



Department of Justice

STATEMENT OF
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DEPUTY DIRECTOR
BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FOR A HEARING ON
OVERSIGHT OF THE ATF NATIONAL CANINE DIVISION

PRESENTED

JULY 16, 2018

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Deputy Director
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Chairman Goodlatte, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you regarding the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' (ATF) National Canine Division (NCD) in Front Royal, Virginia.

ATF has been training dogs for federal, state, local, and international law enforcement and fire investigation agencies at this location since 1995. Our training building was constructed in 1999 and our kennels were opened in 2000. This center includes a 20 thousand square-foot climate controlled training building, and a 21 thousand square foot state-of-the-art kennel that can accommodate 100 canines. The center is located on 250-acres of property on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Front Royal. The federal government purchased this pristine property in the early 1900's, and it has remained in pristine condition, free of commercial development. The property was used as a canine training center during World War II, training "War Dogs" for the U.S. Military, and since 1970 has been used exclusively as a canine training center. ATF shares the Front Royal canine campus with our partners from U.S. Customs and Border Protection; this partnership allows us to realize efficiencies by combining our resources and expertise, reducing costs for taxpayers. The campus provides an ideal venue for training canines in explosives and accelerant detection. Beyond the required pristine environment, it has ample property for on-site outdoor training; the surrounding community has a long legacy of cooperation with operations, voluntarily providing "real-world" settings for practical exercises; it has substantial and well-established veterinary and other supporting infrastructure; and it is readily accessible from a nearby International Airport (Dulles International).

Within this setting, ATF has developed a canine training program that is unparalleled and globally recognized. The explosive and accelerant detection skills our canines learn in Front Royal enable them to recognize explosive and ignitable liquid odors at more minute levels than other training regimens that focus on location of bulk-level odors in various types of devices. This level of training allows ATF-trained canines to detect explosive and ignitable liquid odor residue at post-blast, fire and shooting incidents, thereby helping law enforcement to solve crimes where explosives, accelerants, or firearms have been used. The ability to detect odors at lower-levels also allows our canines to more readily detect devices that are concealed to prevent detection, a common tactic utilized by criminals and terrorists to achieve surprise and maximum casualties.

ATF established the National Odor Recognition Testing standard (NORT) to provide a benchmark standard for the assessment of a canine's ability to recognize explosive odors. Ensuring that a canine is able to detect odors from the full range of explosives that may be unlawfully used in improvised devices or bombs is the foundation for any explosives detection

canine program. The NORT provides a clear, science-based and field-proven standard for this assessment; it represents a refinement and advancement of criteria initially developed by ATF in 1997 and has been recognized by Congress as a national standard for effective canine explosives detection.

ATF has trained approximately 1,200 explosive and accelerant detection canines for law enforcement at the Front Royal campus. We have trained explosive detection teams for approximately 102 U.S. law enforcement agencies and 22 international partners. In 2017 alone, the NCD in Front Royal trained, recertified, and/or tested approximately 751 explosive and accelerant actively deployed detection canines. In 2013, NCD also initiated the Search Enhanced Evidence canine (SEEK) program, which trains canines to work off-leash, allowing them to deploy and work at greater distances to detect firearms, ammunition, explosives, and post-blast evidence.

In addition to training canines for law enforcement, ATF's Front Royal campus is one of the few facilities with the capacity and expertise to train U.S. Military Working Dogs (MWD) to combat the escalating threat of homemade explosive (HME) Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). ATF's Front Royal staff has over a decade of experience training law enforcement and MWD canines to detect HMEs, and these expert trainers have developed the training regimens based upon ATF's in-depth scientific knowledge of HMEs. Since 2009, we have trained approximately 3,840 MWD for the U.S. Military and NATO Allied MWD in the NORT and HME detection with the Department of Defense.

The Explosives Detection Canine Handlers program is used to ready both canines and their handlers working as a team to detect a large variety of explosive threat compounds in a number of different settings. Prior to the handlers' arrival, the canines undergo a 6-week imprinting phase involving conditioning to recognize odors from six families of explosives. After the 6-week imprinting process, the canines are paired with their handlers and undergo a 10-12 week training regimen. During this phase, the canine teams learn to conduct searches in environments such as schools, vehicles, train stations, warehouses, and retail stores. After training, the canines are tested by an ATF forensic chemist on 20 different explosives odors, many of which are compounds that have not been previously exposed to the canine. These canines are trained in a "food reward" environment, which requires them to train on a daily basis and enables them to maintain a high level of proficiency.

ATF's Accelerant Detection Canine program has a similar training regime to the Explosives Detection Canine Handlers program, although it is focused on ignitable liquids at fire and arson scenes rather than explosive compounds. The ATF methodology is very efficient in locating the exact spot for the evidence technician to collect a fire debris sample to reduce the numbers of samples taken and to provide the highest probability of a positive result from the crime laboratory once the sample is analyzed.

Earlier, I made reference to the pristine environment here in the Northern Shenandoah Valley, and it undoubtedly is a beautiful location. It is no coincidence that our facility is located in such a clean place. That is because in order to imprint our dogs to detect minute amounts of

ignitable liquids and explosive materials – so minute, instrumentation cannot detect them – it is necessary to train dogs in an environment that is entirely free of accelerant and explosive residue. From start to finish, the trainers, handlers, and staff are meticulous in their handling of these materials in order to maintain full control of the imprinting process. ATF forensic chemists and canine experts employ a strict regimen to ensure canines are trained to a target odor only, and not secondary scents, in the soil or otherwise. Contamination of any type has a significant impact on the training, confidence, and reliability of the canine. Trace contaminants found in the soil become problematic during training when the canine begins to associate the environmental explosive constituents with the target odor. The environmental odor and target odor become one, the canine will no longer detect the target odor when transferred to another environment, and the canine becomes unreliable. I cannot over-emphasize how important it is to prevent cross-contamination while imprinting and training our canines.

The recent bombing incidents in Austin, Texas demonstrate the importance of our program to public safety and countering the criminal use of explosives. As you know, that community was plagued by a series of six improvised explosives devices concealed and delivered in a variety of ways beginning on March 2, 2018. Onsite in Austin, ATF rapidly deployed 17 canine teams from all over the country. These canine teams embedded with bomb squads, tactical units, and surveillance units, and conducted a variety of operations related to both counter-explosive activities and evidence collection. The teams participated in over 600 searches of blast scenes, unattended packages, suspect vehicles, mailing facilities, and drop boxes, clearing those scenes to assure public safety and allow daily activities to resume. Two of the searches involved FedEx processing facilities, one at which a device sent by the bomber exploded, and another where a device sent by the bomber was located and rendered safe before detonation. At both facilities, the ATF canine teams conducted full explosives sweeps to ensure no other devices were present, providing for the safety and security of evidence collections teams and FedEx personnel. The canine teams accomplished the sweeps far more quickly than human or mechanical alternatives, allowing prompt processing of the scenes and FedEx to resume business at the locations.

The Austin bombing provides an excellent example of why the trace odor detection capabilities of the canines are critical to law enforcement operations. By their nature, bombing scenes like those that occurred in Austin are covered with debris. Some of the debris is critical evidence, and some is just the result of the blast. To a human eye, it all appears the same – but not to an ATF canine. The ATF canines deployed in Austin were able to rapidly differentiate between the two, ensuring the collection only those items of evidentiary value, and allowing forensic lab examiners to focus on critical evidence examination and not waste valuable investigative time on extraneous debris.

Every day across our nation, ATF-trained canines help solve a wide variety of explosive, arson, and shooting cases, and help protect our communities from these threats at public events. Examples from this year alone include: ATF canine teams provides security at a number of public events such as the PGA golf tournament in January, the Super Bowl in February, and the NCAA Final Four and Boston Marathon in March. Additionally, our ATF canine teams worked under the direction of the U.S. Secret Service and provided assistance with security at the middle and outer perimeters of the Presidential Inauguration in 2016 and the Republican Convention in

2017. Our accelerant detection canine teams assisted at major fire scenes in Benton and Fairfield, Maine in February; helped to solve a year old homicide in Tennessee; an arson investigation at an apartment complex in Concord, California in April; and an arson investigation in Puerto Rico in May. ATF explosive detection canine teams assisted in the horrific school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas in April, locating explosive devices left by the shooter; and in May, located a firearm used in the attempted shooting of a police officer in Alabama.

Mr. Chairman, I would be remiss if I did not personally acknowledge and thank the many citizens here in the Front Royal area who have been such outstanding community partners to ATF and Customs and Border Protection in the two decades we have been located here. Our relationships here in the community and region are vital to the success of our operations, and include hotels, canine-supply vendors, training locations, and veterinary services. Further, our proximity to a major international airport in Northern Virginia, ATF Headquarters, and the resources in the National Capital Region have ensured that NCD is accessible to the agencies and handlers we serve, which include our federal law enforcement partners, our colleagues at Homeland Security, and intelligence agencies.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, we are very proud of our facility in Front Royal, and it is without exaggeration that I can say it is one of the best canine facilities in the world. ATF canine teams provide a critical resource both in preventing and countering explosives and arson incidents and in investigating such incidents when they occur. Their capabilities are unmatched and I welcome your questions about our canine programs and the Front Royal campus.