

Ride Along With K9 Cops

Spend time with the Burbank, Calif., Police Department's K9 Unit and find out what an average day on the beat is like for these hard-working dogs.

Denise Fleck

Writer Denise Fleck with Officer Theresa Geier and Caila "This is the Burbank Police Department's K9 Unit. Come out with your hands up or we will send in the police dog. If the police dog finds you, you may be bitten."

These words encourage many suspects to surrender requiring no use of force by our men and women in blue. K9 units are an effective deterrent in crime prevention and can save time and lives as well. Recently I had the opportunity to watch both a training session and participate in a police ride along in Burbank, Calif., just north of Los Angeles.

Caila was headed to Afghanistan as a bomb-sniffing dog when the Burbank Police Department snagged her for their own. Enjoying life on U.S. soil, this ebony-colored Belgian Malinois locates weapons, people and narcotics while taking her commands from Officer Theresa Geier. I watched Caila in action during training day and although the evening wafted no scents detectable to my human nose, her specialized sniffer made a beeline for the tall grasses where I had earlier placed an object. Down she went on all fours excitedly wagging her tail and alerting to the find. Her passive alert – freezing in position when an article is found – was most impressive, but even more so was her control work in which she practiced pulling a perpetrator out of a car and then released him upon command.

Next was my turn, and I attempted to remain quiet as I hid in an abandoned building. I feared though that the sound of my nervous breathing would give me away. Seconds after I heard the command, loud barking accompanied by furious scratching at the door in front of me prompted me to come out slowly, with my hands up, grateful this was just practice.

Writer with Officer Sam Anderson

and Rocco The next evening, I met another Belgian Malinois named Rocco and his human, Officer Sam Anderson. On patrol Rocco paced anxiously in the specially equipped car. From time to time, he'd bark at other vehicles, but only police cars, taxis and pizza delivery cars. Police cars, I'm sure, epitomize the excitement of the chase, but the other vehicles must appear the same to his canine eyes with their lights and signage on their roofs.

A few minutes into the shift, we were summoned to an alarm call where dog and handler cautiously checked to see if a crime was in progress. The whirring blades of the police helicopter caught my ears by surprise as it hovered, prepared to alert the K9 team should anyone be on the roof or dashing from the structure. Although it turned out to be a false alarm, Rocco returned to the car undaunted and filled with pride.

As the day continued, my ears worked overtime discerning the influx of calls on the radio and taking an occasional glance at the dashboard computer noticing what activities were in progress. More alarm calls, trespassing and troubled teens filled the log book that evening, but since dogs are almost never deployed on juveniles, Officer Anderson and his backup left their four-footed friend with me while they took care of business.

Darkness fell, yet Rocco remained eager for an assignment he could sink his canines into. Although some days, Rocco leads the pack into dangerous situations, today is not one of those days. Regardless, whether it's an action-packed manhunt or an uneventful and routine patrol, when the shift is over, the K9 officers go home with their handlers knowing restful sleep and a good meal await them as well as a chance to be, well, just a dog – chasing bees, barking, and chewing on their favorite toys!

Denise Fleck is a freelance writer who lives in California with her husband and three rescue dogs.