



K 9 EQUIPMENT:

TRAINING WITH THE AUTOMATIC DOOR RELEASE

BY JERRY BRADSHAW, TARHEEL CANINE TRAINING, INC.

INTRODUCTION

Many K9 patrol vehicles are outfitted with an automatic door release. The door release is controlled by a button on the K9 officer's duty belt, and if an emergency situation arises, or the officer needs to have his dog come to his aid, or just come to him for a deployment with a push of the button the K9 cage door comes open, and the dog can come out. There are some important considerations to employing this device that will be discussed in this article.

To which door – passenger side or driver side – should the door release be attached? There are arguments for both. The main argument for the passenger side is that since we drive on the right side of the road, when the door is released the dog will be coming

out on the shoulder side of the road, rather than potentially into traffic if the dog is released on the side of the road during a traffic stop. However, the dog could still come out and come across into traffic either in front of the police car or behind the police car if the action is occurring in the road rather than the shoulder. Some officers want the dog to come out behind them and directly up to them in heel position if for example they are posted up at the engine block. In this case the dog exiting on the driver side has a short, fast and clean entry into heel position with the handler posted up at the engine block.

Whichever side the dog exits, it is imperative for the dog to come out and find the handler first, before engaging any perceived threats. Here are some facts about door releases. Often, the door popper is trained by having a decoy in training simulate a fight with the handler on the door release side, so the dog comes out



immediately and is expected to engage the threat to the handler. The problem with associating the door release with a bite is that, in the situation where you just want quick access to your dog, in a potential chase scenario for example, the dog may exit and engage anyone who happens to be running by the vehicle (back-up officer). This potential is increased if the dog is released on the passenger side away from the handler and away from the handler's influence.

There are numerous stories about police dogs released by a door popper, who bite whomever first goes to the ground – suspect or handler - in a handler attack scenario. Grounded “prey” is a very strong draw to a dog in the mood to bite. If the door popper is associated with immediately engaging in a bite, this risk is increased, as the dog isn't thinking as much as reacting. Further imagine a dog in muzzle being released to a handler attack scenario where the suspect decoy is in civilian clothes, again often whomever is thrown to the ground first will be engaged. I believe these situations occur because the dog comes out of the car looking to bite. The fastest way to teach the dog to exit on the door releasing is to give a high value reward (bite). However what we really want the dog to do is release and come find the handler first, and make that behavior very strong. The dog shouldn't be coming out looking for a bite, but rather coming out looking for the handler who then deploys the dog on command.

TEACHING THE DOOR RELEASE

We teach the dog to exit and find the handler. A pre-requisite for this behavior is to know heel position so that the dog can be released, find the handler, and get into heel position. If the dog doesn't yet know heel position, we can teach the dog to exit and find the handler, with the handler giving a marker command “yes” as the dog arrives at his position, and giving the dog a reward toy.

Once the dog arrives in heel position, the officer can then deploy the dog after that happens, on a fleeing subject, felony vehicle stop apprehension, area search, or any number of scenarios. If the handler takes a knee at the engine block, the dog would come up to his heel position and be ready for the next command from a good cover position. In fact we don't want the dog thinking about biting upon exiting to the exclusion of finding the handler first. By removing the “bite first ask questions later” mentality from the exercise the dog is much more likely to be in a thinking mood when he finds the handler, and consequently if the handler is in a fight with a suspect, the dog will better be able to distinguish friend from foe.

If we are having the dog find the handler, and the release is on the passenger side door, I want the dog hugging the rear of the car and coming up into heel position. Therefore in the initial



CHANGING IMPORTANT VARIABLES

Once the dog can find you 360 degrees around the police car, you have to start changing some variables. One variable is your position. We start this process with the handler standing in every position, sometimes facing the dog's approach to you, sometimes facing away. The dog must find heel position. Then we do it kneeling, front and back. Then on all 4s as a prelude to being prone, and finally prone. The dog must be rewarded when he obtains heel position with his toy, and guided into proper position as you change your level with him. Once the dog is doing this well, you can add distractions. Put dead sleeves and suits off to the side of the car, and make him come to position and ignore the distractions. This is something you should be doing with your dog in his regular obedience work anyway, so it just extends to this door release exercise.

training I will put a long line (or if you are good with one a Flexi-leash) on the dog and close him in the vehicle. The long line will feed out the door to the handler. The handler will have the dog's obedience reward (Kong, tug, ball on string) on his person. The dog is released by the popper and the handler calls and guides the dog to him in heel position and rewards the dog for obtaining position. The handler will work his way around the car in the same direction to teach a pattern to the dog. Ideally the dog should exit the vehicle and hug the trunk and come up the side of the vehicle toward the engine block which is the usual cover position. Therefore, we first start at the rear wheel behind the door on the passenger side, then next position to the rear, passenger taillight, then middle of the trunk, then to the driver back wheel, and so on. This should be done in a variable pattern, sometimes further away sometimes closer. If you place your door release on the driver side, start from there and have the dog come out, and up toward the driver door, engine block area, around the front of the vehicle and eventually 360 degrees to where he started.

When the dog is good with coming to you past these distractions, put a man in a suit around the car, as a distraction, not to be engaged. If this is too much of a temptation, that is a signal you need to work more on decoy neutrality in training. Perhaps put the decoy in a chair to make him less enticing. When the dog will come past the standing suited man to you for his obedience reward, you can decide to increase the level of distraction by having the decoy be moving past the release door as you pop the door and call the dog. First just milling around, then walking, then jogging and running. The dog must ignore the distraction and come to you. You must have a way to enforce obedience to the recall, and not allow him to get the decoy. Start back at the beginning with a long line on the dog and coming closer to the exit point, and reward the dog for coming to heel with his toy. If you use an e-collar, the e-collar can be employed to enforce the recall to heel position as well. This training exercise simulates a deployment where a back-up officer might be running by the door as you release the dog, and guards against the dog engaging a good guy or a civilian in the wrong place at

the wrong time. Once the dog will ignore the decoys, you can then release him occasionally to bite the decoy on command but only *after obtaining heel position*. For the recall portion, occasionally be prone or even on your back, so he gets used to seeing you on the ground as normal, and pays attention to that detail. It will be important when the dog finds you being attacked by a suspect in training so that he engages the correct person.

SIMPLE SCENARIO: Put a decoy next to the driver door of a suspect vehicle in a simulated traffic stop. Place another distraction decoy off the vehicle on the side the dog will exit to simulate back up. Hit your popper and have the dog come to heel position at your engine block. Then send the dog forward to the decoy next to the suspect vehicle. Only do this occasionally, and only after the dog first finds you. We want him to know it is a possibility but only on your direct release.

ADDING IN THE SUSPECT VEHICLE

In a real scenario on the side of the road at 3am, the dog may have to look for you around the suspect car as well, and off to the sides in the culvert on the side of the road. Make this a game where the dog has to first search your car, then search around the suspect car for you. Stay out of sight, and when the habit is clear that the dog comes to you in heel position, stop calling him, and just have him find you on the release of the door. If you were being hit and become unconscious, and your last act was to release the dog, you won't be able to call him, he must know to find you when the door opens. Finding you is the first priority. If someone is hitting you while you are unconscious, and there is a second suspect the dog engages on his way out of the car, it does you no immediate good.

Work your way around the suspect car in the same systematic fashion you trained him to work around your car. Standing first, kneeling, and then prone. Employ the same decoy distractions around the suspect car as you did around the K9 vehicle. The dog must come to you first before doing anything else, despite any distractions. Here are two scenarios where using the automatic door release would increase officer safety immeasurably, but don't allow for the dog just to come out and bite indiscriminately. Train hard, and expect a lot of your dog as you progress. The door release is a powerful tool to enhance officer safety, but like anything else must be trained systematically, and with clear goals in mind. This element of the dog's tactical obedience repertoire is extremely important. Devote the requisite time to it and it will increase the efficiency of your K9's usage.

SIMPLE SCENARIO: Simulate a traffic stop. Two decoys are in the front seats. You get the driver subject out of the vehicle while there is another person in the passenger seat. Simulate a "seen gun" on the floorboard of the driver side where you put the subject on the ground at gunpoint and call your dog up to you to assist in the arrest of the second subject until help arrives. The dog must bypass biting the grounded subject at gunpoint and place him in a guard position as you bring the passenger out into the open at the front of the vehicle and secure him.

SIMPLE SCENARIO: Decoy suspect in a hidden sleeve, or alternatively in plain clothes and dog in a protection muzzle in K9 cage. A subject is seen walking toward a wooded area with both hands in his hoodie pockets who is suspected of robbery of a convenience store nearby by threatening he had a gun in his pocket. The suspect seen closely matches the description of the convenience store suspect. As you come up on the subject, he continues to walk, you bring your car to a halt and with eyes on him and from a cover position at your engine block order him to stop. Anticipating the need for an area search or apprehension, you hit your door release and know your dog can easily execute that command and find you at your engine block. You order the suspect to stop, and threaten to release your dog if he fails to comply. The subject breaks into a run into the woods, and you deploy your dog. By training the door release correctly you never have to take your eyes off the threat and the dog doesn't self-deploy.



Jerry Bradshaw is Training Director & President of Tarheel Canine Training, Inc. in Sanford, North Carolina. Jerry has been training dogs for competitive protection sports since 1991, and has competed in National Championship trials in both Schutzhund and PSA, winning the PSA National Championships in 2003 with his dog Ricardo v.d. Natuurzicht PSA 3. Jerry has trained many Belgian Malinois to the highest titles in the sports in which he competed including Arrow of Tigerpaws, SchH 3, BH; Ben von Lowenfels, SchH 2, BH; Rocky de la Maison Des Lions PSA 3; and Ricardo v.d. Natuurzicht PH 1, PSA 3.

Tarheel Canine Training Inc. is a nationally renowned training facility for police service dogs, and has placed trained police dogs at federal, state and local law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally since 1993. Jerry is often a featured speaker at national police K9 conferences, and travels extensively giving seminars to police departments, the US Military, and sport trainers across the United States. Jerry has written a book, *Controlled Aggression*, which is rapidly becoming the standard text for understanding the fundamentals of canine aggression training for police service, personal protection, and competitive dog sports. Jerry also maintains a free blog at www.tarheelcanine.com.

Many of the training concepts mentioned in this article are covered in depth in published articles available on the Tarheel Canine website at www.tarheelcanine.com/media-area/training-articles/

Please feel free to make your handlers, trainers, and training groups aware of this resource.