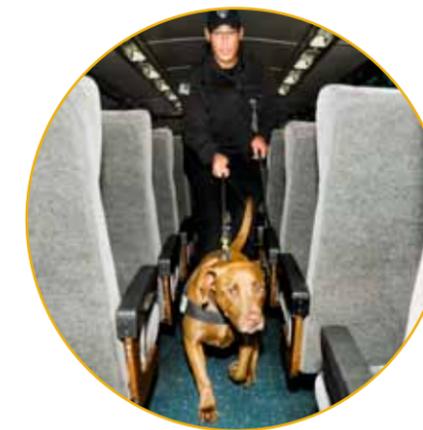




# Nose for safety

Boeing K-9 teams are helping protect the company and its employees

By Christine Cranston



“They have to be confident and not afraid of new environments.”

— Melissa Larsen, primary trainer and handler, Boeing Explosive Detection K-9 Unit

Zachi has the nose and agility to locate 17,000 different explosive-based chemicals and compounds.

The yellow Labrador retriever, with a sense of smell 100,000 times stronger than that of a human, and Robert Magner, her two-legged partner, work at Boeing's facility in Wichita, Kan. Their primary assignment is to support Global Transport & Executive Systems VC-25 program, also known as Air Force One when the president of the United States is on board.

“Zachi checks everything going into the secure area and onto the plane,” Magner said. “Nothing goes in without Zachi's approval.”

Zachi and Magner are one of 14 K-9 teams assembled at Boeing since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. As part of a wider plan to strengthen Boeing security, the company launched its own K-9 explosive detection operation.

“We needed a more secure way to manage our deliveries,” said Melissa Larsen, Boeing's primary trainer for the unit. “We enacted hands-on truck inspection stations. It was the first job for the dogs.”

November 2011 marks the 10th anniversary of the Boeing Explosive Detection K-9 Unit, which is part of the Shared Services Security and Fire Protection organization led by Dave Komendat, vice president and chief security officer. His organization provides the company with security, fire protection, business continuity, supply chain security, data protection and emergency preparedness across the globe.

The specialized K-9 teams, each consisting of one dog and one handler, mainly screen incoming supplier and vendor vehicles, inspect aircraft being delivered to customers, respond to abandoned packages, and conduct site sweeps for hazards or explosives. The teams are also on the job at special events, during flight tests, and at major employee forums held on and off Boeing property. They also partner with local law enforcement to provide assistance when requested.

At some locations, Boeing contracts with private security agencies for dogs and handlers. At other sites, such as Seattle and Wichita, Boeing employees and their dedicated dogs are assigned to the task. Two such teams will soon be added at the Boeing South Carolina site.

When the program was started, the company brought in trained dogs that received Boeing-specific instruction. In 2005, Larsen, then a full-time handler, transitioned to the role of dedicated trainer. In-house training strengthened the program—and opened the door to adopting rescue dogs.

“It's more cost-effective for the company to get the dogs from a shelter, and it gives the dog a job to do and a loving home,” said Tony Lowry, who recently joined Boeing from the Washington State Patrol.

All Boeing dogs live with their handlers, and most are kept by the handlers as family pets when the dogs are retired, generally by age 10. Larsen finds new dog recruits at the animal shelters and pet finder agencies. She initially tests a dog's ability

to use its nose to find a ball. Not giving up translates to probable persistence in tracking down harmful explosive materials that could be entering Boeing property.

Typically, Boeing takes dogs between the ages of 15 months and 2.5 years. “They have to be confident and not afraid of new environments,” Larsen said. “As the program has evolved, we've transitioned to using dogs with a ‘friendly’ appearance so employees will feel more comfortable.”

Once a dog is selected and matched with a handler, the team trains for 12 weeks at Boeing, after which they're evaluated for certification—as a team. The teams are also recertified annually.

“Even after five years, Boeing employees still look at me in my uniform and ask why I can bring my dog to work,” said Chad Olson, Explosive Detection K-9 Team lead. “They don't know that we have a K-9 unit and that it's working every day to keep them safe and protect our company.” ■

*christine.p.cranston@boeing.com*

**PHOTOS: (Left)** Boeing Wichita's Zachi, with handler Robert Magner, identifies a scent from a training device used to simulate one of many odors found in explosives. **TED WHITESIDE/BOEING (Insets, from left)** Melissa Larsen, K-9 trainer and handler, works with Scooby during an explosive detection training exercise; Huey joined Boeing from Auburn University's Canine Detection Training Center at Fort McClellan, Ala.; handler Tony Lowry and Gizmo have been on inspection and protection assignments across the company. **JESSICA OYANAGI/BOEING**