

Long Line 101 - *A Tactical Perspective*

by Sergeant Bill Lewis II (Retired)

The long line can be one of the most intimidating, misunderstood, and misused deployment tools for police service dogs. The long line can sometimes create controversy and cause embarrassment because K9 handlers are not familiar with how to use it properly. Dogs may be reluctant to work with the long line at first and they may shut down upon initial introduction. However, the long line is one of the most valuable tools in the K9 handler's arsenal for providing ultimate control of the dog as it searches during tactical deployments.

The list of long line myths include;

"My dog can't work on a long line.

"My dog won't work on a long line."

"I don't need a long line because I have control over my dog."

Like all tools in the dog training tool box, it takes hours of practice and repetitive training to become proficient with each tool and to familiarize the dog with each one. It is important that the long line be introduced to the dog as soon as possible to make it become a positive tool for clearing and searching. Many handlers do not introduce the long line initially as a search tool (other than those who use it for tracking) and will later be reluctant to introduce and use it when working with tactical teams because it's a change in the status quo and not a familiar tool. It is also important to remember that *you can teach an old dog new tricks.*

In a tactical deployment, the police service dog is a valuable tool to assist a tactical team in locating a concealed or secluded suspect. A tactical team that decides to work a slow and deliberate clearing of a location wants to search the location methodically and most often with a predetermined plan. The ability to use a properly-trained dog to clear an entry point before tactical operators make entry through it is a safer tactic. The team will generally use the dog to assist them as they clear an entry and begin a systematic room-by-room search.

The long line is an essential tool for deploying a dog during a tactical operation. The long line does not necessarily need to be used throughout an entire operation, but there are critical times and locations where its use is essential. The long line limits the range of the dog and allows a tactical team leader or scout to determine the areas to be searched by the dog prior to directing a tactical team to do so. Obstacles where the long line can become tangled, such as furniture and pillars, may necessitate the removal of the long line prior to deployment into the room, but only after a discussion between the tactical team leader or scout and the handler to consider the pros and cons.

The long line is a critical tool for a slow and deliberate search of a residence or other location. Most tactical teams that use dogs to assist them do not want the dog to search on its own beyond those areas the team is ready to clear. If a dog enters a location and wanders to the back of the location where it encounters a suspect, an apprehension may occur and force the team to expedite its entry to take custody of the suspect before other areas presenting threats have been thoroughly cleared. If a second suspect is on the premises or the possibility of a second suspect exists, the team's contact with the first suspect may be delayed and jeopardized as the team clears other parts of the location en route to the first suspect.

The timeliness of an unplanned contact with a suspect could be called into question if a lawsuit arises claiming the tactical team allowed the dog to enter the location *without the ability to control its movement* which subsequently delayed its ability to remove the dog from the suspect in a timely manner.

"I don't need a long line because I have control over my dog" will be claimed by many handlers, and handlers should have control over their dog, but training and experience have shown that the vast majority of dogs will not down or immediately return to the handler if a suspect is easily within view, a physical encounter with a suspect occurs or a the dog sees the suspect flee. Many decoys during training have lured many dogs of handlers claiming total control, and not using a long line, from a predetermined

downed position or search area designated by a tactical team leader. The decoys have subsequently taken the dogs deeper into a location beyond what is being controlled by a tactical team. Many dogs, encountering the scent of a suspect, have then pursued that odor immediately in their attempt to locate the suspect despite verbal efforts by the handlers to down them or recall them. The long line limits the penetration of a dog into a location.

It is a matter of simple mathematics and logistics when a tactical team leader or scout directs a handler from a distance to put a dog into an entry way or inside a room no further than five feet. A long line will almost always guarantee a distance no greater than five feet if the line is handled correctly by the handler. But, a free roaming dog doesn't measure distance and may not always down exactly on the spot with a verbal command if a handler has the luxury to have a view of the deployment. An electronic collar also does not guarantee the down or limit penetration and many a dog has fought through the electronic collar activation to access a suspect or decoy further than the specified distance.

When first introducing the long line to a dog with fellow handlers and tactical operators present during training, without having previously trained with it, the experience can be highly frustrating for the handler and operators and embarrassing for the handler if the dog isn't ready to cooperate with the new tool and the dog may shut down. It is highly recommended that handlers begin working with a long line prior to actually training with a tactical team.

Training with a long line determines the success rate during an operation. There are an unlimited number of exercises and exposures to the long line the handler can introduce to a new dog or an experienced dog, including, but not limited to;

- The handler can allow the long line to be dragged by the dog during open field exercises, a run in the park or article retrieving so that the line does not get tangled and the experience is positive.
- The dog should learn that the presence of the long line isn't necessarily negative through positive reinforcement training exercises.
- The dog can be walked with a long line.
- The dog can bite a decoy at a distance with the long line attached.
- The line can be used as a substitute for a short leash.
- The dog should believe that the long line is merely an extended leash.
- The handler should begin downing the dog at a distance verbally and with hand signals with and without a long line.
- A handler should train with obstacles present and learn how to retrieve the dog and/or long line should the line become snagged or tangled.

One of the problems most often encountered with introducing the dog to a long line for a search or clearing using a standard-type collar occurs when an aggressive or motivated dog reaches the end of the long line or a predetermined distance during a search. The problem is the (perceived) correction the dog receives as it comes to the end. If the "correction" occurs at the location where the dog was intended to be downed or stopped to search, the correction is not always a negative experience and the dog should down or stop. However, the stopping of the dog on a long line often occurs prematurely due to mishandling of the long line by the handler or the line can get snagged and become tangled with an obstacle or a tactical operator.

When a not-intended-to-be-a-correction occurs, the dog's head is snapped back, similar to a leash correction during obedience or the correction it receives when it fails to call off during a pursuit of a decoy. The correction, and the subsequent misdirection, is more severe when the long line is attached to the live ring versus the dead ring. As the head starts to return back in the direction of the handler, the body will also start to follow. If this correction occurs before the predetermined location, the dog will usually begin to return to the handler or the area from last deployed. This direction is usually the opposite direction of where the dog was intended to be deployed and search. The dog must then be directed back to the predetermined location, which often creates confusion for the dog because of the correction, and might be the start of avoidance in returning.

There are two ways to prepare for reaching the end of the long line or getting ready to reach the predetermined location without causing the “head snap correction” and thus making the experience positive for the dog;

- One method to lessen the impact of a perceived correction when the dog reaches its designated location is the handler attaches the long line to the dead ring, reduces slack in the long line, and then slowly feeds it out consistently to reduce a severe snap-effect when the end arrives. A long line should not be deployed from the wrapped position as it will often get tangled. The line should be rolled out in advance, avoiding direct contact with the handler, tactical operators, and potential obstacles.
- The other method to avoid the harsh “head snap correction”, particularly if the dog is aggressive and motivated, is to attach the lone line to a tracking harness. The tracking harness will stop and/or slow the dog when it reaches or nears the end, but it does not cause the head to snap back like a correction, which may also redirect the dog. If a dog has scent or is focused on an entry point or other area, it will remain facing straight ahead and focused on the entry point with a tracking harness.

Some stronger dogs will work without the harness and forge ahead, particularly with scent or a visual of a suspect or decoy, but if they jump suddenly or run in that direction, they will still receive the perceived correction, however minor. As it becomes more clear to the dog that the long line isn't necessarily a negative deployment tool, dogs become comfortable with using it and their avoidance lessens. If the dog believes there is a reward ahead and becomes familiar in working with the long line, it will become a non-issue.

The same tactics and principles using a long line on a police service dog for tactical team operations also exist for patrol-related operations.

Equipment

Gloves: It is always recommended that a handler have a good pair of gloves when working with a long line so it does not become free as it might slip through the hands and/or leave a nice burn when moving quickly through the handler's palms with an aggressive and motivated dog. If the handler loses the long line and the dog continues to progress further into a location, the ultimate control issue exists no longer.

Tracking harness: There are a wide variety of tracking harnesses available. Consider a multi-purpose harness that can be used to track and rappel.

Long lines: There are a variety of long lines available as well as lengths. A long line should be strong, somewhat thick and not easily tangled. Nylon is usually better than rope. It is recommended that a handler should have at least two 40-foot lines, each one capable of being attached to the other to provide an overall length of 80 feet. If possible, two 100-foot lines should be available, one can be kept with the handler and the other can be kept with the tactical team.

A retractable long line is also available. The benefits include the quick and easy ability to recoil it which will assist in avoiding it becoming tangled with other officers. However, the handler must have control over the stop-and-release control to avoid it stopping abruptly. If a handler becomes proficient using a retractable long line, it can be used with a standard long line to give more distance if needed. It's a good idea to have the standard long line available in the event of a malfunction with the retractable one.

The long line is one of the most valuable tools for providing ultimate control of the dog as it searches during tactical deployments. However, it does not work on its own. Continual training with the long line will ultimately determine its success during an operation.

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