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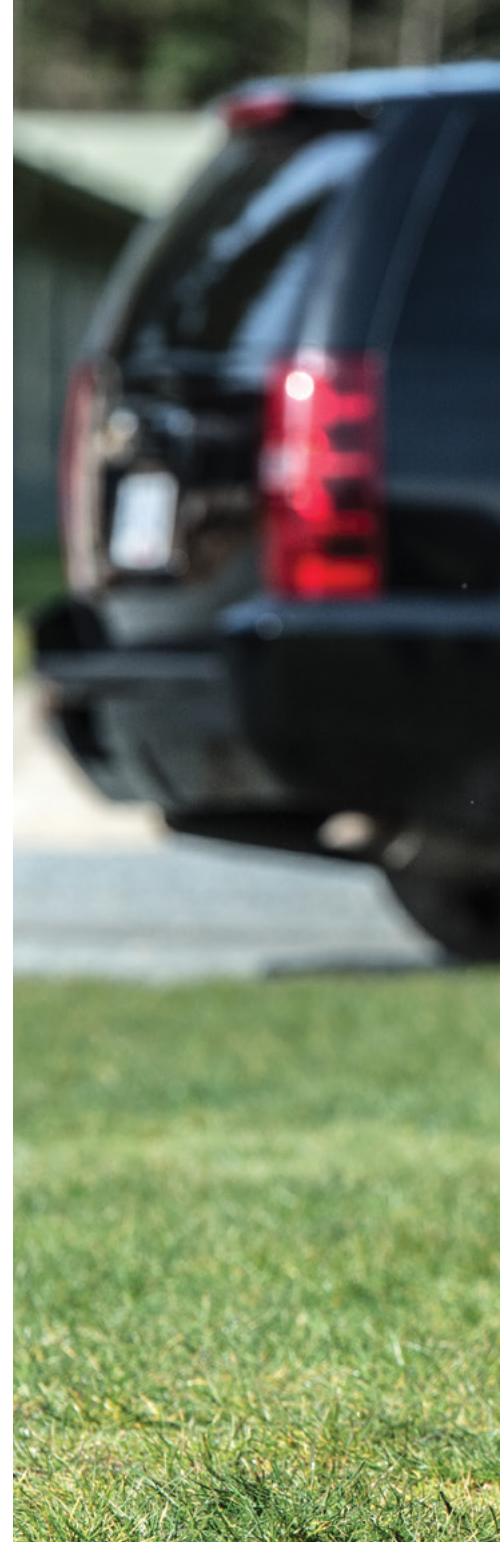
In this multiple article series, we will explore police K-9 obedience from a tactical perspective. Obedience for police patrol dogs, as it is now, is mainly practiced for the purpose of passing a certification test. So, what some police dogs know often has more to do with performing in a sterile certification environment rather than performing on an actual deployment. Most certifications have obedience and agility requirements that are done “out of deployment context” for the most part, meaning on a soccer field, around cones, doing exercises that are mostly old and outdated, but are meant to show “control” and the ability to follow commands. Heeling, changes of pace, turns, stays out of motion, recalls, drops and hand signals, while all worthwhile commands, are done generally on a field without distractions of any kind.

A good in-service program should take these beginning skills and make sure they are woven into deployments in a useful way. This article will focus on tactical obedience applications. In other words, obedience that is carefully trained and planned to gain a specific result important to the deployment of police dogs to achieve safer and more efficient usage.

For many police dog handlers, certification obedience allows them to give multiple loud commands to achieve an obedience result. However, tactically, we teach our officers in other contexts noise discipline, so as to not give away their position of cover or worse, a position of concealment. Yelling hard multiple commands is not tactically sound. Teaching your dog to respond to commands in a normal tone and ensure that they respond quickly with correct behavior the first time in environments that are new and distracting takes planning, training and understanding of how to properly employ positive reinforcement and positive punishment. In a previous article, I wrote about obedience fundamentals, as well as compartmentalizing obedience training (*“Component Training for Police K-9s: Obedience” (K-9 Cop Magazine May/June 2013)*).

Tactical Obedience Training for Police K-9 Deployments: Introduction

In that article, I went into depth about the process for breaking down exercises into component parts, how to reward and correct and get your dog on a variable reward system. In the present article, we are going to discuss general approaches to tactical obedience training that will be discussed in more detail in the follow-on articles.





Article by Jerry Bradshaw & Sean Siggins

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Photos by Britney Bradshaw & Derek Cain Photography

Some of the things in this article may be new for you to consider, but change in our industry is coming upon us faster and faster and it is our job to keep up with the times. Last year I wrote about doing scenario based training in general for your in-service work. These articles on tactical obedience are intended to get you thinking about how obedience exercises can be trained and utilized in order to make your deployments more efficient, safer and more successful. If you ask most K-9 cops which phase of training that they and their dogs enjoy most, obedience doesn't normally make the top three, but when you see how it can not only be enjoyable for you and your dog (using the power of reward rather than old yank/crank methods) and how it can make your deployments more fluid and efficient, it can be a part of training that you look forward to doing because of its utility. As I mentioned already, the articles to follow in this series will explain in detail how to achieve the training results. This article is intended to present these ideas and the reason to undertake this training.

Focused Heeling

Most police dog heeling consists of loose leash walking on the left side that is passable for certification. The dogs are allowed to look around as long as they stay in position. Often, multiple hard commands are given with a lot of leg slapping. There are times when a looser heel with your dog looking at his surroundings is appropriate and tactically sound. However, consider teaching your police dog two other styles of heeling. The first "other style" I want you to consider is a focused attention heel. In my book, *Controlled Aggression*, in the appendix, I go into detail about how to train a focused attention heel.

In the picture accompanying this article, you can see the dog is taught first using a lure. It can be a ball or a tug in sight or food. Then the lure is faded out of sight (often the ball is placed under the arm or the tug in the small of your back). The dog learns to give the behavior first and then is rewarded from out of sight, finally proceeding to a variable reward system with the reward out of sight. Some trainers use verbal markers as a bridge to the reward and some use a clicker to mark the correct head and eye position. Verbal markers are easy to use and consist normally of saying a word that "bridges" from the behavior you want to mark as correct to the reward for that behavior. Typically the word "yes" is used.

The reason to teach an attention heel is simple. Often times you have to make your way through heavy distractions with your dog to a deployment point. Virtually every canine officer has had to contend with people yelling, either at them or around them, and this can often be perceived as agitation by your dog. If your dog sees the "agitator" who could just be a loud neighbor yelling from their porch as you proceed to a tracking deployment, your dog could become fixated

on this distraction and this competing motivation could cause you to have difficulty getting him to focus on his track. The attention heel captures your dog's eyes and head position completely and mandatorily, thus you can keep him from becoming distracted by these outside influences. In-service training can mimic these situations by having your dog heel around loud bystanders and then upping the criteria to bystanders in bite suits. Teach him to bypass these distractions and focus on you until you reach the point where you want him to focus on the reason you got him out of the car, which could be to perform a track, building search or narcotics search. Further, as you proceed to a deployment point, you want your dog, as well as your gear, nice and tight to you. This is a technique you can have and use where and when appropriate.



Tactical Heeling (Between the Legs)

As you progress with your dog in training, another heeling position you can teach is the between the legs tactical heel. You can see in the photos here, the dog is between your legs so you know by feel where he is at all times (this movement by feel is used by SWAT team members as they move in tandem so that they don't have to rely on sight, and don't have to take their focus off of areas of responsibility). This is a great position as you move through a building or dark outdoor area. It allows freedom of movement, allows you to keep hands on your weapon (especially useful as a shooting position for both hand and long guns), allows you to know where your dog is exactly and your body movements cue the dog to move, turn, stop, and down, as you make these moves without commands. Further, it desensitizes your dog to being straddled for tactical removals from apprehensions. You can see a short video of a quick clearing of a building by our instructor Sean Siggins moving with his K-9 Cayman through a building at www.vimeo.com/123302040. This between the legs tactical position can be a deployment starting position for building and area searches as well.

Many K-9 handlers are using this position for moving and shooting with their dog. Teaching your dog to stay in this position during shooting (including return fire) keeps your dog from becoming a possible liability out at your side, possibly pulling you or making it necessary to keep your hand on the leash. As you progress to using an e-collar, both the attention heel and tactical heeling can be very useful in making your deployments more efficient. There is also a prone shooting position where the handler keeps his dog in a down beside his leg, with a foot hooked over his back - again to keep the touch communication with the animal. Of course this is a goal to achieve and should not be attempted without proper desensitization training.



Tactical Heeling (Between the Legs) photos by Britney Bradshaw





Neutrality Training

Neutrality to body position means your dog doesn't react to you differently when your body is in different positions. In most police dog certification tests, obedience is done from a standing position. Changes of pace are done in small increments, with movement transitions of fast to slow to normal. In an actual deployment you may have to heel with your dog at a fast pace or slow pace for an extended period. You may need to heel with your dog with your weapon out in a low ready stance. You want your dog neutral (not reactive) when you call him to heel if you are kneeling or in a firing position or during firing, to bring him safely to cover. Each of these body positions you might need in a deployment must be practiced with your dog in training before they will be reliable on a deployment.

You might leave him in a down at a corner of a building as a rear guard as you approach another corner and call him to you as you clear that next corner. You want the dog to come up into position either on your side or between your legs when you are standing or crouched. Motion exercises need to be practiced from all pace changes (silently) from the between the legs position. As you crouch, the dog stops and downs. As you resume moving, the dog resumes moving with you. If you have any question that this is contextual for your dog, try giving him commands like sit and down at a distance when you are lying prone. Your dog becomes used to your body position when you give him obedience commands.

In addition to body neutrality, your dog needs to be neutral to your weapon. When your weapon is drawn quickly, you don't want your highly prey driven dog to react to it and go after it. This is why we teach



the dog to take toy rewards from our off hands (non-gun hands). This neutrality is built by starting slow. When the dog holds position as you draw slowly, his proper response is marked and then rewarded. Start from a stationary position and move on to a faster draw. Let him see both short and long guns during obedience training. Let him see and hear your Taser being deployed. Let him see your ASP baton being drawn and deployed. Many dogs, because of detection training, get cued into the sound of Velcro (as their Kong is taken out of BDUs) and your ASP being drawn may have the same sound that excites the dog out of position.

Finding Heel Position (Door Poppers)

Finding heel position (or tactical between the legs position) is an exercise the dog needs to learn, so that coming to you from any direction around the clock, he can find this position. Finding heel position is also an exercise that is then incorporated into the use of a door popper. There have always been a lot of questions about how to train the use of the door popper correctly. What side of the car should open and what should the dog do once it is opened? Our preference is for the door popper to be on the driver side not the passenger side, as just outside your door is your typical cover position using the engine block. It has the additional effect of having the driver door shield the dog's eyes until you decide what you want him to see. The dog is also coming out more directly to you and there is less chance that the dog will come out and react to stimulation on the opposite side of the car, out of your sphere of control. The typical argument for the passenger side is so that on a traffic stop, the dog is not coming out into traffic. As with all tactical discussions, there is no perfect answer.

your most familiar tactical position next to your driver side door. This is a direct route from behind you into position. Once he is fluid finding you around your car, move on to positions at a suspect car.

Practice mock vehicle stops and teach him to find you at the suspect car kneeling, prone or on your back around the suspect vehicle. For him to help you, he must find you. Ask yourself if this kind of obedience command is more valuable to you than the time you spend teaching your dog and practicing a certification style catwalk or heeling around cones.

Once your dog will come out to you anywhere very reliably without distractions, start having him come to you around decoy distractions. This can also be practiced when heeling on the soccer field, sometimes call him past passive decoys, call him to you around decoys that are moving slightly, and then ones that are jogging. First have the decoys in suits about 15 feet from the car and make him come to you. Then have them mildly moving around, jogging and then running and being vocal. Dogs deploying out of door poppers without

“If your dog knows he must find you first before he gets to do anything, just like with the attention heeling around decoys to make him neutral to those distractions, he can ignore backup moving into position.”

Regardless of the side of the car you employ, teaching the dog to come out to you first is imperative. Once the dog knows how to find heel position, we back chain the exercise to then include coming out of the vehicle on the action and sound of the door pop.

To keep things simple at our academy, we teach the dog to come out and immediately find the handler. If you are calling the dog to your aid, he needs to find you first. You are in charge of the use of force and you want him ignoring anything and everything until he finds you. If you are calling him out to set up for a coming deployment, he needs to find you. Think of your patrol car as a clock. Pop the door and have him immediately find you, starting with close to the door he is exiting and moving around the vehicle. If you use the tactical heel position of between the legs, you can call him out to you without taking your eyes off what you are looking at as you will feel him come into position. You can have a leash inside the driver area of your car and if he wears a fur-saver collar, you can hook him up without looking. In the articles that follow, we will describe how to properly guide and reward this behavior.

You then move around the clock, having him stay tight to the car, to find you. He must find you standing, behind cover at your driver door and all points around the car, so he stays tight to the vehicle when coming to find you. This increases the safety trade off of being on the driver side, because in many cases you will be calling him up to

this kind of neutrality training will bite your backup guys. The dogs come out, see a flash of movement and want to go to it. If your dog knows he must find you first before he gets to do anything, just like with the attention heeling around decoys to make him neutral to those distractions, he can ignore backup moving into position. This is advanced training, but well worth the time and effort. In a future article, we will spell out this training progression in more detail and how to set up the reward and correction structure for this.

Distance Work

Police dogs are generally more obedient around the handler where his influence is greatest. However, a lot of what we want our dogs to do is work away from us and be able to be under control. Thus, there are two commands to think about training your dog to do that are not always the norm. First, downs at a distance from you. In building searches, we employ a “clear, down and cover” methodology. The dog is fished out on a long line to clear a section of building and then asked to down at a distance. We watch his behavior for signs of change (smell or sight of a subject) and then move up to the next cover position so that we can repeat the process. When we teach our tactical building search seminars, one of the commands the dogs have the most trouble with is the down at a distance. Once the down command is given, the dogs want to come toward the handler to execute the



Photo by Britney Bradshaw



Photo by Britney Bradshaw



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Photo by Britney Bradshaw



command. Often, almost all the way back, because that is the context in which the majority of down commands are given, rather than being fluid with just downing in place. This also re-orientates the dog to looking back at you rather than covering forward with his attention. Again, this is an exercise that can be set up and practiced to perfection so that the dog doesn't run back to you.

Another command that most police dogs are not fluid with is a send away command - to go out away from the handler whether in a building or outside. If you are moving around a building's exterior or even in a building search context, you may want to send the dog up to check a corner or troublesome intersection of hallways. The send out allows you to do this and stay at a cover position so the dog can check the corner for you using his eyes and olfactory senses to make sure the coast is clear. In combination with the down at a distance, the send away and down can give you a big tactical advantage. In many certifications, the down on recall exercise is done. While this is useful, the send out and down is harder to teach. It's always harder to teach the dog to go away from you than come to you. Once the dog learns the send away, you can then teach him directional send outs.

Generalization

In this section, I want to toss out some other things to add into your obedience training to get you away from the sterile, cones on a field, certification style obedience training to keep it fun for you and your dog.

- As you teach your dog to send out and recall to you in buildings, try moving your position to teach your dog to find you. Send him out, down him, move up and into a room, and recall him back to you. Or place him in a sit or down away from you and move your position around before calling him.
- If you have shields, teach him to come up from the rear to you and come back from ahead, past the

shield guy to you. Even if you are not in a SWAT stack, movement with your dog around other officers or shield holding backup is a great neutrality exercise to teach.

- Practice all these exercises in low light and dark environments, encouraging your dog to make touch contact with you, whether on the left side attention heel or between the legs, so when it's dark you can feel him as he comes to you.
- Practice on unstable ground, including stairwells, recalling to you and coming to heel position or tactical heel position between the legs on a stairwell or in the woods or cluttered rooms.
- Practice your weapon neutrality around reloading, dropping magazines, holstering, drawing, changing weapons.
- Once you perfect your tactical movement with weapons and your dog is neutral to shooting at the range in a stationary position, start practicing shooting and moving and then add in additional team members.
- Train all your obedience around decoys in suits, because not only will agitation be a distraction, employing attention heeling to keep your dog's attention on you rather than his environment is often a major safety issue. Friendlies, such as fire or rescue in turnout gear, look like decoys in bite suits, so you must be able to control them around these distractions.

If in-service training is boring and you do the same certification exercises over and over, sit down with your training group and set up scenarios using some of the ideas in this article to inspire you to take your training to a higher level. Certification is a basic competency, don't be satisfied with that. You are K-9. You are a specialty unit that must aspire to the highest standards and challenge not only yourself as a handler/trainer, but your unit to evolve and progress and set the bar ever higher! ■