

# A SOUTHERN REGION FIRST



*Senior Constable Sharon Varley and "Lass"*

**E**NCOURAGEMENT and lots of praise are often described as the formula for extracting the best from human beings. However, when the same formula is applied to "man's best friend", the results can be more than simply rewarding, as this story shows.

The only policewoman dog handler in Australia is Senior Constable Sharon Varley, who is based with the Dog Squad at Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine, with her charge, "Lass".

Although not part of the often perceived "covert" role of the AFP in the various States of Australia, Sharon, her constant companion, and her other colleagues in the Dog Squad and their charges are nevertheless, seldom seen by arriving or departing airline passengers.

Despite being patently capable of protecting her handler, "Lass's" main role is being on call to respond to bomb threats.

Sharon says "Lass" lives at home with her and husband, David, (who is also a member of the AFP).

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The dog is provided with special accommodation for her comfort and well-being in the form of a cage and kennel in their backyard.

"Lass" is a four-year-old German Shepherd bitch initially selected for training by the Australian Army.

Surprisingly, the Army acquired "Lass" from a Sydney dog pound where it could be said her future was anything but bright!

Now as a working dog with the AFP "Lass" has really gone from "boiled lollies to chocolates".

"Lass" doesn't have a pedigree but as far as Sharon is concerned she's almost certainly 100% German Shepherd, but simply doesn't have the papers to prove it.

## Breaking New Ground

Senior Constable Sharon Varley has been a member of the AFP for seven years and was Melbourne-based before she joined the force.

When she first joined the AFP she had no pre-conceived plan to become a dog handler, but her interest was sparked through her contacts with the Dog Squad at Melbourne Airport in 1986 when she was working in the General Uniform Section.

The Australian Federal Police has a number of explosives detector dogs and handlers around Australia (four are based in Melbourne) and they attend to bomb threats or suspicious packages left in Commonwealth areas, such as airports.

Those initial contacts with the Bomb Squad members led to her making inquiries about joining the Squad and mid-way through the year she successfully applied to join the group.

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Sharon was sent to the Military School of Engineering which is attached to the Holsworthy Army Camp near Sydney, where she met "Lass" for the first time and underwent handler training.

Most dog trainers concede it takes almost as long to coach a handler as it does the dog and the programme involves 16 weeks basic training for the animal and 12 weeks for the handler!

The training of dogs incorporates basic obedience and teaching the animal to indicate the presence of explosives in any environment; indoors and outdoors, as well as in vehicles, ships and on board aircraft.

Sharon has received some feed-back about the time she went to Sydney for the training, which suggested there was a degree of "trepidation" on the part of the Army having a female handler undergo training.

After all, she was the first woman to ever undertake the course.

However as the training procedures went through their early stages any fears or concerns were quickly allayed and Sharon completed her course without a hitch.

The German Shepherd, now known as an Explosive Detector Dog (EDD), also undergoes regular supplementary refresher training courses to ensure it is up to scratch (no pun intended).

"Lass" also undergoes daily exercise and a 20 minute grooming session plus twice yearly veterinary check-ups. Of course there are trips to the vet on a "needs" basis as well.

Sharon and her colleagues together with Lass and her furry mates (three males . . . all German Shepherds) are on constant standby.

When they respond to an alert, the handler and dog travel to the scene where the EDD is permitted to move freely under the watchful eye of its master and other supporting members of the AFP.

There are very few people who, in the middle of the night actually enjoy the prospect of heading off to work . . . and Sharon is no exception to the rule.

However as Sharon said, "As soon as 'Lass' sees me through the rather large window at the back of our home, wearing my uniform which is a pair of white overalls, she is excited and even anxious to get started."

And how many people in the

community can say they have a workmate who is always delighted to be with them; who is always anxious to get to work and is never ashamed, frightened or embarrassed to be demonstrative about how much he/she likes you?"

### Risks

What about the risk factor involved in sniffing-out explosives?

How would you react if an explosive fitted with a timing device attached detonated, just as your "workmate" was conducting an examination?

These are things Sharon really prefers not to think about a lot. She places a great deal of faith in the excellent training both she and "Lass" received with the Army. She feels that the remote possibility being hit by a car poses a far greater risk to her workmate's life, than being "taken out" by an explosion.

"The training techniques ensure close to 100% safety for the dog and his/her handler when a search is underway for explosives," she said.

What of the future?

"Lass" will, of course, eventually be retired from the AFP when she becomes too old to work (some years down the track yet) and Sharon believes she will have the option of keeping "Lass" as a family pet . . . that's an idea she warmly embraces.

As for Sharon's future in the Dog Squad; that will very much depend on circumstances at the time "Lass" is demobilised. There is of course the chance she will take on another EDD.

Another option is the possibility of Sharon leaving the AFP before "Lass" is retired.

"That," she said, "is most unlikely!"

## RED NOSES FOR CHARITY



Members of the Stage 4 Course in the Southern Region Training Branch joined in the spirit of lending a helping hand to charity when they bought their 'red noses' in support of the Sudden Infant Death Research Foundation. 'National Red Nose Day' was a major success with the Foundation raising more than \$1.27 million across Australia toward research into the traumatic 'Cot Death Syndrome'. Outside the entrance of Southern Region Headquarters from left to right are: Front row: Inspector Ken Dowell (OIC-Training), Tony Riddell, Fiona Lashmar, Joanne Ogle, Catherine Ainsworth. Second row: Snr Const Rod Crilly (Training), Jim Flood, Michael Hawley, Jodie Hurley, Martin Hess, Michael Connolly, Andrew Peters, Jeff Hueston. Third row: David Bachi, Stephen Pengelly, Andrew Bryce, Conrad Przybyszewski, Scott Reynolds, Dean Hubner.

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