

The Future of the MWD Program: LSCO Integration and Holistic Health and Wellness

By First Lieutenant Catherine A. Nelson

The growing threat from China in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command region has prompted a shift to large-scale combat operations (LSCO)-oriented training as a driving factor across the force. For the military working dog (MWD) program, the shift from counterinsurgency operations to LSCO has also meant a shift in mentality toward our canine companions. In the LSCO environment, MWDs are now considered warfighters. The 520th Military Police Detachment “Sheepdogs,” Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, have adopted new ways to care for, train, and employ MWDs across the Pacific Theater. The Sheepdogs are changing the way that MWDs are integrated into LSCO and taking a new approach to holistic health and wellness for MWDs.

As with any other Soldier, the health and wellness of MWDs is paramount to their success in future conflicts. The Sheepdogs embraced this mentality by including their MWDs in their foot marches, installing a treadmill for MWD use, and working closely with the veterinary team to build tailored fitness programs for each MWD. The fitness programs cover everything from stamina to work/rest cycles, diet, and the behavioral health of the dogs. Within the realm of MWD behavioral health, the Sheepdogs have implemented various methods of controlling MWD behavior in and out of the runs and keeping aggression under wraps. Key aids used in the runs include puzzle bowls and calming toys. Puzzle bowls force hyperactive/aggressive dogs to slow their eating and deliberately think about how to get their food—which, in turn, forces them to redirect unproductively spent energy to a more meaningful task. And “aggression balls”—which are essentially large, rubber bouncy balls—allow dogs the opportunity for productive play. The use of puzzle bowls and calming toys in the runs helps keep the MWDs from becoming overstimulated and overstressed before they are assigned a task.

Focusing on holistic health and wellness produces MWDs that are ready for law enforcement missions and integration into LSCO throughout the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of operations. One of the first LSCO exercises to include MWDs was the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division,

Schofield Barracks, Bronco Rumble, in which MWD teams from the 520th Military Police Detachment were integrated with combat support military police platoons. The teams conducted route sweeps and assisted with security patrols and other tasks. This exercise set the conditions for 520th MWD teams to support the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center, Schofield Barracks, where the teams served in similar capacities with infantry units from the 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, providing support to their maneuver elements. During the time between these two exercises, leaders became rappel master-, fast rope insertion/extraction systems-, and special patrol insertion/extraction system master-certified. These certifications and work with the Lightning Academy, Schofield Barracks, and the 25th Combat Aviation Brigade, Wheeler Army Airfield Hawaii, enabled MWD handlers to train on tactical insertion and movement methods with their dogs. Since the culmination of this training, MWD handlers from across the detachment have served as subject matter experts to partner nations, bolstering their MWD programs, conventional forces, and nonconventional forces.

From the home of the 520th Military Police Detachment at Schofield Barracks, the Sheepdogs continue to lead the way in MWD health and wellness, bringing the benefits of lessons learned into the modern battlespace to ensure that our battalion, brigade, Military Police Corps Regiment, and Army are ready for any missions that come our way. 

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