

# Conflicts In K-9 Unit Had 'Festered

by MIKE SAEWITZ, Herald-Tribune, Jan 1, 2003

SARASOTA -- In a late October training exercise, supervising K-9 Officer Alan Devaney instructed Officer Christopher Hunt to shock his dog in the groin to make him let go of a mock suspect.

An electric collar in his left hand and its control in his right, Hunt reluctantly lunged at the dog. Brisco saw the shock coming and bit Hunt's left forearm, sending him into emergency surgery and putting him out of work for three months.

The incident was described as an "unfortunate training accident," but Hunt's injury was the culminating event in a yearlong saga that pitted four K-9 officers against Devaney in a debate that began over safety tactics but ended in a series of personal attacks.

In one of his first major decisions, new Sarasota police Chief Peter Abbott disbanded the K-9 team last month.

The problem, he said, was a decision made long ago: to place an officer -- not a sergeant -- over four other officers. Abbott reassigned the four officers, but not Devaney, and said the unit will be reorganized with a sergeant in charge.

"Because there wasn't a supervisor there, conflicts were allowed to fester to the point where it was irreparable," Abbott said.

The conflicts became personal. In memos to top department officials, the officers described Devaney as an officer whose "heart wasn't in it," who took questions as criticism, and whose constant absence forced them to take training into their own hands.

Devaney, in memos to his supervisor, described his unit as a group of officers who disobeyed orders, trained the dogs improperly and opened themselves to injuries like Hunt's.

The officers and Devaney accused each other of using unsafe tactics that threatened the well-being of both the dogs and the general public.

While Hunt's injury marked the low point of an already disastrous relationship, it represented the underlying animosity in the K-9 unit, whose members search for missing persons, criminals, body parts and narcotics.

All four officers blamed Devaney for Hunt's injury.

"When Devaney tells us to do a certain training scenario, we do it," Hunt said in a memo he wrote in November. "This is why I'm out of work for three months with a splint on my arm."

Hunt and Officer Kenneth Goebel disagreed with and resented many of the tactics Devaney taught them. For example, Devaney taught that a K-9 officer should carry a gun in one hand and the dog leash in the other. Goebel said that was too dangerous because an officer trying to rein in a dog could accidentally pull the trigger.

Since Devaney worked on day shift and the four officers worked nights, Goebel and Hunt decided to train the dogs on their own.

This was a sign of disobedience, Devaney argued. Goebel does "whatever he feels is right for 'his dog,'" he wrote in a September memo.

"It has become a broken unit where handlers choose to do what they wish when they wish," Devaney wrote. "(Goebel) definitely seems to be the catalyst of the dissention. His attitude and aggressive nature are the downfall of this unit."

In the September memo Devaney asked that Goebel be removed from the team, but Goebel told Devaney he wanted to try to resolve their disagreements instead. Devaney agreed.

But after Hunt's injury, the four officers met with Capt. Mikel Holloway to ask that Devaney be replaced.

Holloway removed Devaney from his supervisory position, but Deputy Chief Ed Whitehead recommended that Devaney continue until an independent review could be conducted.

Capt. Alan Woodle conducted the review and concluded that the unit needed a full-time sergeant and that the sergeant and officers should work the same hours.

The K-9 unit should be reorganized this year, Abbott said. In the meantime, the police will call on the Sarasota County sheriff's K-9 team for help, as they did during last week's search for a missing 5-year-old girl.

Hunt's dog, Brisco, was returned to its previous owner, Abbott said. Another dog was retired.

Devaney will not be promoted to sergeant, and none of the other officers will be allowed to return to the team.

The old team had "too much conflict to function effectively," Abbott said.

"I saw a problem," he said. "I addressed the situation. I did what I thought was the right thing."

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