Meet the Trainer
The Navy SEAL Way:
A One-on-One with Mike Ritland

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Organizations with detection canine programs all have extensive pre-deployment training regimens. Then, maintenance training and periodic evaluations are conducted to ensure continued proficiency. Such evaluations are scheduled in advance and are performed with the handlers aware they are being tested. While these tests serve an important function, their overt nature limits the information obtained; valuable insight would be gained through additional, unannounced testing.

Unannounced testing is already in use in areas of security – extensive undercover tests of airport passenger screeners have been performed. In fact, the Transportation Security Administration has stated that “covert testing is a tool to identify vulnerabilities in the system and uncover weaknesses of training” and that “covert testers are one of the best assets we have to continually raise the bar on security” (TSA, 2008). While covert testing is a prominent and valuable tool in some areas, its use for detection canine teams is believed to be more limited.

For canine teams, unannounced testing would provide the truest
Handlers, unaware that they were being tested, would approach the search as they do normally – the level of detail in the search, inclination to further investigate change in behavior, etc. would all reflect everyday deployment. As such, the results would help to identify (and remedy) training weaknesses, lackadaisical tendencies, trust/confidence issues, and procedural deficiencies. Depending on the setting and targeted contraband, the responsible canine trainer clearly has to perform significant coordination to establish an unannounced scenario and to ensure that it does not escalate to a reportable incident, but these efforts should pay large dividends in better understanding and improving department/agency performance.

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