



Diplomatic Security's Best Friend

Preparing the world's best explosive detection canines

Ocsi, a 2-year-old, male German Shepherd, trained by the Canine Training and Operations Center, checks parked vehicle
Department photo

By Eric Weiner

It turns out that Diplomatic Security's best friend is also the world's best bomb detector.

The Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Canine Training and Operations Center (CTOC) is a world-class facility that trains and deploys reliable explosives detection dogs that are deployed to protect U.S. diplomatic posts overseas.

The CTOC program began operations in 2015 and is housed in a 270,000 square-foot unmarked facility. The nature of its mission and the sophisticated operations needed to fulfill the center's critical explosive detection mission make it the best explosives detection canine facility in the world.

In 2019, CTOC shifted ownership and in-house training of explosive detection dogs from Worldwide Security Services (WSS) to the Diplomatic Security Canine Training and Operations (CTOC) Office of Overseas Protective Operations (OPO). This change allowed for safe and effective collaboration between canine and handler. It also helped to ensure that dogs deployed in support of operations are operationally effective.

"DSS takes programmatic and contractual oversight very seriously at CTOC and employs a team on duty around the clock," said OPO Deputy Division Chief Dane Hixon.



Vegas, a 2-year-old, male German Shepherd, trained by the Diplomatic Security Canine Training and Operations (CTOC) at Kabul's compound, October 2020. State Department photo

DSS relies on WPS program contractors to staff overseas high-threat diplomatic posts with bomb detection dogs. WPS providers identify qualified handlers who pair and certify with their dogs at CTOC. Through the WPS program, DSS deploys more detection dogs overseas than any other U.S. government agency.

The CTOC facility also has improved and expanded its kennel, veterinary, and animal medical spa for the care of their handlers before deployment. The medical facility added a new, state-of-the-art computed tomography (CT) machine used to care for dogs. The computed tomography machine can scan the inside of dogs to meet the standards used by the CTOC veterinary hospital earned accreditation by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA). Of the top U.S. and Canadian veterinary practices hold the "AAHA-accredited" designation.

"CTOC has come a long way, the oversight is outstanding, and it is a truly a world-class program," Assistant Director for International Programs Cornell Chasten Jr., following a tour of the facility in

Dogs that graduate from CTOC must successfully demonstrate myriad detection capabilities and pass related tests before deploying with their handlers to protect U.S. diplomatic posts overseas. CTOC assigns approximately 200 dogs to the WPS program overseas, primarily at U.S. embassies in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are dynamic security environments, and the dogs need downtime too. Dogs and handlers receive scheduled rotational breaks and maintain skills through training monitored by the CTOC.

The CTOC and the Antiterrorism Assistance Program (ATA), together with Bureau of Counterterrorism (CT), expanded partnerships with other nations in response to global terrorism threats. CTOC collaborates with partner nations to provide explosives-detection dogs and the necessary training to deploy in support of counterterrorism missions. Current ATA partner nations with CT-funded dogs include Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal, Oman, Thailand, and the Dominican Republic, with plans to expand into the Maldives.

Explosive-detection dog training is critical to U.S. strategic partners working to secure their borders. More than 50 successful identifications of explosive-related materials attempting to cross the Jordanian

The four-to-six-week ATA program trains each handler and dog as a team. DSS trainers return with two weeks of on-site training, intending to make them self-sufficient.

"The CTOC procures and trains ATA dogs, then pairs them with their partner nation handlers to bring quality control and medical support for the programs," said DSS Deputy Assistant Secretary and A



Robo, a 2-year-old, male and Operations Center, search for explosive devices or unexploded ordnance like Robo, check structure for human entry. State Department



Chief Canine Training and Operations Center (CTOC) Veterinarian Dr. Michael Ratcliff (left), briefs Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Assistant Director for Training Julie Cabus (center), and DSS Deputy Assistant Secretary and Assistant Director (right), on the new, state-of-the-art operating room for dogs trained and cared for at CTOC in Va., March 10. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection)

CTOC expanded medical oversight, mentor coverage, and staffing to ensure the dogs are well cared for. Mentors and one veterinarian—visits each nation with an active ATA dog program to monitor the program. They visit all partner nations on a routine, semi-annual basis. After-action reports by the CTOC travel teams measure the program's effectiveness. Despite the global pandemic interrupting in-person visits, ATA maintains communication during travel restrictions.

CTOC trains and tests the dogs to identify each element of an explosives device, so no matter the device, the CTOC's blast forensics provides the trainers with the new information they need to keep dogs' skills sharp.

"If there's a bombing somewhere around the world, our chemist creates and analyzes that device," says Carter, "so we make sure that our dogs go out to post, knowing the odor and the product so that they can find it."

CTOC's on-site forensic explosives chemist has even developed special containers to transport explosive sample kits to overseas posts for analysis.

training the dogs. The washable containers prevent sample contamination during transport using a unique design that allows odors to escape a closed container when in use.

A dog can usually detect the odor of an explosives device well before it reaches the target and will give off alerts; thus, handlers need to be able to read their dogs’ behavioral cues as they approach their targets. This pre-warning can provide the seconds needed to save lives before a potentially lethal explosive device detonates.

With the combination of a dog’s innate abilities of scent detection, its love of work, high-energy level, and desire to please its handler, each elite dog—trained and validated through CTOC—becomes an unparalleled resource and the best detector to locate explosive devices.

Dogs start working at a young age and typically “retire” by age seven. CTOC implements a detailed policy for dog retirement and adoption. CTOC also checks and verifies the dog’s health before the adoption process begins, then closely tracks the adoption process to verify that every dog finds a good home. These skilled canines deserve the best following their years of service to the Department of State.

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A handler puts his canine detection training at the (10. State Department ph

