



When a Police Dog Loses a Tooth, It's Time For a Titanium Implant

By: Robert Johnson

The metallic snarl puts off perpetrators, among others; Apak look is all the rage.

At the Polk County Sheriff's Department in this mossy town, an 80-pound German shepherd named Apak greets people he doesn't know with a serious metallic snarl.

His top two canine teeth – the long biters – are steel.

"I believe you could set a bomb off in the dog's mouth and not hurt those teeth," says Tim Ellis, a sheriff's deputy who patrols with Apak.

Police are arming their canine colleagues with the dog equivalent of hollow-point bullets. Caps of steel or titanium are replacing teeth, usually the canines. The dogs' original choppers often break in training or when the animals gnaw on their cages. The metal teeth, which can hold a bite through the thrashing of virtually any hapless suspect caught in them, are also gaining popularity among military-dog handlers.

At Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, where military dogs, including those employed by the Army and Marines, go for training, Air Force Col. Steven Hansen, a dentist who mainly treats people, says his practice installs metal teeth on about one dog a month. "It really saves taxpayers money on valuable dogs that receive about \$50,000 of training and then break a tooth. When that happens, a dog's effectiveness in grabbing and holding is reduced without a replacement tooth," he says. Without the surgery, he says, many would have to retire early from what is usually an eight-year career.

Police trainers say that dogs with cracked or broken canine teeth find it hurts to bite, and some stop doing it when ordered to and start cowering in fear.

"When one of our dogs breaks a tooth, I just cry," says Sgt. Steven Pry of Polk County Sheriff's Department

Canine Division in Bartow.

Replacements aren't cheap. "One steel cap costs \$1,200," Sgt. Pry says. In recent months he has had the work done on two shepherds. "They're able to go back to work the next week."

And they are better than ever at what they do. Not only are the metal teeth durable when they encounter buttons, zippers or a gun barrel, but they're much more intimidating.

"When they smile, there's a fringe benefit," says Jim Watson, a retired canine corps policeman near Cleveland. "The look of those steel teeth is impressive. They can be scary, and that can help defuse a situation."



None of this is good news to those concerned about the possibility of excessive force by police. "Metal teeth on police dogs just seems like overkill," says Emily Whitfield, spokeswoman for the American Civil Liberties Union in New York. She adds, "As for the intimidation, just who is it that we need to intimidate? Innocent bystanders see these dogs, too. Do they deserve to be scared by bionic police dogs?"

Sgt. Pry concedes that people have sued over bites by some of his department's 21 dogs in recent years. In each case, Bartow has done what most police agencies do when a canine cop runs amok: pay the victim and settle the case quietly.

Sgt. Pry's two metal-toothed dogs

have yet to bite anybody. "And let's be clear," he says. "We aren't training dogs to tear people to pieces. We're training them to bite-and-hold upon command."

Still, Apak recently escaped from his handler's yard, ran down the street and, at a construction site, chased workers up their ladders, where they found refuge on the roof.

The nation's leading supplier of crowns for dogs' teeth, Precision Ceramics in Montclair, Calif. – whose business is making ceramic caps for people's teeth – estimates that about 50 dogs a month nationally are now getting replacements, up from just about 10 five years ago.

"This type of what I call 'extreme dentistry' for dogs is really catching on," says Mark Jackson, a partner in the company.

He recalls making his first dog teeth for a friend's Australian shepherd in 1985 after a burglar beat the animal with a poker and cracked all four canine teeth.

Mr. Jackson's friend was a veterinary student at Auburn University, and word of the successful surgery spread far and wide among veterinarians. "I started getting calls from all over the place on how to do this."

Dogs are usually given general anesthesia. Their jaws are propped open and crowns are anchored to a titanium post embedded in the tooth cavity.

Teresa Yoder, a veterinarian in Polk County who has done metal replacements on about 30 police dogs in central Florida, says she learned the technique from her former husband, a dentist.

Dr. Yoder is among the many veterinarians who won't put metal teeth on pets, which sometimes they are asked to do. "You wouldn't do this on a regular dog whose teeth aren't a weapon," she says.

Her ethical standards include another rule widely upheld by her col-



leagues: She won't install replacements that are longer or sharper than the dogs original teeth. Says Dr. Yoder, I'm not trying to help them puncture. I'm trying to help them hold on."

Still, veterinarians, dentist and police agree that the most aggressive security dogs are the ones likeliest to break their original teeth. In canine corps parlance, they are known as "Happy Biters."

Their attacks, while controlled to a great extent by human handlers, can be fierce. In training, when the dogs are ordered to apprehend a handler who is wearing protective padding, some will keep biting in different spots seeking exposed skin.

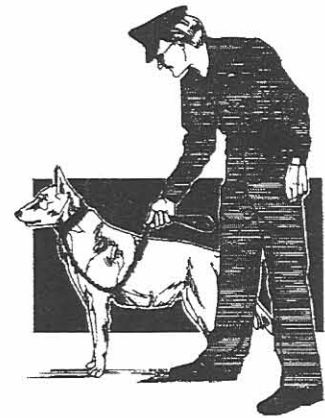
And Happy Biters don't always

calm down right away after a training session. "Some are quite vicious," says Col. Hansen. "They go back to the kennel and attack their bowls."

Veterinarians say police routinely tell horror stories about how the dogs got hurt. George Stokes, a Cleveland veterinarian who has been doing metal replacements since 1987, recalls one German shepherd who became so excited while locked in a squad car watching his master apprehend a suspect on his own, that he broke one of his natural teeth biting a seatbelt buckle. The dog swallowed the buckle, Dr. Stokes says, and it had to be removed surgically. ■

(Robert Johnson is a staff reporter

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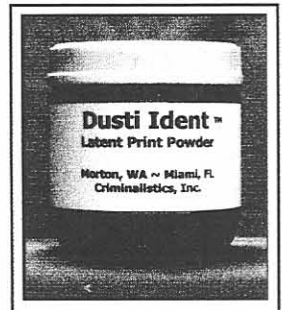
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E-mail: criminalis@aol.com ~ criminalistics@criminalisticsinc.com

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