A FEW GOOD DOGS

BY DEBORAH SALEM

PICTURE A FRIERETED 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 one hundred 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 $844,012,000. Customs officials admit they could use 500 dog/handler teams in port and at border crossings right now; plans call for 500 teams 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 research 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” dog 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 Weissman, 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 towel. (Dog students, who do not have ear tags, are handled on lead.) While the dog is held by its handler, the towel is tossed some distance away, in
lavish praise and play, the dog begins to towel. The dog is allowed to parade around plain sight. “There it is, boy, go get it!” the handler urges, as the dog dashes for the towel. The handler urges, as the dog dashes for the towel. The dog is allowed to parade around plain sight.

Later, the dog learns to find the hashish smell in the package or suitcase by pointing or tapping a sign to the Customs officer. (Pawing, chewing, or jumping on someone in the airside won't win Customs many friends. Personal-search dogs are on the job in a few locations as part of a pilot study. More may be ahead.)

Every dog/handler team is rechristened annually by the Front Royal instructors. Usually, if a dog is not working well, instructors will discover a handler error to blame.

Local and state police—even foreign governments—can, for a substantial fee, send officers to fill vacancies in classes for Customs trainees.

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 for Customs, reports that finding enough dogs is a struggle.

Many shelters have policies against placing anywhere but in a pet home; 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 government service. Others simply don't know how Customs training works.

Dennis Reed is chief warden of the Fairfax Regional Enforcement Program, a facility that releases dogs to Customs. “We've had eight to ten dogs graduate with high honors” from the Customs program. “I would 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 likes a game of catch isn’t Customs material. Dogs must be between fifty and seventy pounds (any larger and they can't search a compact car), sporting breeds predominate, although Airedales 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 dog-detection program, contact Gene McEathron, Director, Canine Enforcement Program, U.S. Customs Service, HCR Box 7, Front Royal, VA 22630-9302.

Above, Ginger, an Air-dale, checks an automobile headlight and radiator grill for concealed drugs. Although sporting breeds predominate in Customs work, representatives from a number of pure breeds and mixed breeds have excelled.