



## To Fetch and to Serve

### After 30 Years, Metro Division's K-9 Unit Still Gets Tails Wagging

by Amanda Richter

On September 23, Metro Division's K-9 Unit will celebrate 30 years of police work that have gone to the dogs — but in this case, that's a good thing. As one of the Department's most notable programs, the K-9 Unit is the epitome of doing more with less, using some of the best tacticians available, who need no more at the end of the day than dinner and a pat on the head. Suffice it to say that the K-9 Unit is perhaps one of the best investments the Department has made, but if it wasn't for the bull-doggedness of two determined officers, it might have never happened.

#### A Doggone Good Idea

The year was 1979. Sergeant **Donn Yarnall**, then a police officer III and dog expert who had trained with the Sheriff's Department, Inglewood P.D. and German police departments, as well as handled a dog in the Narcotics Unit, had tried unsuccessfully several times to establish a K-9 program in the Department. At the time, the Department depended on Santa Monica P.D. and Inglewood P.D. police dogs, and had struck down Yarnall's earlier proposals due to cost concerns. One day, while working his Narcotics dog in the Pacific station parking lot, he ran into a childhood friend from his Pop Warner football days. Now retired-Sergeant II **Mark Mooring** had lost touch with Yarnall over the years, but after observing him in training, agreed to help him submit a new proposal. The two scoured the dusty 77th Division basement for the old proposals, which Mooring studied to devise a new angle. The trick, he knew, would be to hinge the proposal on the money-saving aspect of the program, as well as the officer-safety angle.

Mooring's redesigned proposal was handed up the Department, only to stall at the assistant chief's desk before making it all the way up to the top. But then an encounter with a wanted murderer/rapist caught Chief Gates' attention. In pursuit of the suspect, the AM Watch in West L.A. Division had set up a perimeter, but was



Training Days: From left, Mike Long and K-9 Duke, Paul Stropkai and K-9 Max, Donn Yarnall and K-9 Artos, Marty Coon and K-9 Smokey, Harriet Moffat (one of the unit's most important supporters), Sal Apodaca and K-9 Marko, Mark Mooring, Jay Moberly and K-9 Elka, John Hall and K-9 Chas, Kerell Broussard and K-9 Lasso, Larry Malliet and K-9 Krieg, Joe Vita and K-9 Baker and Jerry Thomas and K-9 Blackie in the mid '80s.

unable to locate the suspect. The Santa Monica P.D.'s police dog was called out, and promptly found the suspect hiding underneath a building. The next morning, the *L.A. Times* printed a picture of the dog and one uniformed officer — from the SMPD. The chief demanded to know why the LAPD had to rely on other department's resources and called for an immediate solution. Mooring and Yarnall's proposal was quickly green-lighted.

Mooring and Yarnall were tasked with implementing the program, including finding the first police dogs, German shepherds donated by local dog breeders. Mooring's first dog was Blue, named in honor of law enforcement's thin blue line, and Yarnall's first dog was Topaz, a variation of blue.

Mooring recalls that the duo was given as long as they needed to train the dogs, but with Yarnall's expertise, they were prepared to hit the streets after only three months. However, there was still one more test before the program could become fully operational. Chief Dan Sullivan, the West Bureau chief overseeing the pilot program, called Mooring unexpectedly one evening and asked them bring their dogs and meet him at the West L.A. courthouse. When Mooring and Yarnall arrived, the chief told them that he had hidden three decoys for the dogs to find. This

would test not only the dogs' searching abilities, but also their control. And one more thing, the chief added. One of the decoys was his 10-year-old son.

Heart pounding, Mooring went first, with Blue, and quickly found Sullivan's son hiding on a shelf in a closet in the judge's chambers. The second decoy was hidden underneath a desk. The third decoy, also human, when located took off running — and was soon caught. Sullivan was impressed. Could the other dog do as well? Mooring assured the chief that she could. OK, the chief agreed. The dogs were ready.

Though initially restricted to the West Bureau, Topaz and Blue began catching suspects immediately. Within four weeks of operation, Yarnall and Mooring received approval to go citywide. The early days were a flurry of search activity, resulting in 1,500-2,000 search requests per year. Days off and vacations were virtually nonexistent, and they would often return from a search at two or three in the morning, only to be called back out. After three months, the trial period was declared over, and the program was relocated to its current home at Metropolitan Division with full Departmental support.

Over the years, Chief Gates followed

closely the exploits and tremendous success of the unit. He frequently contacted Mooring to inquire how the "chief's dogs" were doing.

The unit was also enthusiastically supported by Harriet Moffat of the West Los Angeles Boosters, who purchased all of the dogs needed as the unit expanded to its present complement.

Says Lieutenant II **Robert Arcos**, the unit's OIC for the last two years, "Everything that we are today is because of the sacrifices of the original K-9 Unit: **Mark Mooring, Donn Yarnall, Jay Moberly, John Lopata, Joe Vita, John Hall, Mike Long, Paul Stropkai, Larry Maillet, Kerell Broussard, Marty Coon, Sal Apodaca and Jerry Thomas.** They are the ones who put everything on the line to develop search tactics, dog training and coordinating perimeter responses into a disciplined science. They paved the way for us, and we are truly grateful for all of their efforts."

#### Every Dog Has Its Day

Today, the K-9 Unit has grown to encompass one lieutenant, five sergeants, 18 handlers and 25 dogs (mostly Belgian Malinois) that respond citywide 24/7.



From left, Det. Jay Moberly and K-9 Elka, Sgt. Donn Yarnall and K-9 Popeye and Sgt. Mark Mooring (ret.) and K-9 Friday at Elysian Park in the early '80s.



The 2010 K-9 Unit. Last row, from left, Jerry Mayeda, Miles Taylor, Hans Almaraz, Jeff Miller, Chris Amador, Tom Call, Josh Kniss, Cliff Chu and J.D. McDonald. Middle row, from left, Bob Arcos, Jason Schwab, Linda Travis, Nick Milazzo, Al Rameriz, Dave Wade, Mike Peters and Brian O'Hara. Front row, from left, Steve Carnevale, Doug Roller, Gerry Sola and Sean Colomey.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOUG ROLLER AND MARK MOORING

In 2001, under the direction and vision of Sergeants **Chuck Buttitta** and **Gerry Sola**, the unit expanded to include a bloodhound program for tracking and trailing. The unit's two bloodhounds, K-9s Sage and Lula, specialize in locating lost or missing persons.

The gun-detection canine program was established in 2005 by Chief Trainer

remembers most fondly when he looks back on his 10 years with the K-9s are those in which the dogs proved their value. He recalls a foot pursuit of a hardcore gang member that led to a residence. By the time Mooring arrived, the officers on scene had cleared the area around the house and wanted the dog to start searching the backyard. "The dog has to start at



Chief Trainer Sgt. Doug Roller giving a demonstration of his canine (K-9 Jori) at this year's Los Angeles County Police Canine Association expo.

Sergeant II **Doug Roller**, retired Sergeant II **Steve Groover** and Officer III **Jeff Miller**. Four gun dogs currently comprise the gun-detection program and average 300 requests per year.

The unit has also become one of the leading K-9 units in the world, with a roughly 25% bite ratio and a 55% find ratio. Arcos fields daily requests for advice on everything from establishing K-9 units to troubleshooting canine behavioral problems. Earlier this year, the K-9 Unit co-hosted *Police K-9 Magazine's* HITS seminar, which brought hundreds of handlers from around the globe to Los Angeles for training. The National Police Bloodhound Association is also a vital partner, and in January the unit hosted the association's training day.

In addition, the K-9 Unit has become one of the most recognizable faces of the Department and attends an estimated 100-150 events each year, including the Los Angeles Police Memorial Foundation's police-celebrity golf tournament, Neighborhood Watches, St. Baldrick's, March of Dimes events, roll calls and more. The unit is also involved with the Paws for Cures benefit to raise money for the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine, a nonprofit that trains and certifies specialists in veterinary internal medicine and advances veterinary research.

But the unit's first priority — service to the Department — remains the top priority, and the incidents that Mooring

the beginning," Mooring insisted. As soon as he released Friday (his second dog, named after Jack Webb), the dog ran to the oleander bushes bordering the residence and alerted. But they'd already cleared that section, the officers insisted. "Hang on," Mooring said, as Friday's head and forelimbs disappeared into the bushes. From the dog came a deep growling — then a scream. The suspect attempted to flee his hiding spot and was taken down by the dog. Later, he confirmed that the officers had passed his hideout several times without noticing his presence. Had it not been for Friday's keen nose, he would have likely never been caught.

According to Roller, finding a suspect against all odds is one of the most rewarding aspects of the job. "Suspects are very clever at hiding in places you'd never think to look. But the dog is hitting on scent, not logic," he explains. Once the dog alerts, then the officer is forced to apply his or her logic to determining the suspect's location.

Roller recalls responding to an incident where a suspect had engaged CHP officers in a shoot-out. When the K-9 Unit arrived on scene, then-Officer **Gina Holmstrom's** dog Maxx hit on a trash can where the suspect was believed to be hiding. The search team deployed around the receptacle and ordered the suspect to come out. He did — shooting. Thanks to Maxx's deft nosework, however, the team was strategically placed behind cover, and only one officer was injured by rounds that skipped off of the ground and struck the officer in the arm and leg. "If the officers on scene had searched for the suspect by hand," says Roller, "I'm sure the injuries would have been fatal."

"It's an intricate partnership," says Mooring of the relationship between handler and K-9. "There are times when I saved [the dog's] life, and there are times when [the dog] saved mine. No doubt about it."

### A Dog-Eat-Dog World

Yet despite the many K-9 achievements over the past years, the dogs remain just as susceptible to the dangers of police work as their human counterparts. It will come as no surprise that some suspects are not afraid of attacking the dogs, and four of the unit's four-legged heroes have given their lives in the line of duty.



Ofcr. Cliff Chu trains in the bite suit with K-9 Kane.



K-9 Adjo locating a decoy secreted on a rooftop during training.



Sgt. Chuck Buttitta with K-9 Meagan.

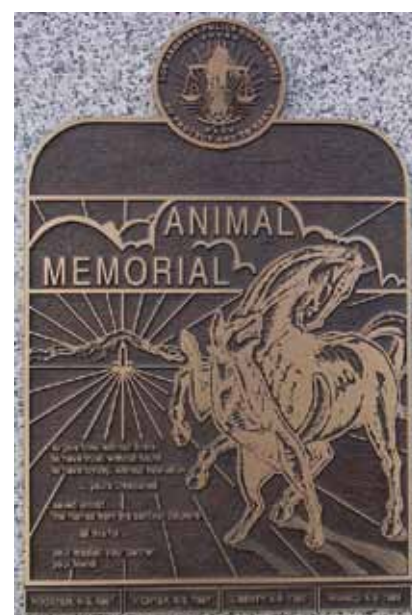
The first line-of-duty death came not long after the unit was formed. On June 4, 1981, K-9 Rooster, a German shepherd handled by Officer **John Lopata** (ret.), one of the first officers hired after the program went full time, was searching for a burglary suspect in Central Area on the roof of a multi-story department store. Rooster, off leash, leapt over a two-foot parapet and fell to his death.

On September 9, 1987, K-9 Richter, handled by then-Officer **Danny Bunch**, was searching a storage building in Newton Area when he located and was stabbed twice by a male suspect who had entered the facility to kill the female caretaker over a dispute. Although he was rushed to medical treatment, Richter died from his injuries the following day.

Less than two years later, on August 24, 1989, then-Officer Sal Apodaca and K-9 Marko were searching for a GTA suspect in 77th Street Area. The suspect was located in the crawlspace of a single-family residence and Marko engaged the suspect. In retaliation, the suspect stabbed Marko in the head. Marko passed away from the injury, and the suspect was taken into custody.

Marko's death compounded a devastating loss only months prior. On March 22, 1989, K-9 Liberty, handled by Officer **John Hall** (ret.), had been searching for two ADW suspects in Pacific Area when he located them in the garage of a single-family residence. Liberty engaged one of the suspects, and during the fight the suspect opened fire on both Liberty and Hall, fatally wounding Liberty. Officers became involved in the shooting and both suspects were killed.

Hall later received the Medal of Valor for his courage, and in memory



Mooring's poem written in honor of the unit's fallen K-9s.

of Liberty, the K-9 Unit created its own version of the medal for its fallen dogs — the Liberty Award. In homage to the fallen, Mooring also penned a poem that, along with the dogs' names, adorns a plaque at the Westchester Academy. The plaque is mounted on a column that stands in a formation of several other columns bearing the names of officers killed in the line of duty — demonstrating the equal importance of the K-9s' sacrifices.

At the K-9 Unit's 30-year celebration later this month, Rooster, Richter and Marko will receive the Liberty Award posthumously. It is their heroism, as well as the courage and dedication of all of the K-9s and their handlers, past and present, that has helped the unit become the LAPD's best friend. ❖

### Donate to the K-9 Fund

Looking to the future, Arcos says that funding will be a challenge for the K-9 Unit, particularly as many of the dogs reach the end of their typically nine- to 11-year working period and need to be replaced. Thus, donations to the Los Angeles Police K-9 Fund are vital to purchasing new dogs. For more information on the fund, visit [www.lapdk9.com](http://www.lapdk9.com).



The unit's logo and motto.