

Dog Talk with Uncle Matty: Use of trained police dog is use of non-deadly force

by Matthew_Margolis

In 2001, national newscasts gave accounts of Devin Batts in Jacksonville, Fla., the 10-year-old girl who was lying on her bed, listening to the radio when a sheriff's department police dog suddenly leaped in and attacked her. A burglar-alarm company had given the K-9 unit a wrong address. Most reports minimized the wrong-address factor and criticized the Jacksonville police-dog policy that reportedly trained the dogs to "detect and hold by biting" rather than "detect and bark."

So what kind of impression do these reports give the public? Without all the information, you might assume that police dogs are vicious by nature and trained to cause serious injury or death. Others will use this as an excuse to lobby for restrictions on K-9 units. There is ongoing debate about police-dog tactics.

Following the incident, I contacted the K-9 unit directly and spoke with Sergeant J. P. Butler.

"Taz," the four-legged officer engaged in the episode, was a 4-year-old brindled Dutch Shepherd. This breed is native to Holland and originally a sheep dog. Enjoying renewed popularity in its homeland as a companion and a protection dog, the United Kennel Club recognized the Dutch Shepherd in 1995. Taz joined the Jacksonville K-9 Unit at age 18 months. He lives with his partner, who is married, and there are small children residing in the house. There are 21 canine officers with the Jacksonville K-9 Unit.

On the day in question, the officers responding to the burglary call arrived at the address and attempted to get someone to answer the door. There was an open window seven feet above ground, and the dog alerted officers that someone was inside.

When no one came to the door, the dog's partner boosted the dog through the open window. While the officer was climbing through the window, the dog heard movement in the house and went to work. Taz found Devin in the bedroom. Had she remained still, the dog would have waited for his partner, but the child did not remain still. Taz did what he was trained to do and detained the girl by grabbing her on the leg.

But there is more to the story. The children, ages 12, 10 and 2, had been left alone with a severely autistic 19-year-old. They were told never to answer the door if an adult was not in the house. According to Butler, a previous landlord of the family has stated the children were frequently left alone. This landlord is on record saying she frequently would stop by the house, find the children alone and stay with them until the mother came home. That day, the other children had hidden in a closet. Although news reports stated that according to the mother, the children did not know the police were there, the children have admitted that they knew the police were there but were obeying their mother's demand that they not answer the door.

In defense of K-9 units, Butler reminded us that the use of a trained police dog is the use of non-deadly force. Using the "force matrix," a dog is between pepper spray and a baton. He also stated that before K-9 units, he had searched buildings for as long as three hours, knowing the felons were there, but never being able to locate them. A dog can search the same building in 15 minutes and will almost always locate the person hiding out.

In Jacksonville, the K-9 units handle more calls than the SWAT teams. Their dogs were responsible for more than 1,000 arrests in 2000, and less than 8 percent of these arrests involved engagements (bites) in order to detain the criminals.

Truth is, police dogs are selected because they have even temperaments and are not vicious by nature. They are trained to do a job, and they do it well. They live "to protect and to serve," and I, for one, feel safer because of them.

Woof!

Dog trainer Matthew "Uncle Matty" Margolis is co-author of 18 books about dogs, a behaviorist, a popular radio and television guest, and host of the PBS series "WOOF! It's a Dog's Life!" Send your questions to dearuncle.gazette@unclematty.com or by mail to Uncle Matty at P.O. Box 3300, Diamond Springs, CA 95619.

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