In post-9/11 New York City, the police department takes extraordinary steps to keep the city safe from terrorist attacks. One of the major challenges is guarding the subway—a maze of 400 stations, 800 miles of track, 6,000 cars and, on any given weekday, 5 million passengers. It’s a perfect job . . . for a dog.

BY BURKHARD BILGER
A police dog stands guard at New York City's Penn Station.
It’s a hectic Wednesday morning at Times Square, the busiest subway station in New York City. Thousands of commuters are rushing to work. A new team from the transit canine unit is just arriving. The team has four police officers, each paired with a dog.

Large, pointy-eared, and powerful, these dogs make people nervous. On subway trains, they stare at passengers with unswerving intensity; every time the train doors open, they pivot to scan the crowds on the platforms. Each dog weighs close to 200 pounds. Their jaws can deliver 750 pounds of pressure—enough to chew through steel. And in preparation for their police work, they have received as much training as a battle-ready U.S. soldier.

The team has been at Times Square for only a few moments when one of the dogs, a large German shepherd named Thunder, erupts into ferocious barks. A few feet away, a man crouches next to a pillar. Thunder clearly perceives this man as a threat.

“Show your hands!” shouts the officer holding Thunder’s leash. But the man ignores the officer’s command. Suddenly, he lunges toward the cop, who immediately lets go of the leash.

Thunder leaps into the air with lightning speed. His jaws clamp down around the man’s arm.

“Get this dog off of me!” the man screams. He manages to break away, but within a few steps, Thunder is on him again, jerking him to the ground.

The suspect has been subdued.

**A Natural Super Soldier**

Dogs serve in two roles within the New York City Police Department. Some are “detection dogs,” trained to sniff out explosives and drugs. Others, like Thunder, are patrol dogs, which hunt down criminals.

Patrol dogs have one of the most dangerous jobs in public life—in the past year, four have been killed or seriously injured in the line of duty. They are also strikingly effective. Sending in “jaws and paws” intimidates even the most hardened criminals. In 2010, one subway station on the Lexington Avenue line was hit by...
20 muggings and thefts in a matter of months. Once a canine unit began patrolling the station, the number dropped to zero.

As a species, dogs were made for this sort of work. No other animal so diligently aims to please humans. A good dog is a natural super soldier: strong yet acrobatic, fierce yet obedient. It can leap higher than most of us, and run twice as fast. Its eyes are equipped for night vision, its ears for supersonic hearing, its mouth for subduing prey.

But a dog's true glory is its nose. Dogs can detect just a few tiny particles of a substance—like the fleck of a cookie crumb at the bottom of your backpack. Just as astonishing is a dog's acuity; it can identify different substances within a scent, like the spices in a soup.

How? A dog sniffs with short, sharp breaths—as many as 10 per second—drawing the scent deep into its nasal cavity. The receptors there are a hundred times denser than in a human and can pick up on a wide array of particles.

Drug smugglers often try to mask the smell of their shipments by packaging them with coffee beans, air fresheners, or sheets of fabric softener. But it takes more than that to fool a dog.

Paul Waggoner, a behavioral scientist at the Canine Detection Research Institute at Auburn University in Alabama, conducted a test to prove it. He flooded his lab with different scents, then added tiny quantities of different illegal drugs. In one case, “The whole lab smelled like a Starbucks,” Waggoner recalls.

The dogs had no trouble homing in on the drugs. “They're just incredible at finding the needle in the haystack,” Waggoner says.

The Best of the Best

Police dogs are heirs to an ancient and fierce bloodline. For thousands of years, dogs marched into battle with their human companions. The great mastiffs and sight hounds of Mesopotamia wreaked havoc on the battlefield. Dogs ran with Attila the Hun's hordes and wore battle armor beside the knights of the Middle Ages. In 1495, when Christopher Columbus sailed to what is now the Dominican Republic, he brought greyhounds that could run down an enemy and rip out his guts. During World War I, Germany fielded 30,000 dogs and used them for everything from transporting medicine and wounded soldiers...
to carrying messages between trenches. The German shepherd, first registered as a breed in 1889 by a former German cavalry captain, was favored during the war for its intelligence and steadiness as well as its power.

Today, a variety of breeds are used in police work. Labradors, for instance, are superior sniffers, while German shepherds are preferred for patrol. Regardless of their breed, almost all American police dogs are imported from Europe. They come mainly from Germany, where dogs have been carefully bred for centuries. Once in America, they receive a year of intense training at one of several canine training facilities around the country. Those that don’t make the cut in training usually become service dogs (such as guide dogs for the blind). Only the most gifted are recruited to work for the NYPD.

Once a group of new police dogs arrives in New York City, each dog is carefully matched with a police officer. For the next six weeks, each cop-and-dog team builds its working relationship, learning each other’s cues and idiosyncrasies.

But the real goal of this training period is to put the dog under the full command of the officer. An officer who loses control of his or her dog in a chaotic environment like a New York City subway station risks disaster. These dogs are inherently aggressive, and if they go too far, someone could get injured—or worse. This is the hardest part of canine work—being able to put “the emergency brakes” on a dog that is capable of biting through human bone.

A Unique Bond

To understand the raw power and energy of these animals, one needs to spend just a few minutes at the NYPD’s canine training facility in Long Island City. There, the dogs are kept in cages when they aren’t working with their human partners. They find the confinement hard to bear. When their partners walk into the room, the dogs go crazy. Foam flies from their muzzles. Some chew their

Police dogs go through rigorous training to learn how to subdue a suspect. But the dogs are so powerful, trainers are often injured. A number of them have had their arms broken in exercises like this one!
cages, reducing steel to bits of twisted scrap metal. They often break their teeth, yet keep chewing.

The moment that the cages are opened, however, the noise stops. The dogs trot silently to their partners’ sides, then sit back on their haunches—ears erect, eyes focused forward—and wait for instructions. As one trainer puts it, “It’s like you’ve turned on a switch.” Indeed, canine police tend to talk about their dogs as if the animals are mechanical devices. They say that their dogs need “maintenance” to be “fully operational,” and that a “dual-purpose dog”—one that has been taught both to chase down criminals and detect drugs or explosives—has “superior functionality.” In the field, a dog is a piece of critical gear.

And yet, officer and dog forge a unique bond. Off duty, each dog lives with its partner and its partner’s family. Like an enduring marriage, these partnerships tend to last for life.

They Are Ready

Back at the bustling Times Square subway station, it quickly becomes clear that the man Thunder has taken down is not a criminal or a terrorist. He is an undercover transit cop—a “decoy” disguised as a troublemaker. He was part of a test for the new canine unit.

Thunder wasn’t supposed to take the decoy down to the ground, but it wasn’t Thunder’s fault that he did. The decoy shouldn’t have tried to run away—that wasn’t part of the plan. It was up to Thunder’s partner to call the dog back.

Thunder is given high marks.

Since September 11, the NYPD has doubled the size of its canine force. There are now 100 dogs like Thunder patrolling the city. And they are ready.

**What Can a Dog Smell?**

Besides drugs and explosives, dogs can smell all sorts of stuff!

- cell phone battery
- bed bugs
- cancer
- people trapped in wreckage
- tree fungus


**Persuasive Letter**

Imagine that you are the police chief in your town, and you want to create a canine unit. Write a persuasive letter to the mayor about why this is a great idea. Support your argument with details from the article. Send it to POLICE DOG CONTEST. Five winners will get Letters from Wolfie by Patti Sherlock. See page 2 for details.