

Joining

Dogs play an important role in helping the armed forces – from searching for bombs to protecting fighter jets. *Animal Action* takes a closer look at these highly skilled animals.

New beginnings

When RSPCA rescue dog Harley was rehomed little did he know how exciting his new life would be.

The clever five-year-old German shepherd was given to the Royal Air Force (RAF) by the RSPCA's Stubbington Ark Animal Centre in Hampshire to begin a career as a guard dog or a sniffer dog, seeking out explosives and illegal drugs.

Global help

Each year the armed forces tell the Defence Animal Centre how many dogs they need – in 2004 it was 375 – and the chosen few are trained until they are ready to start a career in the army, navy, Ministry of Defence (MOD) or RAF.

Armed forces' dog teams are stationed at bases around the world and protect equipment and people. The dogs work in all sorts of conditions and are very useful at night when their keen senses of sight and smell make them brilliant at tracking down intruders. Did you know that one dog can cover the same area in the same time as eight static human guards?

Breeds used by the armed forces and MOD are mostly Labradors, German shepherds, springer spaniels and pointers.



forces

Bad behaviour

Animal rehoming organisations like the RSPCA contact the Defence Animal Centre in Leicestershire to offer dogs they believe are suitable. Staff at the centre then train the dogs for a career in the armed forces.

RAF warrant officer Ken Dowers, who manages the centre, said: "Some dogs can be confused when they first arrive because they may have been told off by previous owners for biting or showing aggression, but in training we encourage that sort of behaviour. If they are biting while protecting their handler that is a good start."

Team work

During their work the patrol dogs can have a number of different handlers. German shepherds are a good choice for patrol dogs because they are adaptable and can easily change their loyalties to a new handler.

But Harley took to his handler, 21-year-old Corporal Caroline Hebden, straight away and they work brilliantly together as a team.

End result

At the end of the trials the chief trainer puts the dogs through their paces one last time.

Harley passed all the tests with flying colours and is now on patrol at RAF Cottesmore in Leicestershire, guarding billions of pounds worth of equipment, including Harrier jump jet fighter planes.

Words: Sarah Mawhinney

Tough training

In training patrol dogs are encouraged to attack padded arms. The trainers start by playing a fun game of tug-of-war before working up to bringing out the dog's aggression. When grabbing the padded arm it's important that the dog gets a full grip – a nip or nibble is not good enough. When the dogs are on patrol, they often reach a suspect first so they need to be able to keep hold of the intruder until their handler arrives.

Sniffer dogs are taught obedience and retrieving skills. After all they could be asked to sniff out anything from substances such as drugs and explosives, to illegal immigrants hiding in lorries.

