

Caring For the Canines

Article by: *Megan A. Peters*

Not ever owning a dog growing up, Trooper Joel Miner thought having a working K9 would be an awesome challenge. He quickly discovered two things within the first two weeks of getting his furry partner, Chevron: Police dogs are a lot of work and he is allergic to them.

“That was a big surprise. At first I thought it was a cold but it didn’t go away,” said Miner as he drove the back streets of a Wasilla neighborhood. “I wasn’t about to quit and give up. I wanted to have a K9. I decided to get allergy shots.”

Initially Miner needed to go in for an allergy shot once a week. After having Chevron for more than a year, he is down to only one shot per month. Miner considers it a small thing to do in order to have Chevron perpetually at his side.

Another small sacrifice is having his uniform go from orderly and spotless at the start of a shift to disheveled and covered with mud by the end of a shift. “All it takes is one vehicle search and I look like I didn’t even start with a clean uniform,” said Miner while shaking his head.

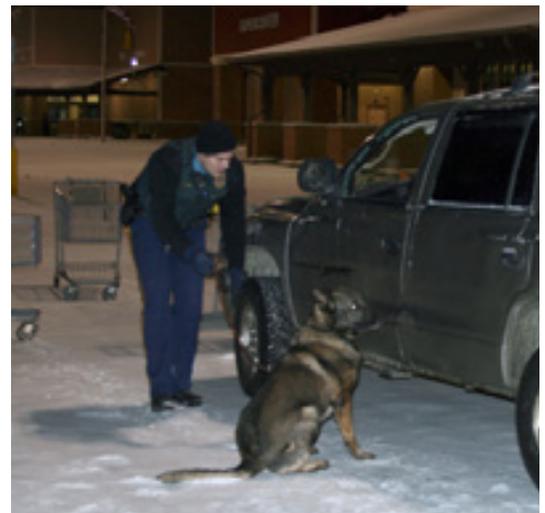
On duty and off duty a K9 requires a lot of attention. In addition to the time it takes training and maintaining the dogs skill set, a trooper has to take the dog to vet appointments, keep them groomed and their kennels clean, exercise the dog and make sure all the dogs needs are taken care of.

A working K9 is more than a partner. “When I had my dog, Comco, I spent more time with him then I did my wife,” said Sergeant Scott Johnson, K9 program coordinator and instructor. “My wife would get out of bed in the morning and Comco and I would fall into bed and zonk out together.”

While the Trooper K9s are working animals, they still become a part of the family because they are a 24/7 responsibility. “They are around the kids, in the house and integrate into your daily life. However, they are highly trained police dogs and you have to see the world through



K9 Chevron spends his time tearing into chew toys and ropes under a desk while his handler takes care of the more mundane office duties at the Mat-Su West Post.



As a drug detection K9 team, Trooper Miner and K9 Chevron are called on to help other Troopers to determine if drugs are inside of suspect vehicles. In the time that K9 Chevron and Trooper Miner have been working together, Chevron has not had a false positive for indicating controlled substances.



Sergeant Scott Johnson's K9 Comco spent a lot of his down time playing with Johnson's kids in the yard. The only member of the family that Comco failed to bond with during his life was Johnson's other pet, a house cat.



At home, Chevron sheds his badge and becomes one of the family. He and the youngest of Trooper Miner's four children both share a fondness for bouncy balls.



Comco liked to celebrate his birthdays just like any other member of the Johnson Family.

their perspective," said Johnson. "A dog will protect your kids like they help protect you. If someone comes running into the yard when the kids are playing, a dog may interpret it as a threat on his turf and want to jump up to defend instead of seeing what happens."

In a sense, Trooper K9s are highly trained athletes that are supposed to take charge which is why a Trooper K9 Handler is never really off duty. "I always had to be with him. If I went on vacation, my K9 came with me," said Johnson. "He was my first concern in the morning and my last at night."



Sergeant Johnson and Comco were inseparable on and off duty. Comco served with the troopers from 1995-2002. He passed away in 2005

Since Miner never really had pets growing up—just farm animals, he compares having K9 Chevron to having another child. But unlike a regular pet or a child, you can't tolerate certain disobedience. The worry is if a working K9 gets used to not obeying commands in the home, it may spread to them not obeying commands in the field. They must have immediate disciplinary action if they aren't following commands to help ensure consistency in their work performance.

A big struggle for the families is how they should interact with the K9s so it doesn't negatively affect the K9s training. They must either learn to properly command the dog and subsequently reward or reprimand the dog's response to the command or they have to not give a dog commands at all. Problems can also arise if a dog is getting too much attention and love in the home. Working K9s are given hyped-affection as a reward for their performance in the field.

“One K9 got so much love at home his performance declined. To fix the issue, the trooper had to resort to kenneling the K9 for periods of time at home instead of letting the dog play with the family,” said Johnson. “It all depends on the dog.”

Sometimes other pets in the home can provide for unique challenges. Johnson’s K9 Comco absolutely hated the family cat. Johnson would have to locate the cat everyday upon arriving home so he could keep the animals separated. Once he put Comco in the bathroom while looking for the cat. Before Johnson realized the cat was already in there when he shut Comco in, the mirror was broken and the bathroom was destroyed. Both the cat and Comco escaped the ordeal with no injuries.

Since a working K9 is almost constantly supervised and with their handler, they can get immense separation anxiety. Leaving working K9s alone has left troopers with shredded books, eaten seats in cars, damaged boats, door trim being torn off the wall and more. An endless supply of chew toys helps to curb the destruction of other items. Regardless of the occasional property damage, K9 handlers and their families find the experience of having the dog an experience to cherish.



Trooper Miner, Chevron and two of Miner’s children out enjoying an afternoon in the snow.



Chevron sometimes gets confused for a cuddly stuffed animal. He often humors Miner’s baby and takes the hair pulling in good humor.

