

Bomb sniffing dog keeps South Shore safe

By Susan Wood

ROUND HILL – “Find it, find it, find it,” Battalion Chief Todd Moss said, while running around the Round Hill fire station.

He wasn't looking for his socks.

Instead, the Tahoe Douglas firefighter was giving out instructions to his dog Gunner, who acted like there was a leftover turkey stashed on the engine in the garage or behind the exercise machines in the living room.

His nose went into overdrive at the cabinets in that room as well as in the kitchen. And the 4-year-old chocolate Labrador retriever thought nothing of stretching out on his hind legs to get a higher vantage point.

He was searching for explosives. For training purposes, it was just a sack of suspicious powder. With a snout able to pick up scents 40 times better than humans, the canine gets his target.



Gunner searches for “explosives” under the watchful eye of handler Battalion Chief Todd Moss. Photos/Susan Wood

Gunner has recently completed his 120 hours of training to be a certified “explosive detection canine.” This means the work is just beginning. Moss will now log 16 hours a month practicing exercises with his four-legged companion.

“He’s a dog until it’s time to go to work,” Moss said as the canine stared at his master-handler. Gunner waits for the “squeaky” toy to come out as a signal it’s time for work. His reward? It goes without saying for a Lab – tennis balls.

Gunner will be used more often than what the public might think – but not for what one would think.

Post 9/11: If there’s a suspicious package, the fire protection district has a robot complete with a camera. It’s followed by a bomb squad crew member with an X-ray machine.

At times, Gunner may be used with Moss by his side. But Gunner – who always appears to stand at attention and willing to please – is more likely to be called out when buildings or venues need to be “swept” as in searched.

Bomb dogs have been brought out for events such as the summer concerts at the Harveys casino parking lot and across the street at the Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course for the American Century Championship.

Think of the Boston Marathon as a good example.

The squad had been recently contacted by the U.S. Secret Service during the election season from August to November, when then presidential nominees Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had rallies in Northern Nevada, and Trump flew into South Lake Tahoe.



Gunner and Battalion Chief Todd Moss

UNR has an explosive detection canine, along with the Reno Police Department and Washoe County Sheriff's Department. Two

make their office at the Reno Tahoe International Airport.

“With all these dogs, they make a task force,” Moss pointed out.

Douglas County felt a need to have its first bomb dog instead of tapping into one miles away.

“We really use them,” Moss said. “We wanted to be a contributor (in the task force).”

As an exercise that serves as a wake-up call, Moss made pipe bombs by emptying shells from a 12-gauge shotgun to show his comrades that “it doesn’t take much to hurt you.”

The U.S. Department of Defense spent \$19 billion researching the best way to detect explosive devices and came up with dogs as the answer.

Trainers expose the canines to the smells of different explosives and give them a reward.

Bomb dogs are more commonly known for their work in the field at war. More than 2,000 have been trained to sniff out explosives through handlers in the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, the National Geographic reported. The Smithsonian estimated that about 10,000 detection canines are at work around the world.

When the opportunity to have a special bomb dog arose, Tahoe Douglas got lucky when a Carson City military family moving to San Diego donated Gunner because the handler had two other dogs.

The dog was free as well as the training, which would normally cost a department about \$14,000. Handler and master dog trainer Jim McNeil of the Washoe County Sheriff’s Department donated his time to the effort and brought the dog to Moss.



Battalion Chief Todd Moss and Gunner always training and playing.

After 20 minutes of the first day of training at the vacant Kingsbury Middle School, the dog kept returning to Moss opposed to McNeil.

“I guess he’s your dog,” Moss recalled McNeil saying to him. Now McNeil has embraced the great uncle status.

“He’s attached to me 100 percent of the time,” Moss said, glancing at Gunner. The Lab, who Moss has had since June, remained focused on Moss with those deep, sincere eyes.

The mutual respect and love is obvious.

So how does a handler love a dog but remove oneself enough to do a job in which he sends his companion in harm’s way?

“It’s a job. We’re trained to do what we do. We do it as safe as we possibly can. We put hours and hours in. Unfortunately,

(accidents) are a part of the job. We try not to think about it," Moss explained.

A Labrador retriever is an ideal dog as an explosive detection canine because they have a hunting drive. The drive to seek remains constant.

When it fades, Moss gives him a break that allows him to hydrate and regroup through a change in environment.

"We take as long as we need," he said.

Gunner may even be influenced by his handler's current attitude. The dog is keenly perceptive and knows when to be intense and when to be fun-loving.

"They have a better temperament for this work," Moss said.

How?

"Look at him," Moss said, laughing and pointing to Gunner lying down by his feet. The dog was warned earlier not to tear up yet another squeaky toy. He looked up sheepishly like a child.

He's presentable in an event setting too, as public safety agencies make appearances to show off all the "tools in the toolbox," Moss noted.

"He's definitely an added plus. We've always depended on other (handlers and their dogs). Now we're a part of (the team)," Tahoe Douglas Fire Chief Scott Baker said.

The district wants to collect donations for a temperature control unit for the truck bed Gunner rides in so he won't be cold out on the job.