A FEW GOOD DOGS

BY DEBORAH SALEM

PICTURE A FRUSTRATED PET OWNER WALKING into a humane society's shelter and going straight to the desk where animals are surrendered, dragging a boisterous, sixty-five-pound young adult dog.

"He's impossible—he has tons of energy, digs holes in the yard, wants to chase a tennis ball 'til you drop," complains the owner. "He's friendly, all right, but we just can't handle the destructiveness anymore." The shelter manager looks at the bright-eyed Labrador Retriever (or German Shepherd, pointer, or Golden-mix) and sighs inwardly. "Who is going to want this guy?" she wonders.

The answer may be the United States Customs Service.

Every year, the Customs canine-enforcement program takes approximately 100 healthy, young dogs with energy, enthusiasm, and an almost compulsive need to retrieve into its drug-detection program. After twelve weeks of training, dogs and their handlers are posted to one of thirty-eight ports of entry across the country, where they search baggage, warehouses, mail-handling facilities, private vehicles, small airplanes—even travelers themselves—for illegal narcotics entering the United States.

For the dogs, it's a great career. They play "find the package" with a handler who has been taught to let the dog do its job, then reward the animal effusively when it makes a find.

Although the dog views the work as a game, for Customs, it is serious business: one year, the Customs Service's 133 canine-enforcement teams made 3,854 seizures of narcotics and dangerous drugs with a street value of $844,024,000. Customs officials admit they could use 500 dog/handler teams in ports and at border crossings right now; plans call for 500 teams to be in the field by 1993. These teams are extremely effective; a dog can search an automobile in a few minutes as thoroughly as can a human agent in twenty minutes.

Approximately 96 percent of the Customs Service's drug-detection dogs come from shelters. Each dog is selected by one of the Customs Service's twelve instructors, who canvass shelters nationwide seeking canine students for the service's drug-detection courses, held at a former government mounting station in Front Royal, Virginia. All female dogs recruited are spayed; males are neutered if so required by shelter policy.

Each instructor chooses dogs that he believes will make a good Customs dog. He looks for a high energy level, physical fitness and agility, and a keen desire to grab a tennis ball or play tug-of-war. This last is critical, because a Customs dog's reward for a job well done is a tug-of-war with its handler/buddy at the other end of a rolled-up towel. This towel is an irreplaceable training tool—it is the means by which a dog 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, dogs 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 towel-towel. While the dog is held by its handler, the towel is tossed some distance away, in
plain sight. “There is it, boy, go get it!” the handler urges, as the dog dashes for the toy 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, airport luggage, or mail—thirty minutes on, thirty minutes off. Each dog receives a complete medical examination every six months. Every day, the dog is given practice retrieving a baited towel during 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 customs handlers before going home with a handler and takes on the role of family pet, the dog’s enthusiasm for the work saves an animal’s life,” he says. A “lot of animals not suited to a family make good working dogs. The rigours of drug enforcement 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 family make good working dogs. The rigours of drug enforcement 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

shelter that it release dogs to Customs, he emphasizes.

Jenny Horlamb, 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 it. If we think he will suit Customs, we give them a call.” Said another employee at a midwestern