

Working with police dogs

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Shift in the life of... a dog handler

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I have a four-year-old German Shepherd called Annie and a 12-month-old Spaniel puppy called Jack. Annie is a licensed general-purpose dog and firearms support dog. Jack is not licensed to work yet – he starts his rummage training in spring 2022.

A day shift for me begins at 4.50am. After I get ready, I'm straight out to my dogs to take them on their first walk. Then it's into the car and off to work at the Operational Command Centre in Speke, Merseyside. We start at 7am but get there for around 6.30am, so that the dogs can have their morning feed and I can load the police vehicle up with all the kit we will need for the day. I have to check that all the dangerous dog equipment in my vehicle is working correctly (electric shields, fire extinguishers, dog sticks), because the last thing you need when you're dealing with a dangerous dog is to realise that the equipment is faulty just as you're trying to use it! I also need to make sure that my own equipment is ready to use: water and bowls, a dog-specific first aid kit, Annie's tracking harness and my ballistic kit, in case we're deployed to a firearms job. On top of this, I have to make sure that I'm in full uniform and kitted up with both my radios, so that we're ready to go at 7am sharp if a job comes in.

We have a briefing with our sergeant at 7am. We're deployed to jobs from the control room but can also self-deploy if we hear a job on the radio that a dog could assist with. At quiet moments, I head out to get a bit of training done with my dogs. We have protected training days throughout the year, but it's also each handler's responsibility to maintain the dogs' skills and abilities. Jack is yet to start his formal training but comes out with Annie, so that he gets used to the working day, as well as the sounds and movement of the car. When we get some downtime, he loves to play with Annie.

After another walk and some training, we get out on patrol. We may be directed by our sergeant towards a particular area, based on the daily intelligence briefing or operational control strategy. Otherwise, we can patrol anywhere within the force footprint.

The sarge shouts up on our back-to-back dog radio and asks us to attend a report of three pit bulls fighting in the street. Ideally, we should have two handlers per one dog, but often there are only three of us on duty on a day shift, so we have to work well as a team and think outside the box. We manage to safely contain the dogs using our dangerous dog kit and tactics. The dogs are seized on suspicion of being banned breeds and the owner is dealt with. Thankfully, no one has been injured.

Next up is an elderly female with dementia, who has walked out of her care home. I make my way to the location as quickly as possible and set Annie up to begin tracking the woman from where she was last seen walking into some woods. It has rained recently and it's cool, so the conditions are good for Annie to pick up the scent. She begins to track and picks up the scent, only for us to hear that the woman has been found nearby by a family member. This confirms that Annie was right and was hot on her heels – always trust your dog!

Then it's another walk and lunch for me – if there's time. I overhear of a nearby burglary where the offender has made off. By the time I arrive, the offender has been detained but there is some outstanding stolen property. Annie conducts a property search and locates the items hidden in a bush, so the male can be dealt with fully for the offences he has committed. And Annie gets rewarded with her ball!

Shortly after, another job comes in. A man has just violently attacked his ex-partner and is walking away from the address. I am only around the corner. Driving down the road, I see him and tell him to stay where he is. He takes one look at Annie and knows this is a fight he won't win. He is arrested for serious assault – another good job for Annie!

By now it's about 4pm and time for another dog walk, unless another job comes in. I return to the station for about 4.30pm to feed the dogs and clean the vehicle. 5pm is home time. Normally, there's just enough time for a gym workout and dinner before a final dog walk at about 9pm, to make sure that they're comfortable and settled before they're put to bed outside in their kennel.

- This article was peer reviewed by Special Constable Ben Manning, Wiltshire Police.

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