World acclaim

FOR AUSTRALIA'S 'SUPERSNIFFER' TECHNIQUES

Manifest Vol.1 No.1 *told how the Australian Customs Service successfully breeds special detector dogs. Now, with moves to establish a unique international canine gene pool, and a highly successful dog training program, many countries are turning to Australia for advice and expertise.* GRAHAM WALSH *tells how Customs arrived at this position.*

The Australian Customs Service is a world leader in the breeding of drug detector dogs and is increasingly being consulted on advances in our training techniques.

This advancement is on two fronts – establishment of an international canine gene pool and development of sophisticated and successful training methods.

Late in 1997 John Vandeloo, Manager of our Customs Breeding and Development Centre in Melbourne, attended an international conference on illicit substance detection at Oxford, United Kingdom, to present information on our detector dog breeding initiative.

The conference, attended by 130 scientists, academics, industry and government representatives from around the world, reviewed the latest technological developments in detecting drugs and explosives. These included the most refined X-ray equipment, computer topography, laser inflorescence, particle collection technologies, chemical detection and vapour spectrometers. There was even a development prototype of an air chamber to collect air samples from the human body micro-environment The aim of government policy makers was to identify technology that was safe for the public and users, efficient and economically viable.

Global gene bank vision

During the conference, the scientific research that attracted most attention and praise was by Australian Customs. This detailed the work which led to DDU's unique breeding program for drug detector dogs and our vision for the development of a global canine gene bank.

Many prominent delegates to the conference clearly regarded the Australian Customs Service as being the world leader in detector dog production methodology.

Consensus of government policy makers at the conference reflected that many of the mechanical detection products available or under research and development did not readily meet the criteria for accuracy or speed required of a broad screening tool. Therefore in the short to medium term, well-bred, well-trained and accurately deployed detector dogs will be at the forefront of broad screening capacity due primarily to speed, mobility, labour efficiency, accuracy and cost.

A legal adviser to the conference pointed out potential political and legal difficulties posed by most new technology-based detection methods in countries like the United States. He pointed to possible right-to-privacy concerns, health problems associated with nuclear and radiation technology, and religious

objections to some procedures. He said that Australia's model and its leadership in breeding better canines should be looked at carefully by policy makers around the world.

During the conference, Customs received requests for additional information and assistance from countries including the United States, Russia, United Kingdom, Canada, and Israel.

US federal agencies have asked Customs to help establish a sub-colony of our gene pool to found a US multi-agency national breeding program during 1998.

The US Multi-agency Canine Substance Detection Working Group (members include Customs, FBI, Secret Service, Department of Defence, Federal Aviation Authority and Coast Guard), has proposed a cooperative US-Australian scientific project that embraces our model with Labrador Retrievers and expands to incorporate required alternate breeds for taskings such as patrol and rescue.

Dr Al Brandenstein, Chief Scientific Adviser with the US Office of National Drug Control Policy (US Presidential counter-drug advisory body), has expressed a willingness to fund the plan to establish a national US detection canine resource. The plan proposes the cooperative effort be oversighted by co-principal investigators, Dr W. Burghart, Chief Veterinarian, US Department of Defence, and John Vandeloo.

We have since received a request for a visit by US Customs to study the breeding program.

Queen's gift to enhance breeding

During John's visit to the UK, Australia's canine gene pool was greatly enhanced through a generous royal gift. Britain is recognised as the stronghold of the working Labrador Retriever and the Royal family owns some excellent bloodlines. Queen Elizabeth made her finest working Labrador freely available to Customs and her Head Keeper, Mr Bill Meldrum, gave John a warm reception at Sandringham. As a result we have been able to procure high quality genetic variation (frozen semen) from five sires, including one owned by the Queen and one from the Duke of Wellington's bloodline.

Customs expertise with the breeding and training of detector dogs is getting worldwide publicity. In Britain recently BBC 2's top scientific program, Tomorrow's World, devoted a large segment to our breeding unit. An Italian television unit has also been to Melbourne to film a science program on the gene pool.

In the US, cable television has recently put to air two reports on the remarkable success of Guam Customs in using detector dogs for drug seizures. The reason for the attention given to Guam Customs is that their dog squad is now responsible for almost 50 per cent of all drug seizures on the island. This also happens to be a notable achievement for Australian Customs as since their inception, we have supplied training, dogs and a regular quality assurance program for all seven handlers of Detector Dog Unit. This was a point emphasised in the US television reports.

Customs can be proud of its achievements and proud of the international contribution we make in this field.

Japanese interest

In March 1998, at the invitation of Japanese Customs, I took part in the first review of their detector dog program at the national training centre in Tokyo. The Australian and Japanese detector dog training programs had similar origins, both adapted in 1979 from a US model. But the success of the Australian program, in terms of seizures by our dogs, has greatly outstripped that achieved in Japan. As a result the Japanese are keen to learn from our experience.

In two lectures in Japan, one at the detector dog program review in Tokyo and the second in Osaka, where Japanese Customs operates 16 detector dog teams, I presented detailed information on the development of our unit and our training methods. As a result of this visit arrangements will be made for the Chief Instructor of the National Training Centre to spend 10 days in Australia studying our program.

Australia's international role started in 1980 when we began training police and Customs officers from the Asia-Pacific region in Canberra. Now the DDU receives requests for advice and assistance from all parts of the world.

DDU officers have been to Jakarta and Bali to help with the training and deployment of customs detector dogs there. This followed our provision of dogs to Indonesian Customs and the training of a group of their officers in Australia. Another DDU officer has been to China to assist their detector dog program .

Many countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Russia, China and Israel are keen to buy our dogs or obtain access to our expertise. This is in addition to requests for help that we receive from the defence forces and other law enforcement agencies in Australia. Unfortunately, we do not have the resources to meet all requests, particularly requests for our specially bred detector dogs.

While we are proud of our achievements and of the international contribution we make, we are not resting on our laurels. We are continually looking for ways to improve the breeding, training and deployment of detector dogs. As a result, the DDU will continue to be an important asset for Customs community protection role.

Graham Walsh is Officer in Charge of Customs Detector Dog Unit.