

## A Chat with Retired K9 Handler Mitch Olson

by Micky Adams

I first met Mitch and Zorn at Heinz Peter's training facility in Elverta CA in the early 90's. I was working with my second German Shepherd Dog and was introduced to the working side of dogs and the SV standards at Heinz's. Zorn was sired by a V-rated, SchH3, IPO3, FH import. Zorn helped to form my understanding of training and what this breed is capable of achieving. While Mitch and Zorn were training for K9 work Heinz believed in mixing in all types of handlers for basic obedience. I learned long ago to assist in the learning process by observation and emulating. I always ended up placing my dog next to Zorn in obedience classes since I appreciated what I saw in him and it gave me a chance to listen and learn from both Mitch and Zorn.

The years passed and as is normal you lose touch with people but the dog world is a small world and I was pleased when I made contact with Mitch after so long. He was willing to talk to me about Zorn and share some stories.

### **How long were you in law enforcement before becoming a K9 handler?**

The short answer; 3 years which is not the norm in Law Enforcement circles. The story behind that 3 year time frame is as follows:

I started working for the City of Colfax Police Department in 1986. Colfax was a small PD with 8 full time officers and 4 reserve officers back then. [Note: Colfax PD has since been taken over by Placer Co. Sheriff's Dept. in 1996] My fellow working partner, Bob Bumpus, and I really wanted to work with K-9's. We sold the idea to the Chief of Police who sent us onto the City Manager who said "If you can sell the idea to the City Council I am all for it. Of course you guys know we have no money for dogs so if you raise the funds for the purchase of the dogs and the training I will talk the City into out fitting a car for you."

Long story short these two green horns of the K9 world set out to raise the money and find dogs to buy. We each bought our first dogs, Me, I bought a German Shepherd and Bob bought a Rottweiler. We lobbied local business and civic organizations for the money for the training and out fitting of the patrol car, so at the end of the day it did not cost the city a dime.

### **What brought about your interest in working K-9's?**

Pretty tough question to answer like the vast majority of handlers I had a found love affair with dogs. I had been around dogs my entire life and as a child growing up in a very rural environment my best friend was always our family dog, of which there were many over the years. Going into Law Enforcement and learning about K9's in police service in general it was just a natural fit for me to want to work with K9's. I had been knocked over by them as a toddler, pulled around on a sled in the snow by 'em. Bitten by 'em and had my food stolen from me, walked with 'em, played with 'em, hunted with 'em my entire life. I was always comfortable around dogs and I guess I was just a natural at understanding them. I realized very early in life that dogs are much smarter than we [humans] had given them credit for. That theory was proven to be true many times over in my 15 year K9 career.

### **How did you and Zorn end up partners?**

Zorn and I became partners after a sad set of circumstances had befallen my first K9 partner. Zeke and I were in training when Zeke sustained a torsion. He passed away as a result of said torsion. This was right in the midst of our training and our whole K9 program was in jeopardy if we did not deliver the two dogs to service. Our trainer at the time (The late Heinz Peters, of his Hundeausbildung) had come across this dog, Zorn, whom he thought would be a good fit for me. Zorn was the same age as Zeke when Zeke passed away, however Zorn had a whole lot of serious talent and natural drive that Zeke did not have, well Zeke had it and we were trying to bring him "UP" a few notches whereas Zorn was the other way around and needed to be toned 'Down' a notch or two. It is much easier to tone a dog 'down' than it is to bring up or increase his drive, aggression etc.

### **What were some of the traits that you liked the most in Zorn and why?**

Having had 3 service dogs in my career all shared pretty much the same traits but Zorn was the first one that I was able to spend a lot of time with and get to know the good traits of a police service dog. Zorn had this ability to *think* through problems and recognize activities that were going on around him and understand...I mean really understand what was going on. Two examples; first on a particular training day early in Zorn's training there was an agitator visible in a high hide. The K9's could see him but were prevented from going directly to him by piles of rubbish and a short wall. The agitator was about 8 feet off the ground and at the far end of the wall opposite the location of the agitator there was a hole in the wall that allowed the K9 to go through

the hole, climb up a platform to reach the level of the agitator and make contact with the agitator.

Zorn had never been to this location and had never been subject to such a problem, hence the reason for the exercise. Zorn was the fifth dog up for the challenge all four previous dogs had failed to locate the hole and crawl through it to allow them access to the agitator. Zorn entered the room, saw the agitator up high in the hide jumped a few times to reach him without success. Zorn then retreated to the far wall away from the agitator looked the situation over and made a bee line for the hole, crawled through and made contact with the agitator. I remained in the doorway giving verbal support to Zorn to get the bad guy. I was totally flabbergasted at this display of 'Thinking' by a dog? Zorn recognized the problem and mentally figured out a possible solution to his problem...on his own.

There were many during his career but the second display of *thinking* that Zorn displayed stands out as it amazed a large group of people, many of whom had never met Zorn.

We were at our family cabin cutting up and clearing the brush from a large Ponderosa Pine that had fallen on the property. Many family members were present as well as several of the neighbors from nearby cabins all helping out with the downed tree. As the brush was hauled away by some, others were cutting the tree into small rounds and others were splitting the wood into stove sized wood. A few of us were carrying the split wood to the porch of the cabin and stacking it to dry for the next winters use. Zorn was lounging on the deck and just watching what was going on with interest. Suddenly he let out with a bark, ran to the wood pile and picked up a piece of split wood and carried it to the deck and dropped it. He then returned to the wood pile steadily for the next 2 hours carrying piece after piece of wood to the deck! Nobody would believe me that I had not given Zorn a command to haul the wood, but sure enough he figured it out for himself. He saw what we were doing, figured out HOW he could help and so he did. Like I said, Zorn was a *thinker*. I, as a handler, could depend on him to *think* for himself in situations and that ability made my job as his handler much easier.

One thing that I did take from Zorn and I still use it today is I look for a potential K9 candidate, family pet or ranch dog of whatever breed or mixed breed. I look to see if the puppy or dog can demonstrate the ability to think or problem solve on their own. By no means is this scientific but if you have a dog that can think, problem solve or at least understand the problem facing them. It makes for much easier training and much more reliable control of your K9. No more repeating a task over and over again to get a predictable response from your partner. Just a few times at a new task or problem and

bang, a thinking dog gets the task and problem and responds with the correct behavior time after time after time.

### **What kind of differences are there today from when you started in the 1980's?**

Wow, there are a lot of differences from back then to today. Back then our K9 partners were pretty much just Patrol Dogs that was trained in personal protection and building/area searches. In those days you might pick a potential working partner from your neighbor, the local pound or in some cases your local schutzund club. The failure rate with the dogs from the pound, neighbor etc. was usually pretty high. You had a much better chance of success with a potential partner from the off spring of a working dog from a long history of working lines.

Just like today, we still strive to have dogs that have a lengthy history of prior family members who have had various schtzund training backgrounds. We look to those lines to help guarantee that our future partners come from generations of this training as a lot of the necessary skills that a K9 must have are basically genetically already in them. That skill is there. We don't need to increase it, teach them to use it... it just comes natural to them. Now we know there is no guarantee that a puppy from several generations of schtzhund lines will actually prove out to be an acceptable working dog. But, it greatly increases your odds of having one that passes the certification process if the parents, grandparents and great grandparents were all from 'Working' lines.

Back then our dogs were pretty much patrol dogs that conducted building searches and area searches and mainly *air scented* for the bad guy. We knew about tracking dogs, narcotic sniffing dogs and bomb dogs who actually were *scent* trained for those tasks. But there was not much success in combining all those tasks into one dog with reliable results. Little did we know that our K9 partners were already up to the task and it was US the handler who could not comprehend that a single dog could be reliably trained to multi-task. So today, continuing to build on the working lines we have K9's that are personal protection dogs, as well as tracking dogs, evidence searching dogs, narcotic searching dogs all rolled into one. Now all K9's do not have all those abilities but most of today's K9 can do a whole lot more than we thought they could 25 plus years ago. I guess it has taken us humans that long if not longer to figure out that our partners were actually smarter than we were.

Today almost all police agencies seek out dogs from working lines. Gone, pretty much are the days when your partner might have been a pickup from the local pound, given to you from a neighbor or somebody who thought their dog might be a good police dog.

The dependency on the working dog lines is greater today than it ever has been and I am sure it will continue to be well into the future. When you find a system that is reliable time and time again. You stick with it.

Gone also are the days when your K9 partner was considered an “attack dog” in your local community. K9’s back in the 1970’s and sometimes up till the mid 1980’s were often kept in a kennel outside the handlers’ residence and family member contact was limited for the quote safety of the family members. Direct public contact was a real no-no for fear of accidental bites and that we thought that constant exposure to friendly humans would somehow reduce the drive of our dogs. Oh, how wrong we were. Today we follow the teachings of the founder of the German Shepherd Dog Barron Von Stephanitz, who created the breed, and well over 100 years ago recognized the value of a pack animal and its mentality. Today our lean, mean patrol dogs often hang out on our favorite sofa, steal tidbits of food from our children, and play ball with the kids at the local park on their days off. They wake us up at 2am to tell us to let them go out to go potty or fill their water bowl. Today’s working K9’s are a family members who visit schools, service organizations and are just all around happy go lucky dogs when not on the clock.

Mitch’s 20 year career in law enforcement is distinguished. He was 15 years as a K9 handler, certified Departmental K9 Trainer. 15 years as Range Master/Firearms Instructor. 6 years as a Bomb Disposal Unit Member. Bronze Medal of Honor recipient. Distinguished Service Accommodation. Live Saving Award. Officer of the Year (Optimist Club). 2 times recipient of M.A.D.D officer of the year award. Over 40 letter of accommodation. Former Board Member-Foothills K9 Assn. [www.foothillsk9.org](http://www.foothillsk9.org)

Zorn vom Berg Strum

10/21/90 – 4/28/2002

[V-Nax v. Hasenborn SchH3, IPO3, FH, KKL-1a, Lbz x June’s Dixie Girl]