K-9 Clipper Joins Fire Investigation Unit

By: Donald P. Cialone Jr, FBNY

The Erie County Sheriff’s Office Fire Investigation Unit (FIU) recently added Clipper, an Accelerant Detection Canine (ADC)to their team. Clipper, a purebred black Labrador, and his handler Detective Scott Kuhlmey graduated in early December from a 12 week certification program at the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) Training Center in Front Royal, Virginia.

Scott and Clipper are part of a larger investigative team including Detectives Shaun Hedlger and Lee Richard who operate three response vehicles out of an office in downtown Buffalo and at the Sheriff’s Bunker in Orchard Park. All FIU investigators are crossed trained in crime scene investigation and evidence processing and have completed the FBI Post-Blast Investigators School for post blast investigation.

The unit conducts all arson and sex offense background checks for the 94 volunteer fire companies in Erie County. They are also available to assist with or conduct fire investigations for any of those fire companies as well as law enforcement agencies in the county.

Training began on the world’s first Accelerant Detection Canine’s at the ATF on May 1, 1986. The ATF currently has 59 ADC Teams active in the United States and over 300 canines in service worldwide.

The ADC program uses classical conditioning to train the canine to associate the odor of ignitable liquids with a food reward methodology meaning Clipper only eats when he detects an accelerate. Clipper and his handler train up to 20 times a day 7 days a week. Clipper is trained to detect 0.1 parts per million enabling him to determine trace amounts of accelerants of ignitable liquids from fire debris.

Repetitive training keeps Clipper sharp and trains him to pinpoint the source of the target odor which enables Scott to obtain productive samples for lab validation, although Clipper is capable of detecting below lab reporting thresholds. To date Clipper and Scott have conducted over 6,000 training searches indoor, outdoor, and in vehicles within various environments.

Clipper is capable of detecting Light Petroleum Distillates, Medium Petroleum Distillates, Heavy Petroleum Distillates, Gasoline, Isoparaffinic Products, and Naphthenic/Paraffinic products.

Training in Methodology, Terminology/Tone inflections, Grooming/Health checks, Canine Wellness/First Aid, Canine Olfaction, Advanced handling skills, Search Patterns/Techniques, Fire Chemistry/Dynamics, Evidence collection, Accelerants, Contamination, Record documentation, and Courtroom testimony were all part of Scott’s training during the program.

The ECSO Accelerant Detection Canine Unit is a regional asset deployable not only to Erie County but anywhere in New York State or nationally as part of the ATF National Response Team. When considering deployment, the request should be made as early into an incident as possible because ignitable liquids are susceptible to different evaporation and dilution rates.

When requesting the ADC the unit requests that you provide the following to their dispatch: Type of fire/incident, injuries, point of contact information, and whether or not you require a hot or cold response. You can contact the ECSO Fire Investigation Unit at their dispatch at (716) 858-2903.