AN EXERCISE IN
Obedience

Keeping your canine in the patrol car when you exit it requires rigorous training and reinforcement.

BY RODNEY SPICER

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT exercises that a police service dog (PSD) performs on a daily basis is staying in a patrol car when its windows are down. Not all agencies deploy with door openers and remote-control windows, so the PSD must learn to stay in the car with the windows and doors open during extreme distractions. Here's how I train a PSD for this challenging exercise in obedience.

First Things First
At the beginning of PSD school, the handler gives the canine the "car" command each time the PSD is put into the patrol car. That gives the command meaning, and the PSD associates the command with the specific physical action of going to and staying in the patrol car. After the PSD spends most of the first few training days in the car, he becomes used to riding in it and is increasingly relaxed and comfortable with being there. Now the handler begins doing obedience exercises around the patrol car;
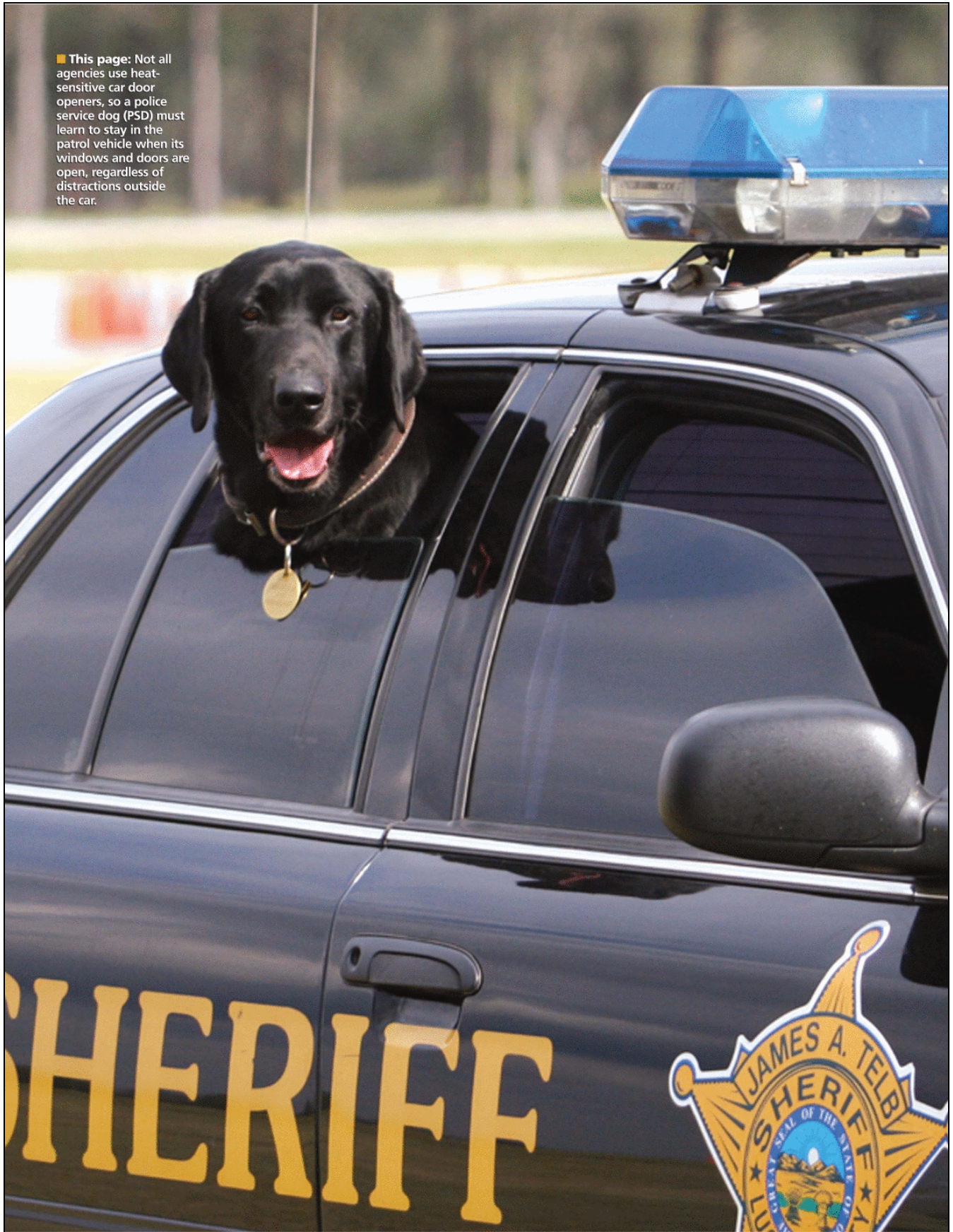
at this point in the training, the car door may be open, providing an easy target for the PSD.

Now I position the handler a short distance from the patrol car with the PSD in a "sit." The handler gives the "car" command, and if the PSD does not go directly to the vehicle, the handler takes the dog's leash or collar and runs with him to the car. When the PSD is in the car, the handler praises him and gives him a toy, thus rewarding the correct behavior. We repeat that exercise throughout training and throughout the PSD's career. The reason I have handlers start the dog from a sitting position is because I never want the PSD to anticipate the handler's next command. Also, it prevents foraging when training around the patrol car.

Up until now, all the car training we have been doing has been positive and motivational in showing the PSD what the command means. When the PSD has been taught through repetition and positive motivation, we go to the next phase of training and introduce a negative reinforcement.

Left: A PSD should never be allowed to place his paws on the window frame, because his next move likely will be toward the ground.

Staying In Control

In my school, all PSDs wear an e-collar from day one until the day they retire. If your PSD is 50 feet away and you give a command and he does not obey it, what does your command mean? Nothing.

In the next phase of training, the handler gets out of the patrol car and leaves the windows down with the PSD still in the car. As the handler closes the car door, he or she gives the "car" command, thus reinforcing the PSD's correct position. I then begin to add distractions, such as having a bad guy agitate the handler. The handler must always anticipate the PSD coming out of the car on his own without being commanded to do so. The handler should also always be in a position to watch the PSD; the priority is the PSD, not what the agitator is doing. By anticipating, the handler will become reactive and ready to take immediate action. If the PSD comes out of the patrol car, the handler immediately gives the "car" command with a simultaneous e-collar correction as the handler is running toward the PSD and patrol car. The e-collar correction should continue at the proper sensitivity level until the PSD is going in the correct direction and jumps into the vehicle.

If, during distractions, the PSD comes out of the car without being called, I have a training partner use a long line that runs through the window on the opposite side of the patrol car. Each time the PSD attempts to move forward, the training partner applies a long-line correction, preventing the PSD from leaving the car. The length of this period of training will differ for each PSD, because the level of desire and sensitivity is different for each.

After several scenarios of attempting to lure the dog out of the patrol car without being commanded by the handler, it is time to teach the PSD that he can come out of the patrol car only when commanded by the handler.

I start by having an agitator excite the dog and create distractions around the car. Meanwhile the handler is giving the dog the "car" command, which reinforces the PSD's correct position in the car. I then have the agitator go away from the patrol car. Also, at this time, the handler has a long line on the PSD. We have reinforced to the PSD that he should not exit the patrol car; now we must teach him that he can come from the car only when the handler calls him.

When called, however, the PSD may demonstrate a strong hesitation to exit the car because we have reinforced the "car" command. So when the handler calls the PSD, the handler simultaneously gives both a long-line and an e-collar correction: the long line gives the handler control and allows him or her to bring the PSD directly to them; the corrections also associate the command with a clear and specific meaning. If the handler does not use a long line to direct the dog, he may stay in the patrol car and not come when called, thus making the command unclear and conflicting.

The handler should always praise the PSD when he does what he was commanded to do. Praise will confirm to the

Training Tips

■ Never give a command you cannot reinforce.
■ Send the PSD to the patrol car daily by giving the "car" command.
■ When exiting the patrol car, always give the "car" command to reinforce the PSD's correct position.
■ Car training should be challenging, with the windows down and the doors open in all training scenarios and environments when possible.
■ Never accept the PSD placing his paws on the window frame, because his next move is toward the ground.
■ Do not use the command, "here," because a handler generally tells the suspect to "come here," and you do not want the PSD to assume that you are talking to him.
■ Always assume that your PSD will come out of the patrol car on his own without being commanded; that will help you to be ready to take immediate action.
■ Train other officers to watch for your PSD putting his paws on the window frame so that they will let you know if the PSD is exiting the car on his own. Have officers alert you by yelling "car," which is your indication to take action.
■ Train more for the PSD to stay *in* the patrol car, versus calling him *out* of car. It is better that the dog hesitates slightly rather than anticipates.

dog that each command has a specific action and purpose, and that training should always be challenging. Also, this training will help reduce excessive barking during the time the handler is out of the patrol car, because if the PSD is in a K-9 cage, the handler's absence will increase barrier frustration, and the dog may begin to scratch and bark at the door during a real-world scenario because he knows that that is the way out in a training scenario. Cages create limited to no obedience and increase frustration during a scenario. The PSD also will be much more focused on the handler and awaiting the next command if car obedience is reinforced.

Car Scenarios

Now that the dog understands the "car" command, I begin to create car scenarios. Following are a few examples that you could do in a training group or by yourself. First, however, always ensure that no one is in the training area that does not belong there.

While in the patrol car, the handler can speed up to a building, quickly stop the patrol car, jump out, and give the "car" command simultaneous with an e-collar reinforcement. Although the handler runs away from the patrol car and out of the PSD's sight, he or she should always be able see what the PSD is doing or have a training partner relay what the PSD is doing. I also give the training collar remote control to a partner so that they can apply a reinforcement correction if needed. The handler should wait a few minutes before returning to the patrol car.

When the handler is running, he or she could be yelling "stop running, stop running," as though to a suspect, which will further challenge the PSD to stay in the patrol car. The handler also can stop the car next to a couple of agitators in bite suits, who fight with the handler or run away and are chased by the handler while the PSD stays in the car.

In training, the handler should never have his or her back to the PSD, because you cannot stop or correct what you cannot see. Also, when out of view of the PSD, the handler and agitator can yell to add to the dog's stimulation. The handler should always brief the agitators and others in the training scenario that if the PSD comes out of or appears to be coming out of the patrol car, they should yell or say, "car," which also will let the handler know that immediate action is required. ∎

Rodney Spicer is a California K-9 POST evaluator, the owner of Gold Coast K9, and training instructor for the Oxnard (CA) Police Department.