

Sergeant Mark Bristow plays with his patrol dog, Kaizer. The week this article was prepared, Kaizer was shot three times in the chest, face and leg. The dog will be fine, but the armed robber who tried to kill him and his handler was shot dead.

PUTTING THE BITE ON THE BAD GUYS

15 Hours With the Durban Dog Unit

BY PAUL KIRK

KwaZulu Natal has 23,000 policemen, a population of 32 million and a rate of violent crime that makes Bosnia look like a Sunday school picnic. According to the United Nations, South Africa is the most murderous and dangerous country in the world outside of a recognized war zone. Of the 23,000 policemen in KwaZulu Natal province, 200 are dog handlers. Last year, those 200 arrested over 15,000 criminals while attending 26,767 complaints. For good reason they have become the toast of Provincial Police Commissioner Chris Serfontein.

The Durban Dog Unit, operating in the largest city in the province, has contributed enormously to these arrest figures—and been terribly bloodied in the process. Recognizing their worst enemy, criminals have put price tags on the heads of police dogs and their handlers. “There is no doubt about it: We are targeted by criminals. They know the impact we have on their activities, so they try to take us out. They try to kill us at any opportunity and pay a lot of attention to doing just that. In fact, many serious criminals know the handlers by name.” These are the words of Captain Eben Coetzer, second in command of the Durban Dog Unit. On many occasions, Coetzer has had to comfort a grieving mother or a young girlfriend—the dog unit prefers not to recruit married police officers.

One quick phone call to Coetzer, and he arranges for me to tour KwaMashu (north of Durban), an area well-known for its rate of violent crime. On the phone he lets me know the risks I might be facing: “This township is the hangout of the criminal element. They have the home-ground advantage, although I would like to think we have the crowd support. It is very dangerous, and I cannot guarantee you will be safe.” As a senior officer, Coetzer no longer patrols the streets. He has no obligation to work after 4 p.m.; even so, he offers to personally drive me around, giving me a first-hand view of what it is like to stare death in the face in the country’s most lethal killing grounds.

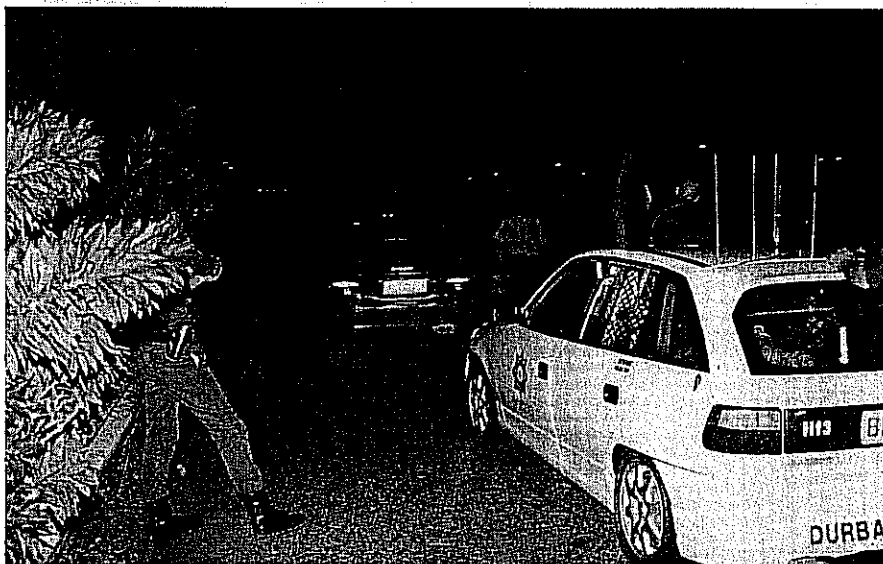
“Meet me at 7 p.m. outside the dog unit building at C.R. Swart. We’ll go visit the guys in KwaMashu,” Coetzer tells me. It was in KwaMashu that dog handlers Shaun Perumal and Eddie Dutton were gunned down three years ago. The murders were not unusual—hundreds of policemen were killed that year. Even so, the killings shocked Durban and the

dog unit. After meeting Coetzer inside C.R. Swart Square police headquarters in Durban, I pile my cameras into a police car and we’re off.

Our first stop on the tour is the petrol station where Dutton and Perumal were murdered. Coetzer related the incident to me: “A lot of our cars stop here; for some strange reason, car thieves who have stolen a car in KwaMashu always fill up with petrol at this specific garage before getting out of the township. We sit here and wait for them. That might have been why Eddie and Shaun were here. That was a very sad time for the unit; Eddie and Shawn were among the best, and



Rambo “smiles” for the camera. Dogs are so effective in South Africa that bounties are offered for them and their handlers by criminals.



in a tiny unit like we operate in, the loss was a great sorrow. They were everybody's friends."

The two young policemen—Dutton had just recently married—pulled into the garage to water their dogs and buy a simple meal that would become their last. A pedestrian approached the car and drew little attention from either of the two policemen. When he asked for directions, Dutton tried to help the man. It was a setup. The pedestrian pulled out a pistol, and the 22-year old policeman died in a hail of bullets. Perumal, trapped in the car by his seat belt and unable to react fast enough, was shot in the head, killing him instantly. The entire scene was filmed by a closed circuit video camera in the garage. The road outside the garage was busy, and pedestrians walked by. Nobody came to their aid. When ambulances arrived, the dogs, Rex and Senja, had managed to escape from the car and were trying to protect their masters, refusing to allow the paramedics near the two lifeless bodies. Both dogs recovered and were given to new handlers.

Rex, the dog of Eddie Dutton, died soon afterward when he attacked an escaped murderer. The dog's handler, Lance Sergeant Stompie Sonnekus, watched in horror as the gunman shot his new dog in the head before opening fire at him. In the exchange of gunfire, the suspect was hit several times in the chest and stomach. Despite being seriously wounded, he survived.

After leaving the patrol station we head for Pinetown, an area about 15 kilometers west of KwaMashu where another dog unit was waiting to meet us. Driving through the township, older residents look approvingly at the car and nod. Odd groups of youngsters standing outside shebeens hurl abuse and make shooting noises as we pass. Some spit at the car. With soaring unemployment, many of the youth have resorted to crime as an occupation.

Constable Timmy van der Mescht and Sergeant Gary Smith have pulled into a Pinetown petrol station to await our arrival. As I get out of Coetzer's car, Timmy looks disapprovingly at my chest, then stares at my hip. He is visibly shocked I don't have a pistol: "If I was you, I wouldn't go unarmed without a bulletproof vest on. Plenty of people will be very happy to kill you if they think you're one of us." Timmy and Gary are well prepared. In addition to their body armor, the car carries two R5 (5.56mm) assault rifles, an UZI sub-machine gun, an R1 (7.62mm) assault rifle, a 12-gauge shotgun, tear gas and stun grenades.

After a few minutes, the two must return to work with their dog, Wolf. They are the only dog unit car posted west of Durban, cov-

TOP: With huge informal squatter settlements surrounding major cities, criminals have ample hiding places. Dogs are invaluable in tracking criminals in these settlements. **MIDDLE:** South African police officers cover the suspect of a stolen car. The driver was found to be one of South Africa's many corrupt police officers who had stolen the car from the police impound lot and then gone on a drinking spree. **BOTTOM:** Squatter camps and African bush provide good hiding places for criminals. Here, Constable Joanne Boardman is tracked down by Inspector Eddy Meake. Despite strong winds and an hour-old scent, Meake's dog found Boardman in minutes, never losing her scent (Chanel No. 5 we're told).

ering Pinetown, Westville, Inanda, Hillcrest, Kloof and Gillits—an area roughly the size of New York City but with an extremely small population.

After leaving Pinetown, we head back for KwaMashu to visit Inspector Gary Fisher and Constable Donogan Glendennen. While heading back, Coetzer suggests our tour may not be such a great idea after all: "We're taking one hell of a chance driving around without vests or rifles. If we stay too long in the area, word will get around and someone will be waiting around the next corner with an AK."

Toward the end of the tour, Coetzer makes a suggestion I snap up—spend an entire shift with the Durban Dog Unit. The date was set for the following Saturday night. I soon began to regret my decision.

On Thursday of the appointed week police came under fire at least twice in KwaMashu. On Friday, a dog handler was shot in the head and seriously wounded. The same day, another policeman mysteriously vanished. Things did not look good.

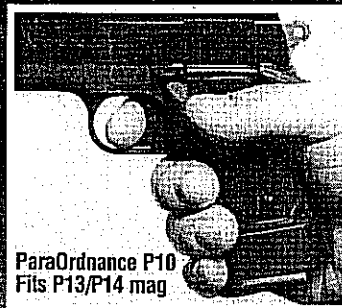
Many of the areas Fisher and I would drive through would not have radio reception—we would be on our own, and every criminal would regard us as a prize target. Many of the areas around Durban, most notably KwaMashu, are squatter camps, informal settlements housed almost entirely with shacks, with no tarred roads and very few roads that even have names. Even if we could call for help, chances are we would not be found until it was too late. Additionally, due to a flu epidemic, the Durban Dog Unit only numbered a total of eight handlers.

Arriving at the unit, I was handed body armor by a smiling Glendennen: "It's a bit old, but it's all we have. Fortunately it doesn't need to look good to stop a bullet." I felt a hell of a lot safer with it on, and I also had my 1911 with me this time—cocked and locked the way John Moses Browning and God meant it to be.

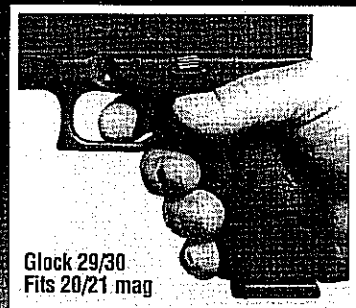
A shift for the Dog Unit means 12-hour straight work with a break every hour for the dogs to be let out of their cages to walk about. A shift starts off with an inspection. Rifles, flashlight, "puppy lines" (very long leashes) and body armor must accompany every handler.

With the inspection over, the handlers fetch their dogs from the kennels at the back of the unit. The dogs love the excitement of going to work, and as soon as they sense their master, an unholy din breaks out. Dogs howl and bark to show their eagerness. Every dog wants to go out, even those that have just finished work and should be sleeping.

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Fisher stops to give me advice before collecting his dog: "If we take fire, move to cover as fast as you can. If I have to chase somebody, lock the car and then follow. Be very careful, and if you have to use the radio to call for help, do it. Don't expect a bystander to help—they won't."

The advice is not intended to impress. Both Fisher and his long-haired German shepherd, "Rambo," have been shot. Fisher stopped a bullet in his calf in 1995, courtesy of an armed robber. Rambo was shot while tackling a burglar. Miraculously, he lived. "He's a tough guy, old Rambo. He was back at work only weeks after having emergency surgery. He's getting on a bit now though, and when he is too old to work, I'll definitely buy him." Like all other police dogs the unit employs, when they are too old they are offered for sale at a minimal price to their handler. The dogs are seldom offered elsewhere, and the handlers inevitably buy them.

Within minutes of leaving dog unit headquarters, the radio informs us of a car theft, and within minutes, four more cars are reported stolen. There is little of hope of recovering them, as chances are they are heading for one of KwaMashu's many chop shops. We take up position on the main road to the township and hope to have a stolen car drive past us.

We are soon spurred on to action again by radio control—a robbery at a pharmacy with five black males armed with AK-47s who have

overpowered the security guards and taken hostages. Driving to the scene at 240 kilometers per hour, the call turns out to be a false alarm.

Next, we are dispatched to a shoot-out in Phoenix, but this time it is no false alarm. The scene has been attended to by other units by the time we arrive, however.

Now we head back to KwaMashu where another dog unit has arrested two car thieves. The thieves are quite cheerful, though they have been forced to lie in front of the police car, blinded by the headlights. After arranging transport for the two suspects, one policeman decides to drive the recovered car back to the owner while his partner follows with us in tow on Ntuzuma Main road.

During our patrol, we dealt with car thieves, burglars, a gang of thieves that broke into the courts building to steal evidence seized by the police and numerous other calls to duty.

The last call of the night was for one of the dogs in the unit to locate the body of slain police officer Simeon Solomon. A unit had found the inspector's uniform cap in a stolen car. The suspects admitted to assaulting him and then shooting him but were so high on crack at the time they could not remember exactly where they had dumped his body. ☉

[Since the time this article was received by S.W.A.T., at least two police officers and five police dogs have been killed in the Durban area of South Africa. -Ed.]