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Deployed defenders' dog days

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by Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski
AFCENT Combat Camera Team

8/13/2009 - **BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan** -- This deployment is for the dogs. German shepherds, to be exact.

A handful of Airmen and their canine companions are deployed here as part of the 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron, the largest squadron of defenders in Southwest Asia.

This past spring security forces Airmen inherited the base defense mission for Bagram and the K-9 units play an essential role. The dogs search thousands people and hundreds of vehicles on a daily basis. They've found thousands of pounds of bomb-making materials, drugs and other illegal items.

When the handlers first arrived, their Army K-9 counterparts didn't have enough room to adequately accommodate the Airmen and their dogs. So the NCO-in-charge, Tech. Sgt. Drew Odell found a small piece of land that wasn't being used. He talked it over with all the right people and founded Camp Kujo.

"Once we had a place to house and train the dogs, we needed to build the stuff to actually house and train them," said Sergeant Odell, who's deployed from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.

Civil engineer and other construction units were already committed to different projects, so Sergeant Odell designed the compound and when the handlers weren't on other missions, they were building it themselves. Units all over the installation "graciously donated" what they could.

Within a couple of weeks, Sergeant Odell and his team had the facility up and running. The dogs had an obstacle course and the Airmen had a place to sleep. But they had to share it with their four-legged friends, so that became the next project.

Photos 1 of 6

BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan - Staff Sgt. Chris Reynolds runs his German shepherd, Baiky, through a training obstacle course Aug. 7. Sergeant Reynolds, an eight-year Air Force veteran, is a dog handler with the 455th Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron and is deployed from Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif. He and his dog patrol the base and inspect mail, luggage, and vehicles for narcotics. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski)

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"Even though we expected this to be a temporary facility, we put a lot of forethought into it when we started building it, especially the dogs' building," said Sergeant Odell, a Mesa, Ariz., native. "The floors (of the dogs' building) had to support the six kennels, which weigh about 3,100 pounds each, as well as the dogs and anyone coming in here."

Sergeant Odell also designed the dogs' building with a slight slope so it would be easier to wash out each day.

The camp requires constant maintenance. Couple that with normal mission requirements, and there are no "off days" for the K-9 units. When they're not on patrols, they're searching people, vehicles, buildings, mail and luggage for drugs and explosives.

And when they're not on missions, they're training. The dogs and their handlers have to stay in shape physically, so they run several miles a day, carrying their dogs the last half mile or so - practice in case their companion is ever injured. The K-9 teams also have to run the obstacle course and perform other drills to keep their dogs disciplined and mentally focused.

All the training ensures the dogs and their handlers are ready for any situation, whether it's one of their routine missions or augmenting other security forces Airmen, said Staff Sgt. Chris Reynolds, deployed with his dog, Baiky, from Vandenberg AFB, Calif.

One evening a few weeks ago, about a thousand people on foot were all trying to exit a gate at the same time. The restless crowd jammed the turnstiles, but once Sergeant Reynolds brought Baiky out, the people instantly formed lines and the defenders were able to maintain order. Everyone stayed protected and the people trying to leave got off base safely.

"When Baiky barks, everyone minds their manners," said Sergeant Reynolds, who grew up in Visalia, about 200 miles away from Vandenberg. "Having the dogs here makes a big difference,"

For Staff Sgt. Scott Carpenter, a Clarksburg, Mass., native, having his dog, Kane, on the job means fewer people have to be assigned to a particular mission.

"One dog can search an entire room when it might take ten people to clear the same room," said Sergeant Carpenter, who's deployed from Peterson AFB, Colo. "What these dogs can do is just amazing."

Although the K-9 Airmen are fond of their little corner of the base, a new, permanent facility is under construction. The new location will house more Airmen and their dogs, as well as an improved training area. Sergeant Odell helped design the new compound.

"We were the first Air Force dog team to come out for the force protection mission," Sergeant Odell said. "When we leave here, we'll have left it better for the next team, which is the goal. But we can't complain; we really do have the best job in the Air Force: we get to train and play with dogs all day. What's more fun than that?"

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