

Huachuca sergeant 1 of Army's 2 female kennel masters

By Bill Hess

SIERRA VISTA HERALD

SIERRA VISTA — In late August and early September, Sgt. 1st Class Charlotte Banks found herself in charge of 62 military working dog teams providing part of the security coverage at the Republican National Convention.

Today, the 34-year-old is the kennel master for the 18th Military Police Detachment at Fort Huachuca, where there are a dozen teams of four-footed and two-footed soldiers providing security on the Army post.

Banks is one of two female kennel masters in the Army. One can tell she'd like to be in the midst of handling dogs, but her current job is more administrative.

It's hard not to be part of a dog-human team as she was for more than half of her career as a soldier, said the 15-year veteran, who hails from Lavonia, Ga.

"I would rather be on patrol with a dog," Banks said.

Being a kennel master means ensuring human military police officers' and dogs' needs are taken care of. Her responsibilities include handling their training records, medical needs and food rations for the animals.

She arrived on the post in early October after a two-year stint as an instructor and supervisor at the Department of Defense schoolhouse for military working dogs and their handlers — officially, the 341st Training Squadron at Lackland Air Force Base, in Texas.

Banks said most people don't know the importance of the military's dog and human teams.

While the program is not new, today's canines are trained to protect a soldier and to attack an enemy. They also are part of detecting drugs and

explosives and as special search dogs, as well as the traditional mission of patrolling, she said.

A new job for dogs and handlers also is being a combat tracker team, which includes the dog locating explosives and tracking them to the person who planted them, Banks said.

She said the ability of dogs is unbelievable, especially when it comes to their sense of smell.

The human equation in the team mix also is critical, Banks added.

Obtaining the right animal for missions has led her to being part of a traveling team to find dogs for the program.

She has gone to Europe, where she and others in a buying team looked over dogs and decided that 120 of them fit the military's needs, she said. The cost of those dogs was more than \$300,000. Over the lifetime of a military working dog, the cost for care and food

probably ranges up to \$40,000, Banks said.

For civilian pet owners who are concerned about the future of a dog, the animals are no longer "put down" once their military days are ended. Those that are adoptable find new homes outside of the military.

And she would know. At her home is one of her former partners, a Belgian Malinois named Tanja, who has adapted well to non-military life. Her 6-year-old son Tristan keeps the 12-year-old animal going, the single mother said.

"He teaches her new tricks," Banks said, shyly admitting the dog trainer in her has a hand in developing the relationship between Tanja and Tristan.

There is a special trust between the animal and the handler, and woe to any soldier who mistreats a partner, Banks said. The dog always has one rank higher than its handler, so mistreatment is akin to hitting

a person of superior rank.

When she was in Minnesota, she watched as 35 teams came off a C-130 after a security mission at the Democratic National Convention in Denver.

"That was impressive," Banks said, adding that some of them had been her students at the Lackland school.

An additional 27 military teams were at the GOP convention, which was the Department of Defense's contribution to security at the event, she said.

In all, Banks estimates there were 90 to 100 dogs involved in security at the GOP event.

As kennel master, she also is thinking of three human-dog teams currently in harm's way.

The connection between canine and human for her began halfway through her job as a military police officer.

"Your adrenaline goes up when you are working with dogs," she said.



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Sgt. 1st Class Charlotte Banks calls out to Beast, a 6-year-old Belgian Malinois at Fort Huachuca. Banks is assigned to the 18th Military Police Detachment at Huachuca.