

Vehicle Searches

By Virginia Beauman

Several years ago the searching of vehicles was left up to each individual. As long as you checked all four sides, you met the requirements for a vehicle search. Standardization was something most handlers did not fully understand or they avoided it completely thinking someone was trying to control them. However, the TSA has taken a very different approach. The TSA National Explosives Detection Canine Team Program (NEDCTP) teaches a basic level of vehicle search to their students, both handler and canines.

Because of recent incidents in the world it is more important than ever to structure the canine's training to ensure the handlers are "Training like they work and working like they train". Algeria has had numerous vehicle bombs (VBIEDs) in the month of August. So you wonder, "How does that effect me". Well, it has hit home also. In Sydney Montana, a vest containing a number of pipe bombs was discovered underneath a rented vehicle. Therefore, it is important to ensure personnel have quality training for the handler, canine and team. Explosives training aid placement and productive location training must shape all aspects of the team.

People tend to train to the level of what they considered their evaluation to be. In some cases, it is just a few vehicles. In others, it might be only one or two vehicles; while others require a more extensive search. Regardless of the evaluation procedure, there is a basic understanding that no IED should ever be missed by the canine team. Explosives canine handlers are the only group in the country spending numerous hours weekly conducting training with the understanding they will probably never find an IED. However, they know their training has amply prepared them to detect any device encountered during a search.

There are several types of vehicle searches discussed in this article. The first type discussed and one of the most frequently required searches for canine teams is the unattended vehicle in airport environments. This is not to be confused with a suspicious vehicle. Once a vehicle is determined to be suspicious a canine team is not longer required and an Explosives Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technician should be requested to take over the scene.

The canine handler arriving on the scene of the unattended vehicle should try to make contact with the person who actually called in the vehicle. A few questions might help the handler determine if the vehicle is in fact unattended. Once the handler has determined to search the vehicle, a quick survey of the area should determine the best direction from which to approach the vehicle. The vehicle should be approached from the down-wind side and it should be included in a larger search area. Never walk directly up to the target vehicle to begin the search. Realize some canines might not begin the search when they first step out of their vehicle; therefore, by including this as part of a larger search the canine will be working effectively when the vehicle is actually encountered. Additionally, by approaching the vehicle



from a slight distance, the handler can see if anything looks out-of-place in the surrounding environment. The vehicle may not itself be the device but something in the surrounding area.

The canine should be encouraged to actively search independently around the vehicle. Close attention should be given to the closed cab and trunk area. This does not mean the entire vehicle is not considered a threat. However, the canine can openly search the area of the engine and undercarriage without much assistance from the handler; therefore, the handler must ensure the canine is actively searching the more confined areas. The handler must be conscious of the air currents because the way the explosives odor is purged from the vehicle is based on air flow.

To help ensure the canine is actively working, explosives training aid placement must have been accomplished during routine training. The TSA NEDCTP encourages the canine to actively work independently with the canine's nose pointed towards the left as the canine processes the vehicle. To do this explosives training aids are placed in the engine block and underneath the vehicle. Occasional placement might include behind wheel-wells just to keep it fun for the canine and to

keep the head turned towards the left. The primary areas of concentration are the doorseams and trunkseams.

Placements should start at the canine's nose level with a progression deeper as the canine begins to understand the seams are important to search. You will know when they are doing well when a lower producing explosives odor in the seam gets the canine attention and the canine has no problem working the explosives to source. Once the canine is hooked on the seams, then the placement of the explosives odors in the interior of the vehicle or trunk can be accomplished. Start with greater quantities with the explosives training aid placed on the downwind side of the vehicle. As the canine gets better, slowly put the explosives training aid deeper or decrease the quantity but do only one change at a time. Do not get discouraged if it takes the canine a little while to learn to do this task. Most handlers think the canine needs them more than is actually the case. However, if the canine does have a problem with a particular explosives odor, go back to surface level and advance more slowly.

The transition from one vehicle to the next should be done in a manner consistent with keeping the canine's nose actively working the vehicle. This might require searching

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the first vehicle in a row of vehicles more than one-hundred percent (100%) to ensure there is a fluid movement from one to the next. Initially, the canine should be worked from the upwind side so a pattern can be developed. Once the canine is proficient at only breaking pattern when explosives odor is encountered, then the canine's training can vary from downwind to upwind. If the canine begins to roam in search of easy finds, go back to working upwind during training. Remember, every vehicle has a downwind side and that is the side the canine will work the hardest and the most consistently. However, during a real search always work from the downwind side to give the canine the best chance of detecting something.

Once the canine has accomplished this task, any other type of vehicle search is easier. The unattended vehicle is just one vehicle instead of a group of vehicles in a line or side-by-side. A dignitary support is slightly different because the vehicle will be opened for the canine to inspect the inside and outside. Encourage routine training in this configuration if a team will be required to do this often. Again, explosives training aid placement is the only way a canine will be conditioned to actively work the vehicle.

A large vehicle search, such as a tractor-trailer or panel

vehicle is conducted in the same manner. However, the approach of this tall of a vehicle may require the handler to ensure the canine breaks the plain of the vehicle during an open area style problem. The vehicle should be worked from the downwind side and initially searched much like an open area problem with objects. The handler needs to be conscious of changes of behavior as the canine breaks into the possible scent cone being produced by the vehicle. If available, the doors to the cab and the trailer should be opened. If a side door is present, opening it will give a good airflow through the trailer. The owner should be instructed to open the vehicle's doors.

Nothing can prepare a team better than practice. Encouraging the canine to actively work without direct involvement by the handler ensures the handler is able to see more of the canine and the area during the search. The canine's changes of behavior will become more prevalent to the handler because the handler is not literally working on top of the canine.

Although there are numerous ways to encourage a canine to work independently, there needs to be a structure for the canine to be effective. Allowing a canine to roam randomly looking for easy explosives training aid placements will cause the canine to miss the IED buried deep inside the cab or trunk of the vehicle.

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