A FEW GOOD DOGS

BY DEBORAH SALEM

PICTURE A FRUSTRATED PET OWNER WALKING into a humane society's shelter and going straight to the desk where animals are surrendered, dragging a boisterous, sixty-five-pound young adult dog.

"He's impossible—he has tons of energy, digs holes in the yard, wants to chase a tennis ball 'til you drop," complains the owner. "He's friendly, all right, but we just can't handle the destructiveness anymore." The shelter manager looks at the bright-eyed Labrador Retriever (or German Shepherd, pointer, or Golden-mix) and sighs inwardly. "Who is going to want this guy?" she wonders.

The answer may be the United States Customs Service.

Every year, the Customs canine-enforcement program takes approximately 100 healthy, young dogs with energy, enthusiasm, and an almost compulsive need to retrieve into its drug-detection program. After twelve weeks of training, dogs and their handlers are posted to one of thirty-eight ports of entry across the country, where they search baggage, warehouses, mail-handling facilities, private vehicles, small airplanes—even travelers themselves—for illegal narcotics entering the United States.

For the dogs, it's a great career. They play "find the package" with a handler who has been taught to let the dog do its job, then reward the animal effusively when it makes a find.

Although the dog views the work as a game, for Customs, it is serious business: one year, the Customs Service's 153 canine-enforcement teams made 3,854 seizes of narcotics and dangerous drugs with a street value of $844,020,000. Customs officials admit they could use 500 dog/handler teams in ports and at border crossings right now; plans call for 500 teams to be in the field by 1993. These teams are extremely effective; a dog can search an automobile in a few minutes as thoroughly as can a human agent in twenty minutes.

Approximately 98 percent of the Customs Service's drug-detection dogs come from shelters. Each dog is selected by one of the Customs Service's twelve instructors, who canvass shelters nationwide seeking canine students for the service's drug-detection courses, held at a former government mount-station in Front Royal, Virginia. All female dogs recruited are spayed; males are neutered if so required by shelter policy.

Each instructor chooses dogs that he believes will make a good Customs dog. He looks for a high energy level, physical fitness and agility, and a keen desire to grab a tennis ball or play tug-of-war. This last is critical, because a Customs dog's reward for a job well done is a tug-of-war with its handler/buddy at the other end of a rolled-up towel. This towel is an irreplaceable training tool—it is the means by which a dog first learns to use its nose to discriminate among a myriad of scents to concentrate exclusively on marijuana, hashish, cocaine, and heroin.

(Dogs can be taught to detect other substances including bombs, but Customs work is geared to these four.) About one dog in fifty has the right characteristics to make a good detection dog. In three weeks, an instructor on a procurement trip may cover five states and return to Front Royal with ten to twelve dogs. These will be carefully evaluated for physical health. Occasionally, a dog will wash out of the program. "A dog may quit working, or work inconsistently, or occasionally even be aggressive towards people," notes Randy Moore, who oversees the dogs while they are at Front Royal. "Or a dog may develop a physical problem once in the field."

Any dog that is deemed unacceptable at any phase of Customs evaluation will either be returned to the originating shelter or placed in a pet home, according to the shelter's wishes. (Since Customs training doesn't teach or encourage aggression towards people or other animals, drop-outs and retirees can always be placed through Customs contacts.)

Once a dog has been given a clean bill of health, it enters the procuring instructor's upcoming class. Although the instructor is assigned his human students, he chooses his dog students himself. This partiality towards "his" dogs makes an instructor a keen observer of each dog's individual working style and a quick corrector of handler errors.

Five human students compose a typical class. The instructor assigns each handler two dogs based on physical attributes, personality, and energy level. At the end of the course, the handler will choose one dog to take on duty; the other will remain at Front Royal to be matched with a handler in another course or an agent in the field needing a replacement dog. In this way, each handler is assured of finishing the course with at least one dog, even if the other dog does not complete it.

Some handlers may have never worked with a dog before, so early days are spent getting acquainted with their charges. But most handlers have applied specifically for dog-detection work. Jeff Weitzman, for example, previously worked in immigration in Arizona before joining the Customs Service in February. "I saw a drug-detection team at work and knew I wanted to get into Customs," he said halfway through his training in May. He was training Peaches, a yellow Labrador, and Trudy, a German Shepherd, with an eye towards his first assignment, Kennedy Airport in New York City.

At first, a small cloth packet containing artificial (and harmless) hashish is hidden in a tightly rolled and secured tube of toweling. While the dog is held by its handler, the towel is tossed some distance away, in

Mail conveyor belt, sniffing each package. The dog grabs the suspect package with its mouth, so the handler knows which package to pull for inspection. Note the rolled towel tucked in the handler's belt, out of the sight of the dog. A towel game will be the dog's reward for a job well done.
plain sight. “There it is, boy, go get it!” the handler urges, as the dog dashes for the towel. The dog is allowed to parade around the handler, with the towel in its mouth, absorbing the peculiar aroma of hashish. After lavish praise and play, the dog begins to learn that finding the hashish smell in the towel creates joy in its human partner and triggers a play session. Later, the dog learns to find the hashish smell in a package on a moving mall conveyor belt, in a suitcase on a baggage carousel, or among dozens of cartons of soap powder and cleaning supplies in a warehouse. Each time, the handler lays on the praise and produces the wonderful towel from a hiding place behind his back or inside a jacket. As far as the dog is concerned, it has “found the towel inside the suspicious package. Since, for obvious reasons, the dog cannot be permitted to open a rear apartment mail or luggage to get at the contraband substance, it must paw or bite at the item so that the handler knows exactly which package among dozens is the one holding drugs.” Presto! The towel magically appears under the package and the tug-of-war is on.

Later, the dog learns it will be rewarded for finding marijuana, cocaine, and heroin as well as other contraband. Each dog receives a complete medical examination every six months. Although all handlers may not begin to find drugs then reward it with whoops and hollers or give a quick game of tug-of-war, customs dogs are always given attention from the customs officer. “Pawing, chewing, or jumping on someone in the aisle is a sign to the Customs officer,” says Mr. Reed. “I wouldn’t hesitate to call.”

Every dog/handler team is recertified annually by the Front Royal instructors. Usually, if a dog is not working well, instructors will discover a handler error in the performance or training. “I know the dogs are well trained,” says Mr. Reed. “I know within a minute of working with that dog I know the handler.”

Although the life of a Customs dog may seem, in many ways, ideal for a certain kind of dog, Gene McEathron, director of the Canine Enforcement Program, reports that finding enough dogs to make the service work saves an animal’s life. “I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend Customs to any shelter—everything we’ve seen has been good.”

Customs isn’t for every dog. Every dog that pulls on a leash or simply refuses to work saves an animal’s life; others have had bad experiences releasing dogs to police departments or military units only to have the dogs later returned to them traumatized or too aggressive for alternate placement and have closed their doors to any Customs work. Others simply don’t know how Customs training works.

Dennis Reed is chief warden of the Fairview (Virginia) Department of Animal Control, a facility that releases dogs to Customs. “I work with about eight to ten dogs a year,” says Mr. Reed. “I know the dogs and the handlers are trained to do an excellent job.”

All shelters have policies against placing dogs in Customs or other law enforcement agencies. “We release dogs only to animal control agencies that we know will treat them right,” says Mr. Reed. “We’ve had good luck with the Department of Animal Control in Virginia, the Department of Animal Control in Maryland, and the Humane Society of the United States.”

A few dogs, such as the famous Corky, have been returned to the agency after being released to Customs, but it is a very rare occurrence. “Most dogs are released after a year,” says Mr. Reed. “We give them a second chance at a life in the wild and a second chance at a life in a working dog situation.”

Although sporting breeds predominate in Customs work, representatives from a number of pure breeds and mixed breeds have excelled.

Above, Ginger, an Airedale, checks an automobile headlight and radiator grill for concealed drugs. Airdales and pit-bull terrier crosses have passed the test. For some shelter dogs, Customs work is a second chance at a life worth living.

For more information on the U.S. Customs Service’s drug-detection program, contact Gene McEathron, Director, Canine Enforcement Program, U.S. Customs Service, HCB Box 7, Front Royal, VA 22630-9302.