

## Representations of Police Dogs in Society

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Military and police dogs have a long and often troubled history. "As long ago as a thousand years before christ, dogs were being used by the armies of Egypt to carry messages and to guard army encampments... sometime early in the fourteenth century, the French began using them... the first known instance of dogs being used for police work".<sup>1</sup> More recently, "Police dogs, German shepherds, were used extensively by the Germans in World War I and would come to be intimately associated with Nazi violence against mongrel humans"<sup>2</sup>. Currently there are two versions of police dogs portrayed in popular culture. One, often shown by avid supporters of the police, is of the patriotic, heroic working dog saving neighborhoods from crime and protecting their officers. These dogs are perfect law enforcement until they are off the clock and then they are their officer's loyal companions. The second version of the police dog has been gaining traction due to recent political unrest. This version of the police dog is a violent killing machine used by police to rip apart innocent citizens who are often members of a minority. These police dogs are seen as just as bad as swat teams and automatic weapons and need to be taken away through calls to defund the police. Even with both representations of police dogs present, they are still treated extremely well and are often given military style funerals if killed in action. However, this high standard for the treatment of police and military dogs hasn't always been the case. Dogs worked alongside soldiers during the Vietnam war but were often left behind when their handlers went home. Police dogs are an increasingly political topic as are the police officers that handle these dogs, but their perspective is rarely considered. Police and military dogs are just following their handlers commands and doing what they were trained for. How society treats and views police dogs shows more about ourselves and our views on law enforcement than it does on how police dogs actually behave and how they think.

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1 Handy, Harrington, and Pittman, "The K-9 Corps."

2 Dekoven, "Guest Column."

While there are many different types of police dogs with many different duties, the most controversial are the dogs used for apprehension of suspects. According to the American Kennel Club<sup>3</sup>, police dogs are commonly trained for apprehension, detection, or search and rescue. Detection and search and rescue dogs are not as problematic because they are not trained to attack suspects with violent force. This violent force is why police dogs are currently controversial as it causes them to be questioned in the same category as other tools used by law enforcement with excessive force. “Mayo Clinic’s Presutti, states ‘The jaws of a large dog can exert pressure of 450 pounds per inch (psi), enough to penetrate light sheet metal. Resultant wounds consist of crush injury with tears, avulsions, punctures, and scratches’. However, Hutson reports that police canines are ‘trained to exert bite forces up to 1,500 psi’... [and are] trained to bite down hard, bite with full-mouth using all the teeth, bite multiple times/places, and hold until handler commands the dog to release”<sup>4</sup> This excessive force is shown in action by the infamous picture<sup>5</sup> of a teenager being attacked by a police dog during the Birmingham protests. This image is one of the most well known of the civil rights movement because it shows the excessive force used by the police, in this case on a fifteen year old bystander. It seems that most pictures shown of police dogs in action are of similar scenes: the dog lunging through the air at whoever it is attacking. This stands as a stark contrast to how police dogs are shown if they are killed in action. These dogs are given full military honors and are buried in caskets draped with the American flag, just as a police officer killed in the line of duty would be. In one case “More than 1,000 people and dozens of service dogs attended the funeral service... for Kye, a 3-year-old Belgian German Shepherd that was stabbed to death...”<sup>6</sup> This police dog, who was killed in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma,

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3 AKC Staff, “What Do K-9 Police Dogs Do?”

4 McCauley, Boatman, and Goel, “The Police Canine Bite: Force, Injury, and Liability.”

5 Hudson, *Birmingham Protest*.

6 Kim, “Police Dog Buried with Full Honors after Dying in Line of Duty.”

was also given a 21-gun salute. These high honors for police dogs are also often given even if the dog is not killed in action. Police dogs are held in such high regards by their communities and law enforcement that they are treated with the same respect in death that their human counterparts.

Why do we feel the need to bury police dogs with such high esteem when they are just animals who happened to work alongside us? Perhaps this is explained by the story of David Lurie, a disgraced professor who is tasked with helping euthanize at a local shelter as punishment for his unwanted sexual advances on a student. Lurie finds himself ensuring that the dogs he helps to put down are put to rest respectfully, even though this is not required of his position. It is found that "he is serving his own idea of the proper relation to the death of 'a body-soul' 'full of being'- because he now greatly identifies with his own death. He is acting on his belief that we should all, all of us animals, be escorted properly out of the life that has ended"<sup>7</sup> We see ourselves in the animals that we are close to. Which is why we feel the need when working with police dogs "... to make sure they are not dishonored, to see that the disgrace of dying, which we all suffer, is not compounded by being left... 'on the dump with the rest of the weekend's scourings'."<sup>8</sup> Our treatment of animals in life and death is just one of the dichotomies associated with police dogs.

However, this high regard for dogs in death does not exempt them from the political reckoning faced by law enforcement. This is shown by the recent controversy surrounding Chase, a police dog in the popular Nickelodeon show Paw Patrol. However, it is not the animated dog himself that causes controversy, it is how law enforcement is portrayed in children's media. As shown by the Paw Patrol wiki, "Chase, being a police dog, is very mature, possibly the most mature of the group. He is definitely a leader, and takes things very seriously when on patrol, though he has his ups and downs.

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<sup>7</sup> Dekoven, "Guest Column."

<sup>8</sup> Dekoven.

He is loyal and obedient, and he refuses to let Ryder down. Whenever Ryder isn't around, he tends to take on the role as the PAW Patrol's leader.”<sup>9</sup> Chase acts very similar to a trained police dog. He follows his handler Ryder's commands and works to keep his community safe. However, as this is an animated children's show that uses dogs for all emergency management, Chase acts more as a police officer than as a police dog while on duty. He has a “police car” with tools that help on his missions and is eventually given “Super Spy gear [that] appears to be a reference to both SWAT... and Covert Special Forces like the Navy SEALs...”<sup>10</sup> The main argument against Chase, and the entire show, is that he shows police in a positive view similar to television programs such as *Live PD* and *Cops* that follow law enforcement at work and show incidents similar to the death of George Floyd. While these shows have had a contentious past, the death of George Floyd and the protests that followed were the last push for many networks to cancel their police shows. However, the cancellation of these shows do not necessarily prove that the networks support the calls to “defund the police” or that they agree with their opponent's political beliefs. *Cops* was investigated due to ethical concerns as it was “found that many suspects had not given their consent to appear in the show and that the programme misrepresented policing in the US”<sup>11</sup> and *Live PD* “paused transmission of the series after George Floyd's death before cancelling it in June, following reports it had filmed an incident between police and an African-American man, which resulted in his death”<sup>12</sup> The cancellation of these shows and the death of George Floyd did have a ripple effect that caused Paw Patrol to post a tweet of support that they were muting their content “to give access for Black voices to be heard so we can continue to listen and further our learning”<sup>13</sup>. The responses to this tweet included a “photoshopped picture that read, ‘All Dogs go to

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9 “Chase.”

10 “Chase.”

11 “Paw Patrol.”

12 “Paw Patrol.”

13 Walker, “‘Euthanize the Police Dog’ Social Media Calls to Cancel Paw Patrol.”

Heaven, except for those class traitors in the Paw Patrol' [and a] call... to 'Euthanize the police dog.'"<sup>14</sup> alongside parents who's children enjoy the show and have learned good values from watching it.

Although our society generally hold military and police dogs in high esteem, we do not always give them the respect that they deserve. During the Vietnam war, trained dogs were used for a variety of tasks but they usually depended on the dog's sense of smell to help protect soldiers and find enemies. These dogs could "smell out human ambushes and mechanical ambushes"<sup>15</sup> and "could pick up the scent of somebody swimming underneath the water and breathing through a hollow reed, which humans couldn't detect"<sup>16</sup>. These dogs worked closely with American soldiers who went through special handling training and "are credited with saving upward of 10,000 lives"<sup>17</sup>. The incredible usefulness of these dogs was not recognized after the war ended and American troops returned home. It is estimated that four to five thousand dogs were deployed by the United States military to Vietnam, but "Only 204 of the dogs sent to Vietnam made it back to the States, or were reassigned to peaceful areas of the Pacific"<sup>18</sup>. While some of the dogs that did not make it home were killed in action or died from other injuries acquired outside of combat, "many were euthanized, some were given to the Vietnamese army and some were left to fend for themselves"<sup>19</sup>. If these dogs were so useful to the military and saved so many lives, why were they treated this way? At the time "the military and Congress considered the dogs 'equipment' and therefore expendable. Thus little effort was made to bring them home"<sup>20</sup>. Many veterans who had worked as handlers for these dogs or had been saved by them

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14 Walker.

15 Hesse, "The US Military Euthanized or Abandoned Thousands of Their Own Canine Soldiers at the End of the Vietnam War."

16 Hesse.

17 Frankel, "Dogs at War."

18 Benner, "No Room on the Chopper."

19 Jones, "5,000 Military Dogs Went to Vietnam; Not a Single One Came Back. Now, They're Being Honored."

20 Benner, "No Room on the Chopper."

worked to get legislation passed "that now ensures all military dogs are treated like true veterans"<sup>21</sup>. This legislation is one of the reasons why military and police dogs are often given full military funerals, even if they are not killed in the line of duty.

While Paw Patrol may be an innocent bystander in the fight to make our society better and lessen the excessive use of force and bias by police, all real police dogs are just as good as their trainers and handlers. "It has often been said that a dog is only as good as its handler allows it to be, and for police purposes it is essential, not only to have a perfectly raised dog, but for its handler to be a capable policeman: dog and handler work as a team and a strong bond of sympathy must be forged between them"<sup>22</sup>. Just like algorithms that are scripted for a specific purpose, police dogs are trained for their specific jobs. As a society, we can take some of the lessons we have learned with the ethics associated with algorithms and artificial intelligence to make police dogs less biased. When AI is programmed, care is taken to make sure that a well rounded dataset is used to ensure a less biased algorithm is produced. There needs to be thought about how police dogs are trained and how they are used by their handlers to keep bias out of the equation. It is important to remember that "...police canines cause disproportionate and profound harm to black and Latinx people. Our country has a long history of racialized use of canine violence, from dogs used to hunt fleeing enslaved people and terrorize civil rights protesters, through the present day"<sup>23</sup>. If officers are more likely to stop, investigate, or arrest Black and Latinx people, police dogs are also more likely to be used on those people. Police dogs simply do what they are trained for and are not inherently discriminating against certain people. In today's society where we often are at odds over each other over political differences, it is important to remember that sometimes, simple facts are swayed by our political views. In this case police dogs are

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21 Jones, "5,000 Military Dogs Went to Vietnam; Not a Single One Came Back. Now, They're Being Honored."

22 MAHIR, "THE TRAINING OF POLICE DOGS."

23 Lopez, "Opinion | Don't Overlook One of the Most Brutal and Unnecessary Parts of Policing."

just dogs and they simply do what they are trained for. If we want to look at how police dogs are used, we need to look at the officers and law enforcement agencies that use them.



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