

BNL Police Group Assists Guide Dog Foundation and U.S. Military in Training VetDogs

Thursday, December 20, 2007

On a sunny but seasonably cool day in December, the Lab's Police Group welcomed special guests to the Lab: three soldiers and two black Labrador Retrievers named Boe and Budge. Joining the guests were members of the Guide Dog Foundation (GDF) and the Lab's Veterans Association.



Boe and Budge are embarking on a new career. They have been trained by the GDF to become the first U.S. Military VetDogs. The soldiers are their new handlers, and will take them to military field hospitals in Tikrit and Mosul, Iraq, where the dogs will provide companionship and a morale boost for recovering soldiers. The dogs are expected to arrive in Iraq just before Christmas. The soldiers, on orders from the 85th Medical Detachment, officially took ownership of Boe and Budge on Thursday, December 13, during a ceremony held at the campus of the Smithtown Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind.

The U.S. Army has assured the GDF that Boe and Budge will be safe. The dogs will not be on the front lines, although they will be in a combat area. Their visit to the Lab was intended to familiarize them with the sound of gunfire. The BNL Police Group played an integral part in the training, as the dogs and their handlers spent time at the on-site shooting range.

BNL Police Officer Brian Buckheit led the event. His brother Michael, a former BNL Police Officer, is an active GDF volunteer who knew that the Lab had a shooting range and asked his brother to see if it was possible for them to use it as part of the VetDogs training program. Brian Buckheit said he had the full support of his fellow officers and Division Manager John Amabile.

With Officer David Baulch, Buckheit fired off several rounds of ammunition as Captains David Peter, Thomas Gilbert, and Steven McCune acted as the range officers ensuring that all safety precautions were followed. In addition to required safety precautions for everyone, "doggles" were worn by the dogs to protect their eyes, and headsets were worn to protect their ears. Amazingly, the dogs had a very mild reaction to the sounds of gunfire -- proof that they have been well trained and are now ready for their deployment to Iraq.

At the conclusion of the shooting exercise, the BNL Police Group welcomed all guests to a luncheon where everyone was able to interact with the dogs. Lanny Bates, Assistant Laboratory Director for Facilities & Operations, addressed the group saying, "The Lab has a long history of serving the U.S. Military, first as Camp Upton in World War I, again in World War II, and now as part of the first skilled therapy dog program for recovering soldiers. We all look forward to a continuing partnership with the GDF and the VetDogs program."

For more information on the Guide Dog Foundation and VetDog program go to:
<http://www.guidedog.org/>.