

**IDNUMBER** 200810160113  
**PUBLICATION:** National Post  
**DATE:** 2008.10.16  
**EDITION:** National  
**SECTION:** World  
**PAGE:** A17  
**ILLUSTRATION:** Black & White Photo: Tom Blackwell, National Post / Ouzo with his handler, Jhonel Arevalo. ;  
**DATELINE:** KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, **Afghanistan**  
**BYLINE:** Tom Blackwell  
**SOURCE:** National Post  
**WORD COUNT:** 546

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## Canine 'soldiers' sniff out danger

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KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, **Afghanistan** -When Canadian and Afghan troops unearthed a major cache of Taliban weaponry and medical supplies last week, the unsung hero of the day was a "soldier" with four legs and the Florida-based private contractor who trained him.

Heading into a grape field as others looked elsewhere, Ouzo the German shepherd quickly zeroed in on a mound of dried twigs. A **Canadian soldier** pulled away the debris and discovered a bag packed with lethal anti-personnel mines. The vineyard was full of such booty.

The find by Ouzo and his Peruvian handler was no shock, however. The pair are among 16 explosive-sniffing dog teams that the **Canadian Forces** have increasingly turned to in their fight against the IED menace.

Motivated by the simple prospect of playing with their favourite toy, the canine bomb detectors are being credited with saving lives on a regular basis.

"They're always finding something that, were it left unchecked, would have a potential for disaster," said Captain Bill Arnot, an engineer operations manager at Canadian headquarters. "They have been so successful that our engineers are asking about getting more teams.... They're worried about tiring the dogs out, they're being used so much."

Though two of the animals have made the supreme sacrifice themselves after accidentally triggering bombs, they are generally looked after very well, with one being airlifted out of the field this summer after falling seriously ill.

"The dog is treated like it is very much a soldier," Capt. Arnot said.

Human troops say they are also morale boosters, providing some homelike comfort on the front lines.

"It's nice to have the dog running around when you're sitting alone in the desert," said Captain Shawn

Bardell, a troop commander with 2 Combat Engineer Regiment.

Meanwhile, the dog's handlers are authorized to carry and use assault rifles, making the program one of the most visible examples of Canada's use of private security contractors in **Afghanistan**. Miami's American Canine hires the handlers and trains the dogs.

The **Canadian Forces** have used dog teams on a limited basis since 2001 to provide perimeter security on their bases. But this spring, they started sending dogs out routinely with soldiers on foot patrol and with engineers searching for hidden bombs on the roads of Kandahar province.

"They are an awesome tool," said Sergeant Adam Taylor of 2 Combat Engineer, who oversaw Ouzo and Jhonel Arevalo, his handler, on the operation last week.

The dogs are trained to detect the scent of as many as a dozen different types of explosive, then show by special behaviour -- often just sitting down -- that they have found something. They can detect plastic bombs that the metal detectors wielded by engineers miss, and lessen the risk to human troops.

Their reward is playtime with their handlers. As soon as Ouzo found the mines, Mr. Arevalo pulled out a kong, a pet toy, and offered it to the dog.

"They don't miss anything, unless they are tired or having a bad day," said the former Peruvian body guard, as a gregarious Ouzo introduced himself to a visitor.

Oblivious to the conflict around them, the dogs actually relish their work, said Warner, another handler who was on the same operation southwest of Kandahar city.

"As long as the handler makes him think it's a game, they will enjoy it," said the former policeman with a South African accent, who declined to reveal his home country or last name.

There is obviously danger, and one handler was seriously injured when an IED killed his dog. But, says Warner: "I don't worry too much about it. I'm still alive, my dog is still alive."

**KEYWORDS:** DOGS; PETS; ANIMAL ATTACKS; DANGEROUS ANIMALS