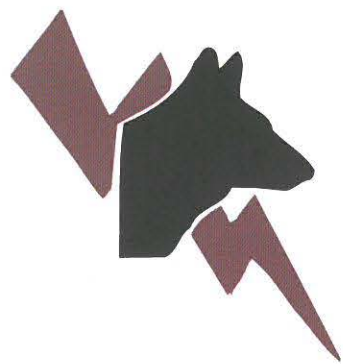


K-9 Dog Academy Takes its Training to the Mine Field

The Journal senior editor Margaret Busé sits down with dog trainer Malinda Julien to discuss the K-9 Dog Academy and the future—and present—of mine detecting dogs.



By Margaret S. Busé, *Editor*

Margaret Buse (MB): Can you tell me the history of Thunderstorm Canine and the K9 Academy?

Malinda Julien (MJ): The academy is actually a small part of what we do. Thunderstorm Canine is undergoing a change. The kennels were originally designed to work search and rescue. In our search and rescue work we came across the law enforcement folks who kept telling me that they could really use some good canine units. We decided to go into explosives, cadavers,

So, we decided to dedicate a lot of our program to mine detecting dogs (MDDs).

MB: What is the basic training needed by all working dogs before they can be deployed into a specific situation?

MJ: In our view it starts even before the dog is born—the genetics. For example, the litter we dropped in January is specifically targeted for explosives and MDDs. They will be scent imprinted. This is something that I do with all of my litters. Some of the old-timers think it doesn't work, but we are convinced that it does work. The pups themselves are actually reared with certain scents that they will have to find later. What we are trying to do is cut down on handler error. The handler is our number one problem. When pups are scent imprinted they will seek rather than be taught this scent. MDDs will be trained using a specific scent like TNT, or other types of materials that will be found in mines. After that they go through an extensive off lead program where they are heavily conditioned to do as they are told. People refer to that as obedience. We refer



■ Malinda Julien and her canine team member.
c/o Malinda Julien

By the time a dog is four to five months old they are ready to be introduced to a handler and a leash. Our programs have been very successful. We have dogs certified and on the street before most people begin training. Our approach extends the working life of the dog, cuts down on handler error, and makes a more successful team for handler and dog. They work more productively all at less cost.

"Most dogs we train never see a leash for the first five to six months of their lives because stupidity goes down the leash and it goes right into the dog. The dogs do not know what you want, the dog does not understand. The dog understands one thing: survival. If being a part of the pack means food, warmth, security and survival, the dog will do anything that is necessary for it." — Malinda Julien

narcotics, evidence search, along with search and rescue. Now we are planning to go into mine dogs. Living here in the United States and not traveling abroad very much it never really dawned on me on how severe the problem really is. When I went to the conference [Mine Detecting Dog Conference, San Antonio, Texas] and got to meet the people involved and found out more about that situation, I realized that there are not enough sufficient dog suppliers.

to it as tactical obedience. These dogs must be able to stop on a dime. They must have the ability to do anything we ask them to do without being forced by lead or choke. Therefore, the dog is compliant. At that point the dog is 12 weeks old and the training starts immediately. We put them with more experienced dogs, dogs that are already detection dogs, usually their parent. The dogs work with their mom and do what their mom says. It gives us a more stable dog.

MB: You mentioned that they seek scent rather than being taught the scent. What does that mean?

MJ: The training world has not budged much from 1950. Most of the people who are in this field are using the methods from [the 1950s]. We are looking at it from a fresh perspective. We want the dog not to have to be taught by humans. First, we don't speak their language. Second, we can't possibly

understand what it is that they think. This is why many scent programs fail because the handler is teaching them to find the wrong thing. They may be thinking that they are teaching them to find the desired scent, but they are teaching them to find something that they tap on or that is in a particular container. What we have done is based on studies that came out of the 1960s on the training and socialization of dogs. It was established in the scientific community that you could imprint anything onto an animal while it is being raised. We are teaching a dog to want to find a particular smell. The smell is incorporated into everything that is good—food, warmth, affection all the things that the mother supplies. It's like when we have had a grandfather who chewed peppermints—everytime we smell that we think of him. Dogs in turn seek that smell which they associate with what is good. We have taken out about six months of the conventional training program in which we

is one year old, he has gone through all of his training. He has spent six months with a handler and is ready to go out in the field. If we set up a program, unless he finds 10 mines in three different areas 10 times each under all terrain and different weather conditions reliably, the dog would be put back into the program. Many of the current programs out there allow for 70 percent accuracy. That is not good enough. In our academy only the professionals work with the dogs through the entire training process. The dogs are not handed down to assistants. We may not produce a lot, but the quality and assuredness of that dog is much higher than the dog that is mass-produced.

MB: I know you work predominantly with purebreds, but as the conference revealed, some organizations do not have that luxury. They are working with stray or abandoned dogs.

MJ: We work with pure breeds for a number

many that can. Purebred dogs usually have more genetic problems than mixed breeds. So I don't have anything against these and would use dogs that are already in place in an area and breed on characteristics that would be desirable.

MB: What advice could you give to organizations that are working with indigenous dogs so that they don't have a high washout rate?

MJ: The biggest problem in using indigenous dogs is we are taking a dog that has no socialization skills with humans. Unless we can breed them from the indigenous dogs that exist we are going to be missing the mark. Strays have very little positive socialization with humans. We need dogs that look at us as providers. Most strays have been providing for themselves for some time. Also, some dogs may have too strong a herding instinct and we need a hunter



■ Disaster training school. Julien sits on top of the truck.
c/o Malinda Julien

could possibly not do as well as nature could itself. So, we imprint the dog with a particular scent so the dogs seek the scent rather than be taught to find it.

MB: When a dog has gone through your training program how do you measure and determine its competency?

MJ: I am pretty tough on the dogs that go out. I want 100 percent accuracy rate. If a MDD was to go out of my academy and he

of reasons. In the United States, we are a very visual society and people expect to see the German Shepherds in police work. However, we have a program that works with re-homed dogs, dogs that may be strays, abandoned, not wanted for whatever reason. In the MDD field, I feel it may work better if we used indigenous dogs. Dogs that are already there are climatized and they can have their talents capitalized. There may be some that wouldn't work but there will be

instinct more than anything else. In setting up programs, one of the things I intend to do is teach evaluators what they really need to look for in a dog. They need to get one very young or find good parent dogs and breed from them.

MB: What qualities would you look for in a good MDD?

MJ: Stability, nerves of steel. A dog that can handle a great deal of stress without losing

control, running or fighting. I have seen this happen many times. Dogs may be able to perform the duty in a test environment but when they get out in the field their nerves fail. That is our number one evaluation tool. What can this dog handle? What is his stress level? If he has a good stress threshold and a good drive to hunt or prey drive then he is a likely candidate as an MDD. Size will also be important. Small feet, smaller size, easier to transport and less dog trotting around a mine field. These are the qualities I would establish in setting up a program.

MB: What else in the current canine training process would you do differently?

MJ: Without being involved with specific training programs, I can say assuredly there

MJ: The biggest problem that we have with handlers is that we don't speak the same language. We see things from a human point of view and dogs see things from a dog's point of view. As long as the human reads the dog through human interpretation, they are always going to be wrong. A handler must know something about canine or social animal behavior. Most dogs have been taught correction or praise or a combination of both, and usually it is incorrect. It sets the dogs up to fail. It is the number one problem of all canine handlers. However, if we give handlers some education, we set the dog up to win by having a handler that is better equipped and we set the handler up for more successes. I often hear I can't get the dog to work. The problem is they don't understand how to make them work. We sometimes expect the handler to do too much in a short amount of time. The handlers need to be our number one priority and they must know how to read the dog.

MB: What are the three basic foundation

"We work within the parameters of the behavior and social structure of the animals. When we stop throwing on big, nasty chains, choking them to death and...heavy punishments out of our own frustrations, then the dog will work better for us." — Malinda Julien

qualities that are needed in a good dog handler?

MJ: They need to be patient. No egos running around out there. They must have a true desire to work with the animal. It is probably not one of the most respected things to say that you work with an animal all day so they must have strength from within. They must enjoy what they do and be good at it. You must have confidence in your animal. If the dog says it's there you have got to believe the dog. These are qualities that can not be taught, they must be present within the handler. Slow and steady as she goes, that's the handler that we want.

MB: A problem for many organizations integrating MDDs overseas is the cultural biases of the indigenous populations that must be trained to be effective dog handlers.



■ Malinda Julien on a drug search.
c/o Malinda Julien

MJ: That really does present a problem. I have traveled in that part of the world and I am aware of the stigma that is attached to a vermin animal like a canine. I realize the psychological ramifications for them must be tremendous. I don't think there is a clear-cut answer. If the MDD program is successful and the dogs are successful and well mannered it will help in the dogs being

received well by the population—at least so that they don't disdain them. Eventually, we can overcome the biases—to a point. Trying to recruit these individuals will take a lot of work. The institution must take pride in what they do. Perhaps not seeing the "dog" in the situation, but the clearance of fields as the mission would help increase the pride of working with dogs.

MB: You and your organization have both bred dogs and received dogs from other sources. What are the benefits and drawbacks to both approaches?

MJ: When we breed the dogs we know what we are going to get, within certain parameters. We can scent imprint and do everything from a social aspect. The dogs are ready to go much faster. The biggest problem is that it takes time to raise a dog. In the year that it takes to begin working is

time that a dog from another source is already mature. That dog may possess everything it needs and we can proceed from there. It really depends on your situation. How fast is this dog needed? What do we have available? Some times your kennel is full and other times you have to depend on outside sources. That is why we plan to dedicate this upcoming litter to MDDs.

MB: Your academy is very integrated. You do a lot of different aspects of canine training from search and rescue to narcotics. Do you think dog training academies should be multi-faceted or single use facilities?

MJ: We really only do one thing. We use dogs as a scent detection tool. Whether we are looking for explosives, mines, narcotics, forensics or live people is really not the issue. It is the fact that a dog is being used as a detection item. These are the things we have specialized in: the ability to utilize the dog to find a certain scent.

MB: MDD is a small, but strong field. Do you think canine academies may begin filling the niche for MDDs?

MJ: I don't think so. It is a real hard sell publicly. Here in the United States people will think that you are sending dogs to be killed. I don't think that the average working dog training facility will be able to train to the parameters that are needed for a successful mine dog. This is not like finding narcotics or a piece of evidence. This is very serious and lives are involved. I think it is

probably cheaper for them to turn out overpriced police dogs.

MB: You mentioned briefly about public outrage. Have you had problems with animal rights groups?

MJ: Yes, because they are misinformed and they think we are using the dog without any regard to well being. I do not mess with them. I just ask them to leave my facility. I have run into a lot of people who have gotten their hackles up when MDD's are mentioned because they think we are going to send Fifi into the mine field to get blown up.

MB: You have often mentioned how little the training methods have changed since the 1950s. Why is that so?

MJ: Just because they have been doing it for 20 years doesn't make it right. There is always evolution, there is always something new, but the people in this industry really are very adversarial. They see and view everyone as heavy competition. None of these changes will take place immediately, I guarantee you, but we are willing to take the slings and arrows in order to go out and attempt to do this. One of the goals in formulating our academy is to allow the newer people that are coming into the industry to have a broader view. The oldtimers have been doing it a long time, but it has stalemated and they just continue to do what they think works.

MB: Can you give me a specific as to how

your training methods are different from this "old-style 1950s training"?

MJ: Our training methods are very different because they are based on an entirely different view. The old phrase used to be, "I am the master of my dog," and that's typically how it was looked at. It was never looked at as a partner, as an entity unto itself. The dog was something that we told what



■ Malinda Julien rappelling with Quat.
c/o Malinda Julien

to do and if it doesn't do it I will make it do it. As we have become more involved and more educated we have definitely found out that your grandmother was right, you can catch a lot more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. We work within the parameters of the behavioral and social structure of the animals. Most dogs that we train never see a leash for the first five to six months of their lives because stupid goes down the leash and it goes right into the dog. The dogs do not know what you want, it does not understand. The dog understands one thing: survival. If being a part of our pack means food, warmth, security and survival, the dog will do anything that is necessary for it to do. So, we look at it from an almost completely 100 degree difference from the rest of the world. There are a lot of technological advancements such as electronic collars that make us more precise. There are a lot of things we can do rather than tie the dog to us and choke the air out of it every time it doesn't do what we want. All that does is break the bond between the handler and the animal and makes the animal more reluctant to work for the



■ Malinda Julien in boat with Gypsy. Cadaver search during floods in Texas. c/o Malinda Julien



handler. The handler becomes frustrated, the handler says the dog is stupid, the dogs say I'm scared of you, and there we have 1950s dog training. That's why most people all the way from pets to law enforcement fail in their K9 programs. So, we don't approach it

dog. I think this is a whole new field that really no one is looking at and it starts with working that trainer and getting those dogs where they need to be, not necessarily together and not necessarily at the same time. Unless we teach these people how to

■ SAR Team. c/o Malinda Julien

"They still want to do what we call 'Billy Bob' training and it does not work. It will work for a little while or it will work 60 to 70 percent, but it doesn't give us the amount of efficiency and accuracy that we would require in a mine detection dog." — Julien

from that perspective. We approach it from a scientific point of view. If we want to get the dog to work for us, we must understand the dog and his behavior and his language. That's what we teach.

MB: That type of change actually occurred in the horse industry with the horse whispering training that has received media attention. It really revolutionized the training methods that had been in place since the cavalry days.

MJ: Yes, it has, and it took just a couple of people to be visual enough to get the public behind them. The United States, in its quest to have K9 units are still in the John Wayne phase of it all. They still want to do what we call Billy Bob training and it does not work. It will work for a little while or it will work 60 to 70 percent of the time but it doesn't give us the amount of efficiency and accuracy that we would require in a mine detection

be more educated handlers and show them how much they do need to know about themselves, about situations, about the animals, they are not going to be more successful.

MB: I'm sure in all the years that you've been training and breeding, a lot of dogs have passed through your academy. Do you have any unique or favorite success story from working with one specific dog?

MJ: I have a dog and she is still with us. She is old and aged at this point. She was nothing but backyard garbage, terrible, disgusting, everything confirmationally wrong with this dog. I do not know to this day why, I decided to risk life and limb to handle this dog. We pumped tons of money into her and made her well. I worked with her and to this very day she is responsible for finding many folks who would be dead without her. She works narcotics for me in the school systems, she

runs security for our property, and she is probably going to retire in the next year or two. She is probably one of the most heartfelt, soulful animals that I've run across in all of my years. Somewhere in those eyes was simply somebody who said, "If you save my life, I promise you, I'll make it worth it." And she has. She's very much a part of our company. She is very much a part of everywhere we go. This dog is usually always present and people all over the world actually know this dog by name. Her name is Quat.

MB: With working with a lot of different animals, you can have good relationships



■ Malinda Julien with Quat and Puppy. c/o Malinda Julien

with a lot of animals, but there comes that special one that you just have this unique bond with. Not only do you have a unique bond, but they go the extra mile for you.

MJ: It is absolutely incredible and once you have that, it opens the way to have others. I had a Doberman that was with me in the Oklahoma disaster and he has since gone on to be in the Pet Hall of Fame. He is now retired and lives with a friend of mine in Colorado; however, this dog again was a stray, a nothing. He was a beautiful Doberman, but he was extremely mean and had been abused. I took the dog for God knows what reason and I trained this dog and it would do anything I asked it to do. I asked this dog to jump out of the back of a fire truck while we were in Oklahoma. I said, "I need you right now!" You know how big a firetruck is? The dog jumps right out, it pops his jaw on the concrete, gets up, shakes his head and keeps right on coming. He wasn't an absolutely extraordinary dog and he met his fate not in the disaster areas of Oklahoma, but with a rattlesnake and became severely impaired mentally from too many bites to the head and thus was retired. If we can ever put dogs like that into the hands of these handlers, dog that are special. They are there; they do exist.

Handlers that can recognize those qualities do exist. It is our job to find them. It is our job to seek them out and to show them the gift that they have, as handlers, and to find the gifted dogs that are out there. You can walk through any shelter and one dog in that shelter will look at you with eyes that say "Take me out of here. I promise I'm good, I know I can do this, if you just tell me what it is." We've had many of those dogs. Many of these dogs are very successful in our police program. We have put them out with units that could not afford the over-inflated \$10,000 (U.S.) fee. These dogs are doing marvelous, and they came from nowhere, but it was the right dog and it was the right handler. I firmly believe that those dogs know you saved their lives. Their bond with you is much stronger than that with the dog that simply came along and had it all made. If you can get those dogs, they will work and work and work until they drop. That's what we're looking for. That's what we want. That loyalty, that bond between animal and human, that is only in certain people and only in certain dogs and can only be done if a person is there to help facilitate



■ Cobra takes a break from training to play with Julien. c/o Malinda Julien

the process. That's what we want to accomplish.

MB: What is in store for you for the upcoming year?

MJ: Hopefully, I will finish all of these shots and various pills I'm taking to go over to Croatia and Mozambique. I need to go over and see what's going on and find out who is looking for better ways to use dogs, what companies are willing to look at a more educated way of dealing with a very difficult and timely problem. I'm looking at spending a lot of time overseas. I'm looking at getting this program up and running, and seeing what we can do.

I think that 2001 will probably be one of our most exciting and rewarding years and

I think we can definitely make a change and a mark in this industry that will enable us to clear those fields, which is our goal. If we can do that, I will certainly consider 2001 a tremendous year, that's for sure. ■

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