

The dogs are out!

*And they're protecting
Team Holloman*

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49th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

from the schoolhouse at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, it is then purchased by a military installation – such as Holloman – for approximately \$6,500.

“A dog leaves Lackland at the canine equivalent of an airman basic – he’s a one level,” Tremmel said. “And just like you’d send a new airman through right start and enroll them in upgrade training, we do the same kind of thing for the dogs. Through training they receive here, the dogs work their way up to proficiency in much the same way Air Force members do.”

At the other end of the leash is the other component of a successful team – the dog handler. A security forces member must have at least two years in the career field and be recommended by the base kennel master before applying for formal dog handler training. Technical training for handlers is approximately 11 weeks and, much like the dog’s training, continues when the member goes to a permanent base and is paired with a dog.

“There’s no set amount of training time for the dog or the handler,” said Staff Sgt. Brad Guerry, dog handler and training manager here. “It all depends on the individual person or animal and how well they learn and adapt. We’ve seen training take 30 days and we’ve seen it take four months. It just depends on the skills and abilities of each team.”

Much of the training the dog and handler receive is geared to help them learn about each other and work together as a team. Tremmel said it’s critical that the handler be able to recognize the dog’s changes in behavior. Once the dog and handler are trained and working as a team, they undergo validation and certification.

“For validation, the dog and handler try to find hidden training aids in various locations,” said Tremmel. When they can demonstrate their proficiency to the kennel master, they must then go through a similar test for those base leadership members who have search-granting authority.

Most pet owners are happy if their dog learns to sit, stay and roll over. That level of training is acceptable for a house pet, but with force protection on the line, Holloman’s military working dog handlers set the bar at a much higher level.

To get to the level of proficiency required for such an important mission, the four explosives dogs, two narcotics dogs and their handlers who are assigned to the 49th Security Forces Squadron spend a large portion of their time training.

“We’re at the tip of the spear for force protection,” said Tech. Sgt. Robert Tremmel, Holloman’s kennel master. “We have an important mission and we take it very seriously.”

To help ensure their mission readiness, Tremmel said there are three primary focus areas the Air Force looks at – the dog, the handler and the team.

Tremmel, a dog handler with 16 years experience, said the Department of Defense is very picky about the dogs they purchase. All canine candidates, either German Shepherd or Belgian Malinois, for the military working dog program go through a meticulous evaluation before the Department of Defense even considers purchasing the dog. Each dog receives a full medical exam and must demonstrate basic obedience training as well as the ability to alert to a scent.

“We can afford to be picky,” he said. The DoD pays around \$2,000 for a new dog before it has even entered into “basic” military training. When the dog graduates

“It’s important that base leaders see how the team performs,” Tremmel said. “When they’re woken up in the middle of the night and asked to grant authority for a search, they need to be confident in the team that’s going out to perform that search.”

The team must perform at an average of 95-percent accuracy each quarter or better to meet command standards, said the kennel master. Trainers hide narcotics and explosives as search aids for a dog and handler team to look for.

“The dogs are smart,” Tremmel said. “We’re continually impressed with their abilities as well as their dedication.”

“We’ve taken the dogs out to the recreational vehicle storage lot in the summer heat to have them train on finding narcotics – and the dogs were ‘hitting it’ from 25 yards away. It blew me away! They practically went right to the training aid and sat.”

But the relationship between the dog and handler isn’t just business.

“To the Air Force, the dogs are just like service members,” said Tremmel. He explained that the dogs get a physical exam more often than military members do. And the dogs are quickly removed from conditions which might be harmful to them.

“When I was in Korea, we’d have exercises,” said Guerry, a 10-year dog handler. “The temperature would start to drop toward freezing and the kennel master would pick up the dog, but leave the handler on post. We always joke that the dogs are more valuable than the handlers are.”

As the dog and handler team work and train together, they build a bond stronger than that of typical coworkers. The ‘puppy pushers,’ as they call themselves, agree that it’s one of the toughest things in the world to leave their dog as they progress in rank and move to other duties or another base.

“Even if you’re having a bad day, when you come to the kennel your best friend is happy to see you. The dog loves you no matter what,” said Guerry.

“That dog is there for you no matter what,” said Tremmel. “It’s an incredible bond between the dog and the handler – that dog will die to protect you.”

And that is the ultimate in force protection.

(Right) Anita and Senior Airman Anthony Perkins demonstrate aggression training for a crowd of visitors to the Holloman kennel. (Below) Anita maintains an overwatch on Perkins, a simulated suspect, during a working dog demonstration.



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Paul Coupaud



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Paul Coupaud



Portrait by Staff Sgt. Kenneth Lustig

Staff Sgt. James Smith and Dino strike a patriotic pose.



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Paul Coupaud



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(Above) The six residents of the Holloman kennels eat their way through approximately 1,000 pounds of food each year. (Left) Blackie and Staff Sgt. Derek Nelson escort Perkins, acting as a simulated convict, during a military working dog demonstration.

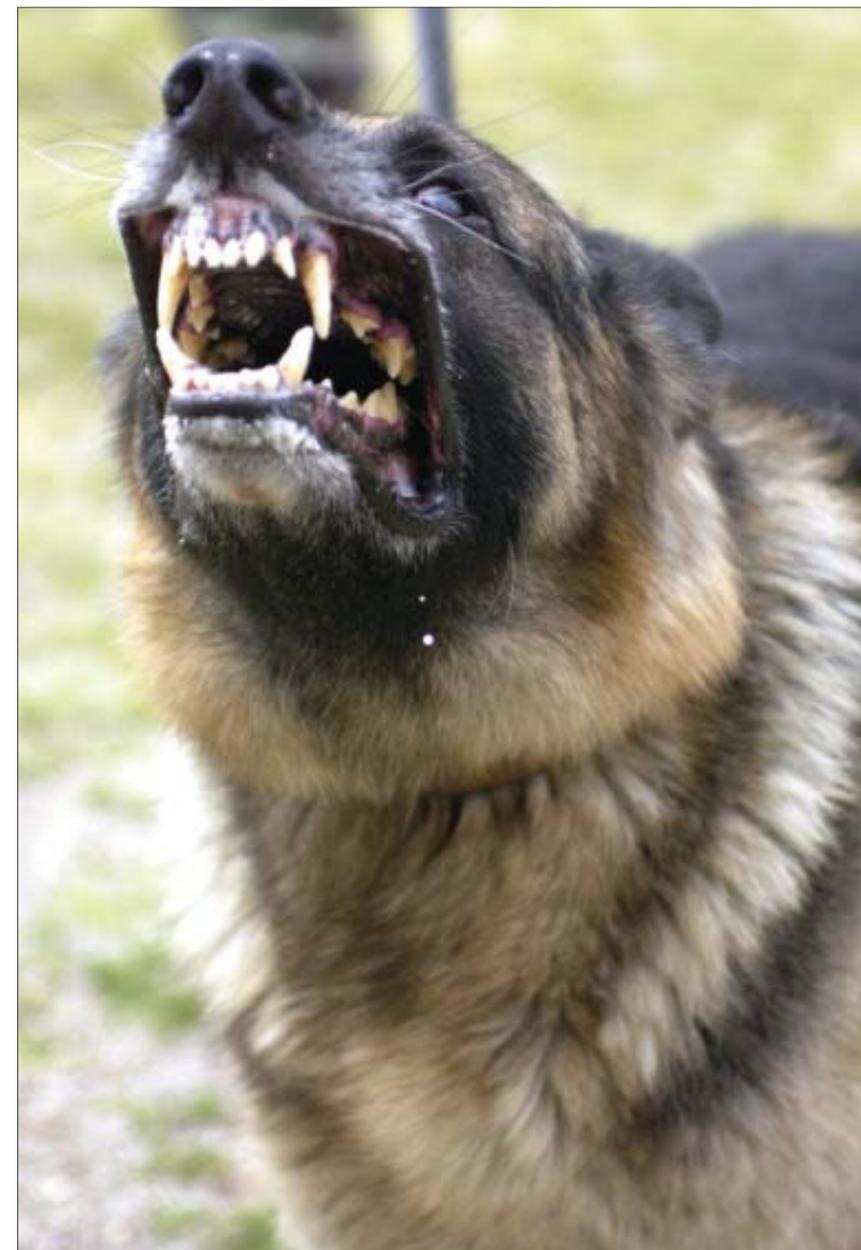


Photo by Tech. Sgt. Paul Coupaud

(Top) Tarzan puts on his game face and demonstrates his bark is just as bad as his bite. (Below) The Holloman kennels have a small graveyard behind the kennel complex to remember their fallen partners.



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