Drug-detection work for the U.S. Customs Service requires agility and confidence on the part of dog and handler. Here, a dog in training trots back and forth along a moving mail conveyor belt, sniffing each package. The dog grabs the suspect package with its mouth, so its handler knows which package to pull for inspection. Note the rolled towel tucked in the handler’s belt, out of the sight of the dog. A towel game will be the dog’s reward for a job well done.

first learns to use its nose to discriminate among a myriad of scents to concentrate exclusively on marijuana, hashish, cocaine, and heroin. (Dogs can be taught to detect other substances including bombs, but Customs work is geared to these four.) About one dog in fifty has the right characteristics to make a good detection dog. In three weeks, an instructor on a procurement trip may cover five states and return to Front Royal with ten to twelve dogs. These will be carefully evaluated for physical health. Occasionally, a dog will wash out of the program. “A dog may quit working, or work inconsistently, or occasionally even be aggressive towards people,” notes Randy Moore, who oversees the dogs while they are at Front Royal. “Or a dog may develop a physical problem once in the field.” Any dog that is deemed unacceptable at any phase of Customs evaluation will either be returned to the originating shelter or placed in a pet home, according to the shelter’s wishes. (Since Customs training doesn’t teach or encourage aggression towards people or other animals, drop-outs and retirees can always be placed through Customs contacts.) Once a dog has been given a clean bill of health, it enters the procuring instructor’s upcoming class. Although the instructor is assigned his human students, he chooses his dog students himself. This partiality towards “his” dogs makes an instructor a keen observer of each dog’s individual working style and a quick corrector of handler errors.

Five human students compose a typical class. The instructor assigns each handler two dogs based on physical attributes, personality, and energy level. At the end of the course, the handler will choose one dog to take on duty; the other will remain at Front Royal to be matched with a handler in another course or an agent in the field needing a replacement dog. In this way, each handler is assured of finishing the course with at least one dog, even if the other dog does not complete it. Some handlers may have never worked with a dog before, so early days are spent getting acquainted with their charges. But most handlers have applied specifically for dog-detection work. Jeff Weitzman, for example, previously worked in immigration in Arizona before joining the Customs Service in February. “I saw a drug-detection team at work and knew I wanted to get into Customs,” he said halfway through his training in May. He was training Peaches, a yellow Labrador, and Trudy, a German Shepherd, with an eye towards his first assignment, Kennedy Airport in New York City. At first, a small cloth packet containing artificial (and harmless) hashish is hidden in a tightly rolled and secured tube of toweling. While the dog is held by its handler, the towel is tossed some distance away, in
plain sight. "There it is, boy, go get it!" the handler urges, as the dog dashes for the package on the luggage conveyor. In an automobile headlight, or among dozens of cartons of soap powder and cleaning supplies in a warehouse. Each time, the handler lays on the praise and produces the wonderful towel from a hiding place behind his back or inside a jacket. As far as the dog is concerned, it has "found" the towel inside the suspicious package. Since, for obvious reasons, the dog cannot be permitted to tear apart mail or luggage to get at the contraband substance, it must paw or bite at the item so that the handler knows exactly which package among dozens is the one holding drugs.*

* Tartan Engine may appear to have discovered marijuana, cocaine, and heroin as it due to a working environment. A local businessman allows the agency to use his facility for training his canines. There are few places anywhere in the country that will allow dogs to practice on a conveyor belt or scavenging amid cardboard boxes. Customs work requires a dog with both confidence and natural physical ability because of such working conditions. The Front Royal training center has its own mail-handling conveyor belts, parking lots filled with automobiles, and luggage carousels to provide realistic simulations of all kinds of working environments. A local businessman allows the agency to use his facility for warehouse training.

Bill Molaski has been with Customs for ten years and has been an instructor at Front Royal for four. The hardest part of a handler's job, according to him, is "staying out of the dog's way, learning to cut the dog off or trip the dog to stay focused and alert. The handler relationship is like a dancing partnership—each has a role. Since the dog is always on a leash while at work, the handler must insist the dog check every package or suitcase by pointing or tapping at it (a technique called "targeting") but not yank the dog away from a package if it hesitates for a second. A dog with a belt moving dozens of packages a minute, such a technique requires physical fitness on the part of the handler as well—along with eye-hand coordination.

Once in the field, dog and handler typically work an eight-hour shift, checking vehicles at border crossings, holds of container ships, aircraft cabins, luggage, or mail—thirty minutes on, thirty minutes off—with another team in a physically demanding position. After its shift is over, the dog is returned to a secure local kenneling facility—often a veterinarian's clinic—fed and groomed by the handler, and left until the next morning. Customs has found that, if a dog goes home with a handler and takes on the role of family pet, the dog's enthusiasm for the next day's "fun" can diminish. A valuable piece of government property, the dog would be a significant loss if it were to get away from a family home—another reason to keep it securely kenneled. After an energetic eight hours on the job with a buddy, the Customs dog probably relishes time alone to flop down in peace and quiet, in any case. Each dog receives a complete medical exam every six months. Every day, the dog is given practice retrieving a baited towel to keep its sense sharp. Dogs are also periodically rewarded with a find of contraband on the job, even if the handler has to plant a bogus package, so the dog doesn't become discouraged by a long drought between finds.

Although all handlers may not begin their courses as "dog lovers," they soon realize that they must genuinely respond to their dogs in order to complete the dog-detection course successfully. Even those who are "volunteered" for drug-detection work enthusiastically cheer on their dogs through each day's training exercises, trotting along as their dogs strain against their leashes. Although some handlers have found it rewarding to work with a dog that finds drugs then reward it with whoops of praise and the ever-popular tug-of-war. Customs dances for drugs, rather than the famous Corky, a cocker spaniel working in Miami's airport, are trained by Customs to detect drugs concealed in luggage. Personal-search dogs are on the job in a few locations as part of a pilot study. More may be added. Every dog/handler team is recertified annually by the Front Royal instructors. Usually, if a dog is not working well, instructors will discover a handler error to blame.

Local and state police—even foreign governments—can, for a substantial fee, send officers to fill vacancies in classes for Customs trainers. Although the life of a Customs dog may seem, in many ways, ideal for a certain kind of dog, Gene McEathron, director of the Canine Enforcement Program for Customs, reports that finding enough dogs is a struggle.

Many shelters have policies against placing anywhere but in a pet home; others have had bad experiences releasing dogs to police departments or military units only to have the dogs later returned to them traumatized or too aggressive for alternate placement and have closed their doors to any dog-detection service. Others simply don't know how Customs training works.

Dennis Reed is chief warden of the Fairdale, Va., Warden's Department of Animal Control, a facility that releases dogs to Customs. "A dog's work saves an animal's life," he says. "A lot of animals not suited to a family make good working dogs. The rigors of drug detection can make an unmanageable animal into a manageable one." Mr. Reed has been to Front Royal to see Customs training for himself. "I know the dogs are well cared for. I know [Customs] to be a very reputable agency. They take care of the dog—not only mentally but physically. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend" to any shelter that it release dogs to Customs, he emphasizes.

Jenny Horlamarus, who works at the Washington County (Wisconsin) Humane Society, agrees: "We check back with Customs and [the dog's] all seem to get excellent care," she says. The instructors know within a minute of working with that whether the dog will work for them. We sometimes have a big dog that has been in the shelter for three weeks with no one interested. If we think he will suit Customs, we give them a call." Said another employee at a midwestern shelter, "We've had eight to ten dogs graduate with high honors" from the Customs program. "I would recommend Customs to any shelter—everything we've seen has been good."

Customs isn't for every dog. Every dog that pulls on a leash or likes a game of catch isn't Customs material. Dogs must be between fifty and seventy pounds (any larger and they can't search a compact car), sporting breeds predominate, although Airedales and pit-bull terrier crosses have passed the test. For some shelter dogs, Customs work is a second chance at a life worth living.

For more information on the U.S. Customs Service's dog-detection program, contact Gene McEathron, Director, Canine Enforcement Program, U.S. Customs Service, HCR Box 7, Front Royal, Va. 22630-9302.