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Israeli canine cops protect California residents

By Kelly Hartog June 15, 2007



Santa Clara Deputy Sheriff Michael Saliba with his Israeli canine partner Shemaya - 'By training in Israel we had tangible experiences that an average officer in America can't get'

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When Michael Saliba wants his two dogs to follow his commands, he barks out the following orders: Chapes (search), Artza (lie down) Ken (yes), and Shev (sit). Pretty standard commands for any dog... if you live in Israel. But Saliba is a deputy sheriff in Santa Clara in Northern California, and until recently didn't speak a word of Hebrew.

That all changed earlier this year, when Saliba, along with eight other law enforcement officers from six California jurisdictions, went to Israel to learn how to become the Office of Homeland Security's first ever Counter-Terrorism Canine Handlers. Following two months of intensive training, the officers returned with their Israeli dogs to their jobs in Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, Alameda, Santa Clara and San Mateo Sheriffs' offices - and with a new, albeit, limited command of Hebrew.

The majority of the training took place at kennels in Netanya, with field operations in the Sharon and Gush Dan areas. The \$411,000 training program funded entirely by California's federal homeland security grants was undertaken by Pups for Peace, a California-based non-profit organization dedicated to reducing death and injury through the use of specifically trained explosive detection dogs and handlers, in an effort to prevent terrorism.

Pups for Peace was established shortly after the Passover double suicide bombings at the Park Hotel in Netanya in 2002, to train dogs to send to Israel to help detect suicide bombers. "It's amazing," said Yoram Doctori, the Israeli director of operations for Pups for Peace, and course manager for the California Homeland Security Office. "They helped us in the beginning and now we can give back to them by training their handlers here in Israel with our dogs."

"Israel is the place to work with world renowned experts on canine and anti-terrorism training," added Mathew Bettenhausen, director of the California office of homeland security.

Doctori explained that some of the unique methods that Israel employs with its dogs involve advanced counter-terrorism.

"We use tactics that no one else in the world uses. Krav Maga, and martial arts to allow the dogs to detect [a possible suicide bomber] within three feet of them. We train the handlers and the dogs in places that were hit by suicide bombers. It gives them that sense of urgency that cannot be found in America," he told ISRAEL21c.

In addition, Doctori said unlike in the US, the dogs are not just trained to detect the explosives; they're also trained to

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control the suspect. Other training methods that are not employed in the US include training the dogs to work with the public. "We don't evacuate and work in a controlled area," Doctori said. "All our dogs are friendly and are at ease being in public."

In fact, the dogs and their trainers joined a Purim parade held in Netanya, filled with children and merriment.

"For us it was a drill," said Doctori. "It helped being able to work among all that noise."

Saliba, who has now been back home for just over a month with his two Israeli dogs - Shemaya, a yellow lab and Jerry, a German Shepherd - is still amazed by how much he has learned.

"Almost every place we train here [in America] is in a controlled environment," he said. "When we worked in Netanya we took our dogs to the bus terminal. That place is packed with people and our dogs were checking under seats, round people's bags and everyone was fine with it."

Saliba's also getting used to working in Hebrew with his dogs. "I can't say the word "stay" (tisha'er) though," Saliba admits. "Too many 'e's" I've given up." But he has managed to get his tongue around Azov (wait) tov (good) and lo (no). "It's taken some getting used to," he admits. "In America when we train dogs, it's all silent commands. With the Israeli dogs we're trained to talk to them and give commands constantly."

According to Doctori the international dog training language in the canine industry is in fact German - "but we refuse to do that obviously in Israel," he said.

Another unique aspect of the Israeli training is that each of the handlers receives not one but two dogs. "The Israelis had such foresight on this idea because the dogs work really hard and can only focus for 20-30 minutes at a time," said Saliba. "This way one dog can rest while the other works, so we can scour an area constantly. Visibility is the best weapon against terrorism," he explained. "Having two dogs creates more presence, saves money, and allows us to search a greater area.

"We gained so much by doing this program," Saliba added. "By training in Israel we had tangible experiences that an average officer in America can't get. We learned how to function in a society that has to deal with terrorism every day; we learned how society reacts to terror and how to act in order to save lives."

Saliba also had nothing but the highest praise for his trainers - Elad and Ram. "They serve in the military, and are so smart, experienced and knowledgeable. But they're also so humble. They shared with us how they served on the border with Lebanon with their dogs. They're all focused on one goal to save lives and keep an eye out for terrorists."

For Saliba the experience has been invaluable. "We now have one more weapon we can use to fight and defeat terrorism in the US. For the Israelis, there is no limit to the amount of

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money and training that can be utilized to save a human life. That's what we need to do here."

Saliba said he would go back to Israel "in a heartbeat. I hope maybe there'll be an advanced course we can take. I have made such good friends and since I came back from Israel, I bought two big jars of green olives. I'm afraid I've become addicted to them," he said, laughing.

Doctori said the whole experience has been amazing. "We can now give something back to the US. We both have the same values of democracy and freedom. We share the same enemies and we are both in this struggle for this fight against terror."

Kelly Hartog is a free-lance writer based in Los Angeles.


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