

Treading the deadly paths of Afghanistan to uncover bombs that would otherwise kill their human colleagues, dogs have become an essential asset in conflict. Report by Joe Clapson.

But, unlike troops, the military animals in Helmand province are blissfully unaware of what is being hunted or the daily risk they face. All they know is that a ball or treat follows a successful find.

103 Military Working Dog Squadron is currently based at Camp Bastion. Part of the squadron, Private Patrick Medhurst-Feeney, a veterinary technician in the Royal Army Veterinary Corps (RAVC), explained that infantry personnel on patrol are happy to see the animals because of their ability to detect IEDs:

"The lads always give these dogs a good reception because they inspire confidence due to their proven track record," he said.

"We get out and go from compound to compound with them, looking for weapons and IED-making factories, and searching for devices. We recently had a find where we uncovered an ammunition cache."

Each handler usually works with a single dog for an entire operational tour, allowing the animals to learn their companion's traits and forge a strong relationship built on instinct.

Corporal Robert Webb, RAF Police, works with a search dog as part of the Counter-IED Task Force on route clearances. Together, they step out with patrols:

"We do a lot of planned operations but if there are infantry units that need us then we'll be called - we're here and ready to be used," he said.

"It's my third time out as a handler and the demand has increased ten-fold because the insurgents have become more sneaky in planting their devices."

Regardless of the dynamic nature of the threats, one thing that does not change is the ability of the canines:

"If something is not supposed to be in the ground, a dog will find it," said Corporal Robin Ardis, RAVC, an arms and explosives search dog handler.

"They don't know when they've found something dangerous - to them it's just a game - but it just so happens that their discovery could be life-saving."

Corporal Ardis' companion is a black labrador called Travis, named after the Scottish indie band. He has a growing reputation as a cool customer in his field:

"The dogs here have been selected because they can work while bullets are being fired, and

they don't get frightened when explosions happen," said the former member of 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment.

"Call signs are always glad we've arrived because we bring another detector to the party."

As well as the valuable searchers, more vicious 'attack dogs' are used as protective assets in theatre.

Private Medhurst-Feeney's Belgian Malinois named Vinko is one such creature, who will bring down a suspected enemy as soon as he is instructed to do so.

Once unleashed, the highly-trained animal will take hold of a target's arm and persist until ordered to stop:

"We patrol around the camp to ensure people are not where they shouldn't be," said the technician.

"If we found someone, we would be obliged to release the dog in accordance with the rules of engagement. Again, it's a game to them and the dog will bite the arm until the suspect has been taken down."

As a single unit, 103 Squadron's primary operational role is to provide protection and specialist skills to commanders on the battlefield.

Far from acting as pets, the talented four-legged soldiers are proving a menace to the insurgency and a symbol of morale for British troops in theatre:

"To them they could be anywhere and they just work for a reward," said Corporal Ardis.

A bouncing ball is all the dogs expect in return for saving hundreds of lives.

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