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Officer Robert Edwards
& K-9 Rico

SUCCESSFUL RANGE TRAINING

Preventing Canine-to-Canine Aggression

BY RODNEY SPICER

Training on a shooting range — like all K-9 training — should begin with a plan to achieve a desired goal. At the range, the perfect scenario is for the dog to remain quiet and at the handler's side, in complete compliance with any handler commands. This article discusses how to introduce a canine to gunfire and train him for that ideal scenario.

Initial Training

To begin, officers should form a line, standing at 15- to 20-foot intervals. The officers will be referred to as training partners. Each handler and training partner has a cleared weapon that has been approved by the safety officer. The K-9 handler muzzles the dog and then "heels" him to the first training partner, who will be standing.

Safety note: Prior to range training, the dog should first be desensitized to wearing a muzzle. One reason the dog is muzzled at the range is that each dog likely will demonstrate a different behavior and initial reaction to gunfire. The muzzle provides additional safety for the handler and other training partners until the dog is comfortable around gunfire and exhibits the appropriate responses.

After the handler has heeled the dog to the first training partner — who is standing, and the dog is in the "sit" position at the handler's side — the training partner simulates charging his or her weapon by racking the slide back and releasing it several



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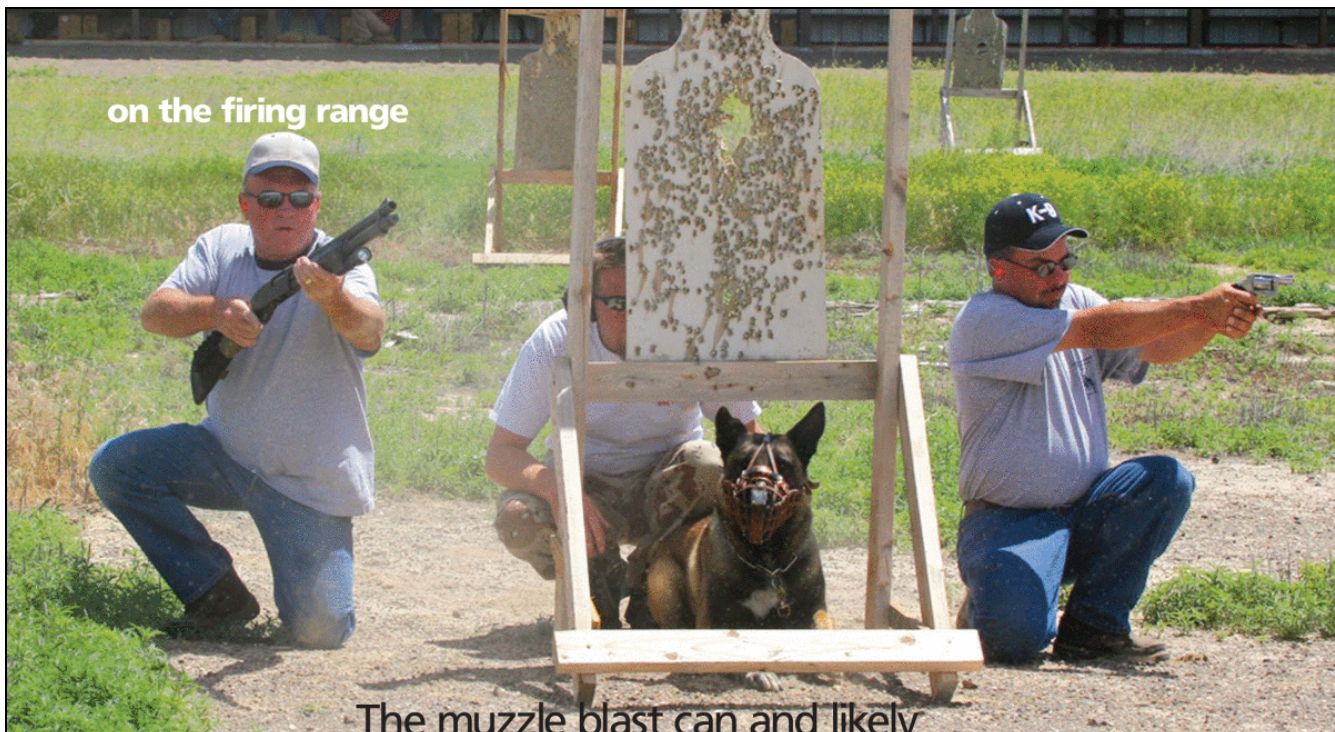
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■ The goal of range training is for the dog to stay quietly positioned next to the handler as he or she fires a weapon.

ING RANGE

on the firing range



The muzzle blast can and likely will stimulate the dog to bark.

times. If the dog begins to bark, the handler calmly applies pressure to the training collar while simultaneously giving the “quiet” command. If the dog shows aggression to the training partner or tries to move away, the handler reinforces the “sit” command and brings the dog back into position. The handler continues this exercise by moving to the next training partner, and repeats it beside each training partner in the line.

In the next exercise, the handler “heels” the dog and puts the dog in the “down” position next to the first training partner in line, who is still standing. When the dog is in the correct position, the training partner simulates charging his or her weapon as previously described. If the dog begins to bark, the handler calmly applies pressure with the training collar and gives the “quiet” command simultaneously. As before, if the dog shows aggression to the training partner or tries to move away, the handler reinforces the “down” command. Corrections should be appropriate to the dog’s sensitivity level; a harsh physical correction may overstimulate the dog and cause or reinforce barking. The handler continues this exercise by moving to the next training partner and repeating it beside each training partner in the line.

Training for Live Fire

The next phase of training involves obedience during live fire. The handler performs a variety of obedience exercises

25 to 30 yards behind the firing line while officers or training partners are firing at targets downrange. Those exercises can be conducted during actual range qualifications. The exercises can be performed with or without a muzzle initially, but

eventually the muzzle should be removed.

During obedience training, the training partner will apply electronic collar (e-collar) corrections simultaneous with the handler’s physical leash corrections and verbal commands. The training partner should be familiar with and trained in the correct use of the e-collar to apply all corrections during this phase in a timely and appropriate manner. All e-collar corrections will be at the dog’s level of

sensitivity, thus reinforcing the handler’s commands. If the dog has not been exposed to an e-collar, a long line can be attached and the training partner should trail about 10 feet behind the handler. The training partner uses the long line to prevent forging, as well as to reinforce the “sit” and “down” commands. Once the dog is secure and calm, the handler should begin to move closely with a shooter.

The reason the handler should move with a shooter is to

■ **Above:** In initial training, the handler places the dog in a “down” position next to a training partner, who will be the one to fire a weapon. That allows the handler to have both hands free to reassure or correct the dog. **Below:** Before range training begins, a dog should be desensitized to wearing a muzzle. Dogs should be muzzled at the range because they may exhibit behavior that is different from how they normally would act.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ACEK9.COM



on the firing range

training partner applies all e-collar corrections just as though he or she were handling the dog. If the dog is in the “down” position while the handler is firing and the dog begins to go into the “sit” position, the training partner should apply an e-collar correction on the momentary setting until the dog is lying in the correct position, thus reinforcing the command and allowing the handler to move and fire safely and consistently.



■ **Above:** A training partner can apply e-collar corrections to the dog's level of sensitivity at the same time the handler applies physical leash corrections and verbal commands. **Left:** It's important for the handler to calmly praise the dog when he exhibits the correct behavior on the firing range.

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Final Notes

Range training can be a stressful time for any dog. For that reason, dogs need to be introduced to the different gun calibers and other devices when possible so that the handler will know how the dog will react in a real-world or training scenario.

Other important aspects of range training include the following:

- Ear protection should be mandatory, for both the handler and the dog. At the very least, cotton balls should be placed in the dog's ears.

Range training can be a stressful time for any dog.

enable the handler to use both hands, if needed, to correct the dog from reacting to the muzzle blast. The muzzle blast can and likely will stimulate the dog to bark and move away from the handler to avoid the noise. Also, during this time, the training partner applies e-collar corrections simultaneous to the handler issuing verbal commands and using the leash to apply physical corrections. As a result, simultaneous leash corrections and e-collar corrections have now been linked together and associated with specific commands. Those actions will lead to the final phase of gunfire training.

In the final phase of the introduction to gunfire, the handler becomes the shooter. The dog should be wearing a muzzle and a leash. The handler may attach the leash to his or her belt so that both hands are free and will not move abruptly if the dog jerks when the handler is shooting. Now that the dog understands how to comply with the commands along with the leash and e-collar corrections, the

- Conduct obedience exercises prior to shooting so that the handler can set the obedience tone and focus on what is in front of the canine team.
- When possible, use a training partner.
- Always praise the dog calmly when he is in the correct position as directed.

Once again, remember that all training should have a desired goal. The goal for range training is for the dog to remain calm and quiet and at the handler's side. Due to the range of individual canine characters and desires, not all dogs will remain quiet during every exposure to gunfire, but range training will significantly improve all dogs' responses to gunfire. ■

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