

K-9 Arson Unit trains on Lake Erie

By Hank Huber, Bengal News Online

The New York State Office of Fire Prevention & Control Canine Accelerant Detection Training Program has graduated three dogs April 17 after completing 300 hours of preparation. The course is an eight-week program for prospective Canine Teams offered at the New York State Academy of Fire Science in Montour Falls, N. Y. Part of the training includes environmental conditioning such as exposure to aircraft, water craft and fire apparatus. Three canine trainees and one veteran spent a little more than an hour with their handlers on the Buffalo Fire Department's Fire Boat, getting used to the experience.

The dogs were a little apprehensive going up the narrow ramp onto the boat for the first time, but the experience was meant to expose them to new situations and equipment. Attention and reassurance by their partners lessened the dogs' uneasiness, and helped reinforce the trust between the two. Once aboard they were fine. The dogs' handlers walked them around the deck as the 103-year-old fire boat The Edward M. Cotter made its way into Lake Erie.

Little Buddy, a yellow lab, was handled by Lt. Garnell Smith, the Buffalo fire investigation office commander. New York State Fire Investigator Jim Cable was paired with Bucca, a golden retriever he named after New York City Fire Marshal Ronald Bucca, who died in the September 11 World Trade Center attacks.

The dogs seemed to enjoy the cold breeze and new smells as the Cotter passed the Navel Park's ships The Sullivans and The Little Rock, and the submarine The Croaker. They showed no fear as the boat loudly cut through the ice, pushing huge sheets of it under the frozen surface of the Inner Harbor. After returning to the Academy in Montour Falls, the three graduates and their partners received certification as Official Canine Accelerant Detection Teams.

Eve Bucca, the widow of Fire Marshal Bucca, traveled from NYC to the Finger Lakes/Watkins Glen region to be present for the ceremony. Her husband, who gave his life in the fight to save others, now gives his name to one who will help take arsonists off the streets and make the world a little safer.

The Training

During instruction, the dogs are trained to detect ignitable liquid vapor residue from such substances as: gasoline, kerosene, alcohol, charcoal lighter fluid, Coleman camping fuel, and paint thinner.

The accelerant detection canines use their sensitive noses to discover accelerant residue sites to supplement fire investigators using visual indicators, or electronic detection instruments. Dogs are used because their sense of smell is considered to be about 100 times greater than that of humans, and can distinguish between accelerant vapors and vapors given off by synthetic furnishings burned in the fire. Items made of plastic, rubber and polystyrene often cause the electronic detectors to indicate false-positive results.

"Their ability to discriminate is phenomenal," said New York State Arson Investigator and canine handler Dale H. Moone.

Moone's partner is Alex, a 70-pound, 7-year-old golden retriever with more than 500 searches credited to him. He said that one time, after Alex found the backside of a terrified skunk stuck in a ground hog hole, he had to put him to the test in the investigation training burn building because the dog had been sprayed in the face at close range. Less than 12 hours after being hit directly in the nose with liquid skunk spray, Alex was able to discriminate minute



Accelerant detection canine trainee Bucca with handler Jim Cable on board the Fireboat Edward M. Cotter



Veteran accelerant canine Bucca with reporter and handler

incremented samples of fire accelerants flawlessly, according to Moone.

The significance of this is that even in structures where the debris is considerable and burnt synthetics have produced deceiving vapors, dogs can save valuable investigation time by indicating areas where an accelerant might have been used.

Fire investigation is an extremely difficult task, according to Louisiana State Deputy Marshall and Canine Accelerant Detection Team dog handler Ric Abbott. "You go into an environment that has been completely corrupted from the get-go, then you have 20 firemen going through the place, walking on everything. That's after they've put 3,000 gallons of water on it," he said.

Abbott trained with his 1-year old Labrador retriever, Big Buddy, who was rescued from an animal shelter in Rochester. He said that Louisiana has only three fire dogs, and Buddy will be assigned to cover the whole northern section of the state. "We have a void to fill, and we think Buddy's going to fill that void," he said.



This is Jim Cable and "K-9 Bucca," New York State's newest certified arson investigation team. Having completed a grueling two months of intensive accelerant detection training together, the pair graduated and were officially commissioned into the Office of Fire Prevention & Control - Arson Bureau on April 17.

Two-year-old Bucca (Goodtimes Come Fly With Me) was donated by breeder Kathy Smith of Atlanta, GA, and is named in honor of Fire Marshal Ron Bucca of the NYC Fire Department, an arson investigator who died at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Jim and his wife, Lynn Cable, with

Bucca and a companion Shih Tzu, live in Clarksville, NY. The pair will work from the arson bureau's Albany office. Bucca was Golden Retriever Rescue of Central New York: Rescue #03-03