

K-9 corps put through paces

By JEAN LEVINE
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It was hardly an every-day experience when Transit Police Officer John Woodall was "wrapped" and "hit" by Sam, Staten Island Rapid Transit Officer Scott Johnston's partner.

Sam, you see, is a police dog in partnership with Johnston, a West Brighton resident who doubles as Sam's handler and best friend.

And, he "hit" (bit) Woodall, until given the command to stop, during training to sharpen the dog's skills as a law-enforcement partner.

Woodall was wearing a protective leather sleeve used during the monthly in-service training sessions given by the city Transit Police's K-9 Corps on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Disability Service Office grounds in Willowbrook.

"We have two 16-week training classes in September and March with between six and 12 dogs and an equal number of handlers," said Lt. John R. Carlo of Castleton Corners, the K-9 Corps' commanding officer.

"Since 1982, we've trained most of the police dogs in the city for a wide variety of agencies with no similar programs of their own."

Some of the agencies whose dogs have received training are the New York City Police Department, SIRTQA, the U.S. Parks Department Police, the Port Authority, the Atlantic City Police Department, and the Jersey City Police Transit Authority.

Sgt. John Benintendo, the K-9 unit's director, said the program was started eight years ago after three TA officers lost their lives in the line of duty within one year.

"Since the inception of the program, not one Transit canine officer has been seriously injured or killed in the line of duty," Benintendo said.

"This is why we started this unit. It was part of a joint pilot police dog training program created at the request of Mayor Koch and the MTA board. A dozen Transit officers went down to the Philadelphia Police Department Canine Training Center to learn the skills of canine police work. In turn, we helped the New York City Police Department start their own unit two years later," he explained.

"A dog can pick up a scent and follow it where humans can't. Our canines have tracked violent crime suspects to their very door. They can outrun a police officer who normally is weighed down with 28 pounds of equipment. If there's a situation where an armed suspect has barricaded himself inside an apartment, building, or subway tunnel, the canine is capable of flushing him out without exposing several officers to extra danger."

The K-9 Unit program is also seen as an alternative to the use of deadly physical force where weapons are used, according to Benintendo. He contends that, un-

like a bullet going the wrong way, a properly trained dog can be recalled.

"Unlike the so-called 'attack dogs' used by some civilian guard services, ours are trained to be defensive," the sergeant said. "Our key to training is obedience. The dogs are taught to obey their handler and listen to every command. Unlike attack dogs, who don't know when to let go, they learn to tolerate more."

The hundreds of dogs donated annually to the K-9 Corps come from many sources, most frequently the city's ASPCA and private individuals. The animals are a "German Shepherd" type — either purebred or a mixed breed and preferably male and under three years of age, Benintendo added.

"We've discovered that males are invariably heavier and more temperamentally suited to this sort of work," he said.

"To be acceptable, a dog must weigh between 70 and 100 pounds. Some females approach that, but

it's rare. And the animal must not be gun shy, afraid of people, or phased by loud noises and traffic. A dog raised in the suburbs couldn't adjust properly."

Benintendo said only one out of every three dogs given to the K-9 Corps makes the grade. "The dogs we can't use we find homes for," he said.

"Not only does a dog need to be healthy, but he must have a good temperament and listen to commands. We don't accept vicious dogs because they can never be properly trained," he added. "Like people, each animal has its own individual attitude, mood and pace of learning."

During training classes and at monthly refresher courses, the dogs and their handlers are put through their paces at locations throughout the city. Besides the most frequently used SIDDSO grounds, other sites are Fort Wadsworth, the Seaview Hospital grounds in Seaview, Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, and subway stations.

in Willowbrook

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