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. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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.
lavish praise and play, the dog begins to the handler, with the towel in its mouth, ab­sorbing the peculiar aroma of hashish. After lauding praise and play, the dog begins to learn that finding the hashish smell in the towel creates joy in its human partner and triggers a play session. Later, the dog learns to find the hashish smell in a package on a moving mail conveyor belt, in a suitcase on a luggage conveyor, in an automobile dashboard, 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 in plain sight.

...sorbing the peculiar aroma of hashish. After a moving mail conveyor belt, in a suitcase on a luggage conveyor, in an automobile dashboard, 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 in plain sight.

The handler observes that the dog cannot find the hashish smell in a package among dozens is the one holding drugs.* Later, the dog learns it will be rewarded for handling conveyor belts, parking lots filled with automobiles, and luggage carousels to get at the contra­

...it 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. “The dog has to enjoy what it’s doing in order for it to be effective,” Bill Molaski observes. “If the dog doesn’t like the job, he stops working.” Training the dog to detect drugs can be a lot of fun—finding drugs then reward it with whoops of praise and the ever-popular tug-of-war. “He has to have fun to be fun,” says the famous Corky. Usually, if a dog is not working well, instructors will discover a handler error to blame.

Every dog/handler team is re­ceived 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 McEachern, 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 animal protection service. Others simply don’t know how Customs training works.

Dennis Reed is chief warden of the Fair­dale, Virginia, Department of Animal Control, a facility that releases dogs to Customs. “Customs work saves an animal’s life,” he says. “A lot of animals not suited to a family make good working dogs. The rig­orous nature of training 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 Horlamus, who works at the Washington County (Wisconsin) Humane Society, agrees. “We do check back with Customs and [the dogs] all seem to get excel­lent care,” she says. “The instructors know within a minute of working with that dog 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 in him. We think he will suit Customs, we give them a call.”

A local businessman who has had eight to ten dogs “volunteered” for Customs has been to Front Royal to see Customs training. Although the life of a Customs dog may seem, in many ways, ideal for a certain kind of dog, Gene McEachern, director of the Canine Enforcement Program for Customs, reports that finding enough dogs is a struggle. Although sporting breeds predominate in Customs’ work, representatives from a number of pure breeds and mixed breeds have excelled.

* Should a dog inhale or otherwise come into con­tact with real narcotics while on the job, an ambulance is immediately administered.