Basic Canine Course one of the host agencies' Dog Teams engaged a robbery suspect on the other side of a small river. Before back-up could reach them the suspect did everything in his power to kill the dog, and the dog did everything he could to stop the suspect (including 87 individual bites requiring medical attention). Years later, once I became the Unit Trainer, I realized that it was now my responsibility to prepare both Dog and Handler for as many of these eventualities as possible. So it was something that we included in training, but I eventually learned that you cannot have enough exposure training.

In the past several years, I have noticed an increase in these types of incidents, both on a local level as well as throughout North America. It was because of this, that in 1996, while instructing at the United States Police Canine Association National Seminar in Canton, Ohio, during the night training sessions I included a total of three scenarios that involved unusual but still street realistic situations. One involving a sustained(or prolonged) confrontation, the additional two other scenarios involved other non-typical confrontations (Special thanks to L.A. County and Summit County Sheriffs Offices for their help). The interesting part of this exercise is not only the reaction of the dogs, but the reaction of the handlers. It became a real learning experience and a chance to gain insight into some possible problems or weaknesses in our training programs. During these scenarios it was easy to see, that if we are not careful, we condition ourselves into an unsafe belief that the danger ends for the handler when the dogs starts biting the suspect, or simply the mistake that when I call the dog out the danger is over, or the equally dangerous trap that all scenarios will play out the same way.

From these scenarios, a number of concerns came to light. Firstly in the non-typical scenario, it involved a non-aggressive suspect in some dense bush. The suspect was in a full bite suit with head protection. His job was to lie in the bush without any movement and even if bitten by the dog, he was to give no reaction regardless of the dog's actions. It quickly became obvious that many of the dogs were having difficulty with this exercise. This is not a comment on the quality of the Police Dogs involved, it is a comment only on the need for more exposure type training, I assure you that I was the first one to go home and add a few changes to our own program. Additionally, because the dogs were having trouble with the scenario many of the Handler responses became contrary to Officer Safety despite being advised the suspect was armed.

The most typical problem was many of the bite and hold dogs, failed to engage the suspect in anyway, some would bite or mouth the suspect but upon getting no reaction would release the suspect and leave the area. Similarly, many of the bark and guard dogs would let out a whine or many a small bark and upon getting no reaction from the suspect would again leave. It was interesting to see the reaction of the handlers, most were visibly upset, disappointed or mad at their dogs. It was obvious they had no idea why their dogs were having trouble with this exercise. However, in conversation with these handlers it quickly came to light that the dogs who had the most difficulty with these exercise had had no previous exposure to this type of training scenario. For many of the teams every time they find a suspect in training, the exercise unfolded pretty much the same way. Unfortunately, for many of the unsuccessful teams, each previous time had included some type of stimulation or contribution on the part of the suspect (quarry). Simply stated the dog expected the quarry to move or make a noise and would not engage the suspect without that extra and unrealistic stimulation. Therefore, when the dog entered this scenario and did not get the reaction he was conditioned to, he was unable to complete the exercise.

These are not difficult problems to overcome, it is simply a matter of running a few exposure type exercises that deal with a suspect that gives no reaction. For those of you who are bark and guard the exact same is true, ensure that your dogs will bark at a passive suspect on the ground with no stimulation from the suspect. Once again this is just ensuring that we do not allow ourselves to fall into a rut where we allow ourselves to condition the dog to work only in the training environment. Additionally, these types of problems reminds all of us not to add unrealistic stimulation to training. On the street hidden suspects do not make noises to assist dogs in locating them, or make interesting little movements to keep a dog with them. Adding these flawed methods to your training can be a recipe for disaster and a serious challenge to Officer Safety.

## **The Importance of Exposure Training cont...**

For those who think that this type of scenario is not realistic and does not happen on the street, it does. In one incident near us a bite and hold dog did his job found and did engage the biker type suspect in some very dense bush. However, when the handler heard nothing from the dense bush he called the dog back. Later the suspect turned up at the hospital to have multiple dog bites treated, including reattaching part of his ear. The suspect later told the handler that each time the dog came in and engaged him he just laid still himself biting down on stick to keep from screaming, when the dog got no reaction from the suspect he released. In this case it was both the dogs conditioning that upon being engaged a suspect would fight and the handlers conditioning that a suspect would not lay there while getting bitten that caused this incident and shows how easy it is to become conditioned to specific response if we are not careful.

One of the fellows in Ohio, advised me he had sent his dog into a wooded area to locate a suspect. The dog found the suspect lying motionless and the dog failed to engage, the suspect was later located by uniform officers and the handler was both embarrassed and severely ticked off. However, in conversation he told me his dog had never engaged a suspect laying on the ground in training or had he engaged a totally motionless suspect(no movement, sound or reaction to bite). I tried to explain to the handler that he most likely only had an exposure problem and it could be easily corrected by giving the dog some scenarios where the dog is encouraged to engage a suspect who acted in this manner. In this case however the handler did not agree and still thinks there is a problem with his dog and continues to look for an answer that doesn't take some extra very fundamental training.

Fundamental work in training is everything in Canine Training, anyone who has trained with me knows I'm a stick to basics kind of Canine Trainer. However, I believe equally in the importance of exposure training. To me exposure training is a fundamental work when training Police Service Dogs. You cannot expect your Canine Partner to respond in environmental conditions he has not previously experienced. Simply put, just because a dog does a box search well at your training field, does not mean he is prepared to search an auto wreckers full of obstacles, animal feces and all sorts of other distractions. If we continually run scenarios or training the same way, we condition both ourselves and our Canine Partner for a letdown. This was driven home to me a few years ago when a handler from another agency came to spend a training day with us. His dog had been on the road about year and had topped just about everything at his Regions United States Police Canine Association PD1 Field Trail. However, during the training day we had gone to do building searches in one of the storage warehouses our Police Service uses for found bicycles etc. The warehouse was very cluttered, but

nothing compared to what you might encounter on the street. To all our surprise this fellow's dog would not even enter the building, when we talked about it later, he told me that during his Basic Canine Course, they had only used one building for all their training. This dog knew how to search, what he lacked was simple exposure to this cluttered environment. That was a real eye opener for me and I am always challenging myself to ensure the exposure training of my Canine Teams. It was for this reason that we added the following scenario to the Night Training Program. In this scenario the Canine Team were required to work an Open Area Search from a simulated Stolen Car Bail Out in a wooded area. The suspect was hidden in a single garage type structure. Some snow fence was used to ensure that dog could only enter the garage in one direction and a number of realistic street type obstacles were placed in front of the entrance. First, a number of plastic milk jugs and beer cans and some were contained in plastic garbage bags, second some rolled up news paper, and finally an old mattress. Although the majority of the dogs were able to overcome these simple obstacles there were several who did not. Some would not walk over the beer cans, it was obvious that the sounds they made threw the dog off. A few would not walk on the mattress, despite at that point they could see a suspect in a full bite suit within 6 or 7 feet. Once again this is not a comment on the quality of the dog or their training, it's simply to point out the importance of exposure. The handlers I spoke with who had the most problem were able to tell me things like, "we always do bite work in the same place" or "we always do our area searches in the boxes". In these cases "ALWAYS" is the dangerous word, if 90% of a dog's intelligence is memory, think how really dangerous it is.

Once again the scenario is realistic to the street, in 1988 my dog at the time indicated and on a suspect hidden in the backyard of an abandon house. There was so much garbage in the yard, I first thought the suspect was just another bag garage, till I realized the bag of garbage the dog was standing over was wearing cowboy boots.

In the sustained confrontation scenario we ran in Ohio, the Canine Team responded to assist Officer who had cornered a suspect in darkened building. The suspect was loud, violent and aggressively threatening. In this case there was lots of stimulation for the dogs and the vast majority were more than prepared to engage the suspect.

When the dog engaging the suspect had little or no effect, the suspect came running out of the building dragging the dog and started attacking the handler. The majority of handler were not prepared, the Sheriff's Deputies acting as suspects all commented on how the handlers looked so surprised and had that wide eyed look of shock, almost saying "hey, my dogs biting you, you not suppose to do that". When the suspect did give in and submit and the dogs were call out, despite the violence offered by this

suspect many handlers let their guards down and were attacked again, many twice in a row. I know many people will read this and say yea but it was training.

## **The Importance of Exposure Training cont...**

In addition to the sustained confrontation scenario in Ohio, in April in California, Deputy Marty Pigeon (Sacramento Sheriff's Department) and I included a similar sustained confrontation scenario in the Advanced Patrol Dog Seminar we were instructing at. Thanks to fantastic a training area (abandon military base) as well as excellent planning on the part of Deputy Pigeon and the support of his agency (which included putting a helicopter over head to take part in some of the scenarios) we were able to produce some very realistic training. Again, from this training we both had a number of concerns about better preparing our own Handlers at home for that sustained confrontation that break from the norm. The scenario we ran in California was an "Officer Needs Assistance", "Code 3 Cover", 10-78, 10-33, whatever your Agency calls it, it's the fats in the fire and one of the good guys is getting hurt call. In this scenario its seemed the dogs responded well, but the handlers were not prepared for this type of situation, this was true both in the scenarios run in Ohio at the Nationals and in California.

In the sustained confrontation scenario, the quarry put up more of a fight than the dog team would expect. Once the dog engaged the suspect many of the handlers let down their guard, and the quarry was able to attack the handler and deliver significant blow with his weapon (padded baton) to the handler that could in real life caused grievous bodily harm or even led to their death. When the quarry did finally submit, despite being repeatedly attacked many handlers again let down their guard and put themselves in position to be attacked by the suspect again.

Although, the performance of the Dogs was better in most cases then the handlers, some of the dogs were not prepared for a sustained confrontation. Some of the dogs which demonstrated excellent control, however almost shutdown after being called out and were obviously not prepared for a re-engagement. Most importantly they were not prepared to protect their handlers at this point after being called out. With all the concern about liability it is easy to see why we put so much emphasis on control and we should. However, as trainers we must always remember there is a very thin line between control and ineffectiveness.

Once again, anyone who feels these events do not occur on the street is setting themselves up for disaster. I realize how easy this is to do, for the first ten years I was a Canine Officer every suspect my Canine Partner was sent to apprehend dropped like

they had been shot and offered no further resistance. Then one day I ran into a suspect who engaged myself and Canine Partner and my Escort Officer for twenty-eight minutes. The suspect was bitten numerous times, he was Pepper Sprayed and struck repeatedly with Batons, I will always remember the suspect who at this time was fully naked pulling myself (who was on his back), my Police Dog (who was fully engaged in his left inner thigh) over a 6 foot chain link fence with one arm. During the confrontation I kept thinking the dog must be missing him or not biting hard enough (till we took pictures when he was in custody), or thinking maybe the Pepper Spray was no good (till my eyes and skin started burning). Although, as I review this incident I think my dog was up to the task neither he nor I were prepared for this incident. Often, I'm asked about this incident since it made many Headlines, "where was your back-up". This incident occurred in a small town within our region where only one patrol officer is assigned and by the time backup arrived we were too far in the bush for any other officer to possibly find us. The suspect was finally arrested after he broke into a cottage ripped up the floor boards and hid in the crawl space. I retained a small amount of my confidence upon learning that when he finally did surrender he told the officers, "OK, just keep the dog back".

On yet another occasion we had an Armed Robbery suspect attempt to kill one of our dogs, despite a Dog Bite that went through his penis, the suspect unsuccessfully attempted to kill the dog by choking and beating him for well over two minutes until the troops arrived. These are just two of the hundreds of dangerous sustained confrontations our Canine Teams become involved in each year.

When a citizen needs help, he calls the Police. When the Police need help they call the Canine Unit. It is our job to best prepare these Canine Teams for the street and that is never routine. Like myself, we all need a reminder that we have to vary our training to best prepare our Canine Teams for the unexpected. For me, these incidents and learning experiences are a reminder to me to constantly be striving to better prepare the Canine Teams I train for the street. As a final thought, my kids love a television show called the Magic School Bus, where school kids go on a magical bus to learn science, the teacher is always telling the kids to get messy and take chances. I guess that's what I'm saying too.



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