



Hancock County sheriff's Deputy 1st Class Scott Little and his former K-9, Nitro, in happier times. (Submitted photo) – credit - reviewonline.com

TRAINING MAY HAVE BEEN A FACTOR IN K-9 ATTACK

- Stephen Huba

The Review Online Oct. 16/16

NEW CUMBERLAND—On Dec. 10, 2015, Hancock County sheriff's Deputy 1st Class Scott Little was training with his dog, Nitro, at Oak Glen Middle School when something went wrong.

The young K-9 and his experienced handler were doing routine locker searches when, all of a sudden, Nitro attacked Little, biting him on his right forearm, according to court documents. Little, an 11-year veteran of the department, had to get stitches and take time off of work while he healed.

The attack soured the relationship between dog and handler to the point that, by April, Nitro was decommissioned by the sheriff's department—released to a shelter for retired military and police dogs.

"I have determined this particular K-9 is not suited to the type of work we in this county require, especially due to his unpredictability," Sheriff Ralph Fletcher said in a letter to Hancock County commissioners in April. "The safety of our citizens should and does come first."

A black Belgian Malinois that was not even 3 years old, Nitro was hardly old enough to retire. He was just a year into his service when the attack at OGMS happened.

So what went wrong? Records recently released by the sheriff's department show that the bite incident was the culmination of a relationship between dog and handler that was fraught almost from the beginning. The relationship that started with such promise in July 2014 turned into a battle of wills between an inexperienced, stubborn dog and a K-9 officer eager to prove that he could train Nitro himself.

Because the attack is now the subject of litigation, neither Little nor Fletcher would comment on the in-house training Nitro received. Little referred questions to his attorney, Eric Frankovitch.

Fletcher, who currently is running for re-election, deflected questions about Nitro, except to say, "If there is any fault, it's not for me to decide at the moment, other than I won't try that maneuver again. ... I would never do that again."

Fletcher was referring to the fact that Nitro was a "green" dog when he was purchased for \$6,500 and that his training was handled mostly by the department. Acquiring an uncertified dog with minimal training was intended as a cost-saving measure.

"The officer involved with Nitro had much more additional training than the other officers (in the K-9 Unit), and we felt that he would be able to take a green dog much further," Fletcher said. "I don't have all the answers for Nitro, other than it didn't happen the way I hoped."

Nitro's arrival in Hancock County came at a time of upheaval in the department's K-9 Unit, which is budgeted for four dogs. The department lost one of its K-9s, a Belgian Malinois named Rudie, in 2012, and another, a German shepherd named Freddie, in 2015.

Rudie had been assigned to deputy Scott Gittings, who has since retired from the department but continues to serve as an evaluator for the West Virginia Police Canine Association. Freddie was assigned to Deputy Pat Hoder, who received a new dog, a Belgian Malinois/German shepherd mix named Midas, in July 2015.

The department lost another longtime K-9 officer, Lt. Chuck Stanley, to retirement in June 2015. He was replaced by a new handler, Deputy 1st Class Hugh Tate, who received his dog, a German shepherd named Dagoo, in August. Both Dagoo and Midas came from Shallow Creek Kennels, of Sharpsville, Pa.

Midas and Dagoo cost the department \$12,000 and \$13,500 respectively, so it was with a view toward saving thousands of dollars in training expenses that the department acquired Nitro in July 2014. Nitro was intended to replace a German shepherd named Christina, who, after being paired with Little for seven years, was retiring.

Despite all the turnover, the department's K-9 Unit was enjoying a period of prestige because it had recently hosted, under Little's leadership, the state WVPCA convention.

Little traveled to Tri-State Canine Services, of Warren, Ohio, on July 11, 2014, to check out the replacement, records say. There, he encountered a "solid" 1-year-old male dog—the smallest of the litter—who seemed eager to please.

Little, who was then the K-9 Unit supervisor, tested Nitro in six areas: hunt drive, play drive, courage and desire to work, apprehension, dark room and compact area apprehension, and health.

"Nitro showed a strong desire to play and chase all objects that were given to him and also a strong desire to possess the object as his own," Little wrote in his evaluation.

Little used a decoy to test Nitro's courage and desire to work. "Once being removed from the bite Nitro continued to show aggression towards the decoy and a desire to re-engage," he wrote.

Little used a decoy to test Nitro's apprehension skills: "In both instances Nitro remained engaged and did not release from the decoy."

The dark room and compact area test was more complex. "Nitro showed an untrained ability to know how to search a room and without locating the decoy keep moving on. Once Nitro located me he quickly entered into the dark room without hesitation," Little wrote. "Once again the full mouth engagement was achieved and his courage was tested to enter into the tight area. Once engaged I was able to put Nitro into a corner off the room with no ability to move him. In doing this he didn't disengage from the bite."

The unwillingness to release a bite, or "out," became an issue later, as Little attempted to train Nitro in Hancock County.

In his evaluation, Little described Nitro as a green dog with a small amount of training, but one that would become a "great canine and a worthwhile asset" to the sheriff's department.

The dog came with a three-month workability warranty and a one-year health warranty. Following the purchase, Little began his training of Nitro almost immediately.

Records show that there was almost daily training for the remainder of July and all of August 2014. Nitro got mostly "satisfactory" marks from Little during that time. Training took place at the Eden Valley ballfields in New Cumberland, the former Jefferson Elementary School in Newell, Tomlinson Run State Park, Chester City Park, Gas Valley Road and elsewhere.

During obedience training in late July, Little made the notation, "First attempt at food reward. Stopped due to no compliance for food."

On consecutive days in July, Little noted that Nitro had a "very slow start" with obedience training at the Eden Valley ballfield and a "good search" for drugs at a training site in East Liverpool's East End. "Focused on quick finds to keep motivation," he wrote.

Nitro returned to Warren for followup training in narcotics searches, building searches and area searches in mid-August. On Aug. 15, Little made the notation, "With extra attention on K-9's behavior change. K-9 did well for first being introduced to exercise."

Little introduced a prong collar on July 25, 2014, and said that it "worked effectively." An electronic collar was introduced a month later, with Little noting that it was "effective. Nitro came out of the bite."

Both the prong collar and the e-collar are common tools used in the training of police dogs, but experts differ as to their effectiveness.

Lt. Levi Livingston, a K-9 evaluator with the Huntington, W.Va., Police Department, said he uses both kinds of collars and requires his handlers to use them.

"Basically, they're for any time you need to correct your dog. They're tools of our trade," he said. "I want my handlers to have every tool that I can give them to make sure our dogs are well-behaved and do what we ask them to do. It's not a punishment."

Livingston, who helped with some of Nitro's early training and WVPCA certification, said he could not comment specifically on Little's use of the prong collar and e-collar with Nitro.

"Pinching (with a prong collar) gets the dog's attention. The e-collar gives me control from distances. With most of our dogs, when I'm doing obedience training, I have it on such a low setting that it's almost like you can steer the dog," he said. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, just my voice will be enough."

Livingston said the e-collar is used mostly to train a dog to break off from a pursuit and to release its bite.

"It can be overdone, just like anything else," said Scott Gittings, who is now assistant chief with the Chester Police Department. "Hardly anyone uses them anymore. ... They're a good tool, but they've got to be used right."

Gittings, who retired from the sheriff's department in October 2015, said he was not privy to Little's day-to-day training regimen but was generally aware of the difficulties Little was having with Nitro. It was Gittings who asked Tri-State Canine Services owner David Blosser to re-evaluate Nitro after the December 2015 attack.

Gittings said he believes Little was *"in over his head"* and that Nitro may have been *"over-corrected."*

"I didn't think (Little) should do the training himself," he said. "Drug work is one thing, but patrol training is more complicated."

Nitro received his WVPCA certification in patrol work, building searches, area searches, tracking and narcotics detection in September 2014. He was put into service in December 2014.

Sheriff's department records for Nitro end around April 2015, which is the same time Little was first bitten by Nitro. Little was bitten on at least three occasions, including the December 2015 attack, according to a letter from sheriff's Sgt. Eric Cline.

K-9 bites on handlers are not altogether unusual, Livingston said, but Cline's letter indicates that the episodes were *"without any type of warning or being provoked."*

A longtime K-9 officer, Cline wrote the letter in March to recommend that Nitro be adopted by the Grey Dog Group, a shelter for retired military and police dogs located in West Harrison, Ind.

Cline said Nitro would not release his bite and became agitated during building searches. "This is a major department liability and trainer safety issue," he said. "Nitro gets so worked up that he begins to jump on Deputy Little and bite him in the face and neck area. We have attempted several modified behaviors to correct this problem with Nitro without success."

Cline learned about the Grey Dog Group from Blosser in January, whereupon he contacted the shelter's founder, Mark Darcangelo.

In a letter addressed to Fletcher in April, Darcangelo outlined what he believed were the main problems with Nitro. He declined to be interviewed for this story.

Darcangelo said he believes Nitro is trainable and still able to be a productive service dog. "Since Nitro has been here we have never used the pinch collar or electric collar, and Nitro has been very happy and willing to please," he wrote. "I believe there may have been over corrective issues with Nitro after his initial training program with the handler that led the dog to act out toward his handler."

Darcangelo said Little and Nitro may not have bonded properly and that Little's use of the pinch collar may have exacerbated the obedience problems.

"It was not surprising (sic) to hear that Nitro began nipping and biting at Deputy Little as far back as April 2015. Dogs, especially those without proper training, can get easily frustrated to the point of biting in an effort to protect themselves against anticipated corrective actions on the part of the handler," he wrote.

"Improper use of these training tools can cause frantic behavior in a dog, leading it to shut down or go into 'fight' mode if the dog cannot get away from the corrective pain the handler is inflicting. If these collars are used improperly or too early on, the pinch and electric collars becomes (sic) a trigger when simply worn by the dog, and the dog will likely act out towards the handler because he anticipates being jerked with 2 inch prongs or shocked. Because the dog was young, there wasn't time to build a bond of trust between the dog and handler before making demands on him," he wrote.

Darcangelo's recommendation to Fletcher was to discontinue use of compulsion-based corrective measures, which he described as "old school," and to adopt a positive-reinforcement style of training.

"Dogs are like people," he said. "We all have our own personalities and have to be treated individually."

Little said he's currently not working as a K-9 officer but that he hopes to again soon. *"That'll be up to Sheriff Fletcher and Chief (Deputy Art) Watson," he said.*

Quotes from the article

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