



A DOG IN THE FIGHT

STATE FARM'S TEN YEAR SUPPORT OF ACCELERATION DETECTION CANINES

"A MAN'S BEST FRIEND IS AN ARSONIST'S WORST NIGHTMARE"

The State Farm Insurance Companies' slogan captures the role of a dog and investigator team on the fire scene. But behind the slogan is a hard fact—these teams began a transformation in how fire scene examinations are conducted.



The change began at a time when few people had heard of the internet and a cell phone was the size of a brick. A few well-funded fire investigators wrestled with electronic hydrocarbon detectors or "sniffers" designed to recognize signs of a flammable liquid on the fire scene. The profession assumed that hi-tech solutions for investigations were just over the horizon, perhaps only a breakthrough away.

Simultaneously, and away from the world of silicon computer chips, an age-old bond of trust between human and animal quietly revolutionized fire scene investigation.

The canine team of dog and handler eclipsed the contribution technology was making in the field of practice.

The impetus for creating these ventures came, in large part, from the private sector partnering with public service canine handlers who believe a dog could learn to identify the presence of certain substances on the fire scene.

Willing partners within the insurance industry backed some of these enterprising handlers. State Farm Insurance Companies emerged as an early supporter. Ten years later the company remains a significant contributor providing scholarships for public sector canine handlers.

The introduction of an investigator and a dog team was the most important new investigative tool developed since the advent of the chemical analysis of fire debris. While some may argue the full extent of the impact, it is safe to say that accelerant detection canines or "arson dogs" as they are known colloquially, have changed the way many fire scene investigations are conducted.

For State Farm, it began in 1993 when the company announced it would provide scholarships, dogs and the necessary training and certification to full-time public fire investigators. In that first class, six handlers and dogs trained under the watchful eye of Paul Gallagher of the Maine State Police. Investigator Tom Norton of the New Hampshire Fire Marshal's Office and Cinder were the last team of that first class

to retire after many years of service to the Granite State. Two handlers are still active. Both have received replacement K-9s. Fred Sanders of the Shreveport Fire Department, Shreveport, Louisiana, received Mark in April 2001. Ken Palmers of the Georgia State Fire Marshal's Office received his new partner, "Georgia" in August 1999.

Gallagher has retired from the public sector. His commitment to the program and his love for the dogs led him to open his own training facility ... Maine Specialty Dogs. After receiving accreditation from the Maine Criminal Justice Agency, he continued his relationship with State Farm.

Among the Gallagher/State Farm class of 2000, are Hunter and his partner Tom Petty who work for the Harris County Fire and Emergency Services Department, Houston, Texas. Tom and Hunter worked hundreds of fires together. They are seldom out of each other's sight. Hunter, like all arson dogs, needs constant training to keep him sharp. Tom works with Hunter every day. Hunter trains by locating a drop or two of flammable liquid hidden nearby.

Hunter is a part of the Petty family. He lives at home, travels to work with Tom and he goes on vacation with the family. Having a 96 pound chocolate Labrador around 24 hours a day is no easy task. When Hunter and Tom aren't investigating fires they educate the public. Tom estimates the team has interacted with at least 20,000 people in schools, nursing homes and public events, a valuable public relations team for Harris County.



Tom Petty and his partner "Hunter" of the Harris County Fire and Emergency Services Department, Houston, Texas, have worked hundreds of fires together.



Tom works with Hunter every day by locating a drop or two of hidden flammable liquid. Like all arson dogs, Hunter needs constant training to keep sharp.



In his "off duty time" Hunter lives at home with Tom and his family. Tom estimates that they have interacted with at least 20,000 people in schools, nursing homes and public events.

Hunter and Tom also send a clear message through press coverage the team receives at high profile events. The message: If you are thinking of setting a fire in the Harris County area, there is a very good chance Hunter and Tom will bring you to justice.

The team is well known to State Farm agents and employees along the Gulf Coast. "We like to visit with State Farm people to thank them for their support," Tom says. In 2001 he and Hunter traveled to the International Association of Fire Chiefs Conference in New Orleans to help staff the State Farm booth at the conference trade show, interacting with hundreds of fire service personnel.

Company's "Good Neighbor Slogan" guides program

State Farm is proud that each one of the more than 175 dogs it sponsored in 39 states and 3 Canadian provinces wear the company's logo on their collar. The company is ready to help because arson is a serious problem in society. But like a good neighbor, State Farm doesn't meddle. The company plays no part in the instruction or the management of the teams. Maine Specialty Dogs has complete control over the training of the dogs. How the departments deploy their teams when the dog and handler go home is up to each jurisdiction.

Each dog and handler, like Hunter and Tom, have their own personal story that reflects the trust and love between man and animal. When a team is broken by death, a pall is cast over the entire fire or police department. State Farm has been able to help with some of these situations.

State Farm assisted Ulster County, New York just this year when Luke, a non State-Farm dog, was struck and killed by a motor vehicle. Jim Bales, Chief Investigator with the Ulster County Arson Task Force, approached State Farm about filling the void left after Luke's death. "State Farm granted us a scholarship just months after Luke was killed," said Jim.

Meanwhile, State Farm goes about working with Gallagher and his graduates. Recertification takes up most of Paul's time with the large number of teams on the street. He is concentrating on recertification of dogs he formally trained ... that's State Farm's focus too. ●

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