

Police Dogs
of Trinidad and Tobago

INTRODUCTION

A NEWSROOM IN THE 1990s felt like a beehive, and there is no way ever to forget its energy or promise. Journalists—even me, a rather timid worker bee among a swarm of seasoned journalists—chased after that ever-elusive, “perfect” story. Never good at finding an empty desk so I could tap out my story on a clunky old computer, I darted about the *Trinidad Express* office looking for a place to land. The clock ticked. Deadlines loomed. In one hand, I held a sweating bottle of Coca-Cola purchased in Viet Nam, the bar across the street where customers ducked bottles flying through the air. My free hand snatched a ringing phone from its cradle.

I had no idea this was *the* call—the one we all waited for, but never expected to get. On May 3, 1992, Cpl. Leonard Dyer committed an unspeakable act when he dialed the *Express* office in Port of Spain. The desperate canine police officer defied the public-service gag order. I listened to his plea, grabbed my notebook and pen; jumped in a taxi to central Trinidad, and headed for a story that would haunt me for decades and ultimately change my life. In all my excitement, I forgot to ask for a photographer.

In the warm breeze of the Caroni plains, in central Trinidad, Cpl. Dyer sat on a gray metal chair outside the annex at the Caroni Canine headquarters, situated in a sugarcane field. His disarming smile, brassy voice, and percolating exuberance initially hid his concern. Constable (PC) Stephen Mahabir walked across the compound with Bonnie, a sleek yellow police dog twirling in her Labrador dance.

“She’s something else,” said Dyer.

Bonnie, a drug detection dog, reigned as the Canine Section’s

Introduction

undisputed star during the early 90s. Over three years, Police Dog #204 had sniffed out cocaine and marijuana worth a street value of TT\$3 million. Her closest rivals in the Canine Section had just crossed \$1 million in drug finds.¹

“That makes us the unheralded branch of the police service,” said Dyer.

His pride, then concern, spilled out of him.

“Just the presence of dogs on police patrols decreases crime. Criminals have suspicious behavior that these dogs sense instantly. The dogs rarely make mistakes, but the heat is a big stress factor for these dogs, and we transport them with open Land Rovers in the hot sun. That’s bad. These dogs should be going to work in air-conditioned vans. When they’re exposed to plenty of heat, they pant too much and don’t rely on their noses. Then stress affects them, and they die at alarming rates.”

Something caught Dyer’s eye and he chuckled. Nine-month-old yellow Labrador puppies loped across the grass behind Corporal Khairool Khan. Ace leaped up and rested his front paws on Dyer’s lap; then dipped into the annex, sniffed around, and scratched madly at the stainless-steel table leg where Dyer had hidden a training device for marijuana detection.

“Good boy!” Dyer shouted.

He doled out hugs and hearty pats on the puppy’s back.

“They say a dog handler should be able to win an Academy Award for his acting,” Dyer laughed.

With tails wagging, puppies Action and Aurora arrived for their performance.

“Don’t worry. The dogs don’t come in contact with drugs or get hooked on marijuana or cocaine. They just sense one or more of the components inside a training device,” Dyer said.

“Drug dealers try all kinds of tricks to mask the odor of their drugs: perfume, coffee, rasta oil, paint. But if a dog has a nose like Bonnie...”

Back at the newspaper office, I tapped out a story about Bonnie, the police puppies, and the need for air-conditioned vehicles, but I couldn’t shake off something Dyer had told me.

Introduction

“The police dogs have files—just like police officers—and they date back to the first four dogs in 1952.”

He had pointed to gray metal cabinets in the anteroom of the annex where the puppies had searched. Crime stories in the media rarely mentioned police dogs’ work. I thought: this could be a fresh new angle for a journalist to explore. What secret world of crime did these dogs work in? What did they know about crime that people did not know? How could the dogs help us to understand the history of crime in Trinidad and Tobago? How could I get to those secret police files?

Bonnie’s story began on the front page of the *Trinidad Express* on Tuesday, 12 May 1992.

Drug Lords’ Worst Enemy

Bonnie is a sleek blonde bitch who has stolen more than \$3 million from Trinidadian drug lords.

“She’s something else,” Corporal Leonard Dyer says with a smile that rivals Dick Tracy’s whenever Breathless Mahoney crosses his mind.

“She’s on her way to the airport,” her police partner, Stephen Mahabir says.

Dyer flashes a wry smile. Before the day’s finished he’s sure a drug dealer somewhere in the country will say, “You’re a dog, Bonnie.”

The drug lord would be absolutely right...”²

The graphic artist drew a black-and-white smile-worthy picture of Bonnie standing upright on shapely legs in high-heeled shoes. The story haunted me. I stopped flitting around like a bee in the newsroom and became dogged in my quest to see those dog files. The breakthrough came in 2006, when canine police inspector Michael Roban got that permission from Acting Police Commissioner James Philbert.

I headed back to those filing cabinets in Caroni, still in the same spot where I had first spotted them while interviewing Dyer. Here, I would return to my training in anthropology, be tossed into history from half a century ago, and be propelled into the heady experience of immersion journalism.

A senior officer and I opened two filing cabinets and found six drawers of dog files. The officer carried the brittle brown files outside to wipe off the covers so we could read the dogs’ names. I felt the

Introduction

adrenaline rush that came from discovering information no other civilian had ever seen. The canine officer stacked the dusted files on a desk so I could read and transcribe the handwritten reports inside.

The dogs in the kennels had been fed, so they settled into sleep. A cool breeze gently rustled through the sugarcane. A fleeting memory of Ace, Action, and Aurora dashing about this room crossed my mind. The canine officer chuckled and gently laid a thick file in front of me.

I looked down and gasped.

The file read: "Dog #1, Bruno."

CHAPTER 1

DOG DAYS

September 25, 1952

Four Trinidadian police officers, accompanied by their newly acquired Alsatians,¹ had no idea of the fate awaiting them as they boarded the ship that would carry them home. They had just completed a three-month course at the Metropolitan Police Training Centre in the UK. Cpl. Theophilus Thomas, Cpl. Carlyle Piggott; Sgt. Hamilton Bridgeman, and Police Constable (PC) George Alexis must have felt excited about the new venture awaiting them in the British colony of Trinidad and Tobago. Quite possibly, they were unaware of a storm brewing in the Atlantic.

Storms in the Caribbean can take unexpected turns and curl towards any island—especially during the hurricane season from June through November. On September 25, meteorologists in Florida noted an easterly wave that showed signs of intensifying over the Atlantic, about 700 miles east of the Lesser Antilles. Aircraft scanning the area encountered squalls of 68 knots over a considerable distance. Reports noted 100-mph winds. A hurricane appeared to be forming, but no closed center of circulation could be found. The sea appeared rough and unpredictable.²

At around 8 a.m. that day the four officers, “justly proud of these dogs with which they were trained” (as Thomas would later write in Bruno’s file), arrived in Port of Spain. Thomas and his dog Bruno; Piggott with his dog Winston; Bridgeman and Shah; and Alexis, with Carlos, landed in Trinidad without any recorded fanfare. The four officers, dressed in suits, ties, and the fedoras of the day, posed for a picture on the deck of the ship. With heads held high, the four dogs sat at their handlers’ feet.³

Police Dogs of Trinidad and Tobago



The first four police canine officers and their police dogs arrive in Trinidad on September 25, 1952. From left: Cpl. Theophilus Thomas, Bruno, Cpl. Carlisle Piggott, Winston, Sgt. George Alexis, Carlos, PC Hamilton Bridgeman and Shah (photograph by a *Port of Spain Gazette* photographer, from the Eustace Bernard Photograph Collection, SC.30 Box 1 Folder 6, Alma Jordan Library, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad).

The first official notation of the dogs' presence in Trinidad came from a note Thomas wrote in Bruno's file: "Bruno, Carlos, Shah, and Winston arrived in the Colony on September 25, 1952, and were taken on the strength of the force and posted to the Depot (DP 9031)." There the dogs would await their first duties.

On September 27, the Florida Met Office watched the weather pattern that had formed just before the officers' arrival and finally assigned a name: Hurricane Dog.⁴ Thomas, Piggott, Bridgeman, and Alexis escaped that storm, but they would face unimaginable danger in the future while making history as the first four Trinidadian canine police officers.

The new, uncharted territory of the Dog Section came under the British colony's paramilitary force led by Col. Eric Hammet Fairfax Beadon from 1949 until independence in 1962. The officers'

Chapter 1. Dog Days

pioneering efforts brought fame to one of the officers and a horrifying end to another's career. The other two canine officers quietly slipped into history.

Thomas would advance to the position of superintendent of the Mounted and Dog Branch and eventually become an assistant commissioner of police (ACP). He would champion the police dogs' cause for the rest of his life. His stories, often dramatic—especially when it came to his dog Bruno—sounded like passages from a novel rather than official police reports, but the stories proved necessary for the survival of the Dog Section in those early days. Without Thomas's dramatic flair, the dogs' stories might have slipped into oblivion.

Expectations grew high for Bruno, a sable Alsatian with a black face, and his working partner, Shah, a black-and-gray Alsatian with black-and-gray legs and a tan-and-black face. Trained as tracker dogs, Bruno, Shah, Winston, and Carlos were off and running. Their files recorded the dogs' every move.

Jail Break

19 December, 1952

The call came to the Northern Division requesting the services of two dogs in connection with a jailbreak at the Royal Gaol on Frederick Street, Port of Spain. Cpl. Theophilus Thomas, with dog Bruno, and PC Bridgeman, with Shah, immediately headed for the gaol.⁵

On their arrival, Thomas and Bridgeman met three superintendents and a few detectives from police headquarters, headed by Supt. Carr.

We were at once given a verbal detail of the two escaped convicts and were shown to the cells in which they were last kept. We took the blanket in which the prisoner slept. We were also told that one of [the prisoners] had been recaptured in hot pursuit, therefore we had only the other man to contend with. The blanket was taken with us to the entrance of the prison where the prisoners were said to have escaped from a vehicle while being ushered into the jail.

The prisoners had pounced upon an opportune moment to escape, after a court appearance, when they were being shuffled back to prison. Bruno took a sniff of the blanket and Thomas gave him the signal to track the escaped convict.

Police Dogs of Trinidad and Tobago

[Bruno] quickly took on the scent and headed down the pitched road south along Frederick Street. He turned east and continued onto Charlotte Street where he had a bit of confusion with traffic and pedestrians. Bruno picked up the scent again, crossed the street, and continued east-bound to Belmont Circular Road.

Bruno reached a bridge crossing the East Dry River⁶ in Belmont, and again had difficulties. After several futile efforts ... he eventually took up the scent again. This time he continued South along the bed of the said river to about fifty yards from the Observatory Street Bridge when he, on his own initiative, jumped onto the bank on the Eastern side and continued into a yard and finally came out on Observatory Street.

An audience swelled along the route as curious onlookers witnessed a police search never before seen in Trinidad.

All this time [Bruno] kept his nose turned to the ground and I, having a thorough knowledge of his reactions, was quite certain that he was on the trail. By then the crowd was getting thicker and the police men available had great difficulty in keeping them from crowding the dog and me.... The dog sniffed around in a desperate effort for some time.

Meandering from one street to the next, Bruno ended up on the Park Street bridge, where he sniffed and jumped up on the western bank of the river.

I assisted him up. He took up the scent again and came out through a hole in a fence, large enough for a man to pass. The crowd was terrible and uncontrollable. The police managed to keep them back a bit. The dog again made a gallant effort, but this time he failed to get any scent and therefore went no further. He was tired and taken off [the trail] to the agreement of Supt. Neish who was present all along.

It is my opinion, sir, that the dog was right all along and had it not been for the confusion of picking out the scent from the many of the crowd gathered, he might have gone that way where the escaped convict was actually resting in a house a little beyond Park Street.⁷

At the end of the report, Thomas made a parenthetical note. "(When the criminal was apprehended he did say that he went that route.)"

Early the following day, Thomas noted that the police had arrested the escaped convict about five miles away in San Juan, a town east of Port of Spain, which had served as the Spanish island's capital from 1592 to 1783.

From that first report, Thomas established himself as Bruno's

Chapter 1. Dog Days

biggest defender. From 1952 until 1960, Thomas worked alongside Dog #1 and recorded every detail of Bruno's working life. Bruno's files are possibly the best chronicle of crime in those eight years of Trinidad and Tobago's waning era as a colony. To Thomas, Bruno always appeared to be on the right track.