

The Bulletin

By [Jane Koropsak](#) | May 28, 2010

Training Unusual Soldiers

Security Police Officers from the Laboratory Protection Division recently participated in an unusual training exercise — helping train America’s “VetDogs.”



Security Police Officers from the Lab’s Protection Division recently assisted the Smithtown Guide Dog Foundation training “VetDogs.” These special canines will be sent to military hospitals to provide physical and stress therapy to recuperating soldiers. They are, from left, David Peter with VetDog DonnaK, Brian Buckheit with VetDog Stephanie, Ralph Vega with VetDog Timmy, and Justin Merrow with VetDog Apollo.

Four Labrador Retrievers — two black and two yellow — and their handlers from the Smithtown Guide Dog Foundation (GDF) put on safety goggles (“doggles”) and ear protection while BNL officers fired rounds into targets at the on-site target range. The purpose is to train the dogs to become familiar with the sound of gunfire. These special dogs are part of the GDF’s VetDog Program, and will be transported to military hospitals to provide occupational, emotional, and physical therapy to active soldiers. The dogs will not be in harm’s way, but may hear distant gunfire. Captain David Peter and Police Officers Brian Buckheit and Ralph Vega fired shots at targets while the dogs and their handlers stood nearby. “These dogs are amazing,” said Peter. “They were unwavering and seem ready to leave the GDF to begin their new careers.”



[VetDogs](#)

According to the [VetDogs](#) website, these specially trained canines offer emotional support for servicemen and women dealing with combat stress. VetDogs have also been helpful for physical and occupational therapy and rehabilitation. For instance, the dogs can be trained to brace recuperating soldiers when they transfer from a bed to chair, and to help them get up if they fall. Through innovative tug-of-war exercises, the dogs can also help soldiers as they learn to work with new prosthetic limbs.

Buckheit, who has been a liaison between the Lab and GDF, said "I think the GDF is providing a great service for American soldiers. I am personally grateful that Lab management has supported my efforts in bringing these extraordinary service dogs to BNL for training. As a longtime Lab employee and friend of the Lab's Veterans Association, I am proud to be even a small part of this important program. For veterans in our police group, like Ralph, it's a great opportunity to have a connection with our soldiers overseas."

The VetDog program is even more personal for BNL Police Officer Justin Merrow, who drove directly to the shooting range to visit the dogs when he reported to work that day. "I served two tours in Iraq," said Merrow. "I know firsthand the difficulties our soldiers face. These dogs will certainly provide comfort to those serving in our military. Just looking at these dogs brings a smile to your face."

For more information visit the [VetDogs](#) website.