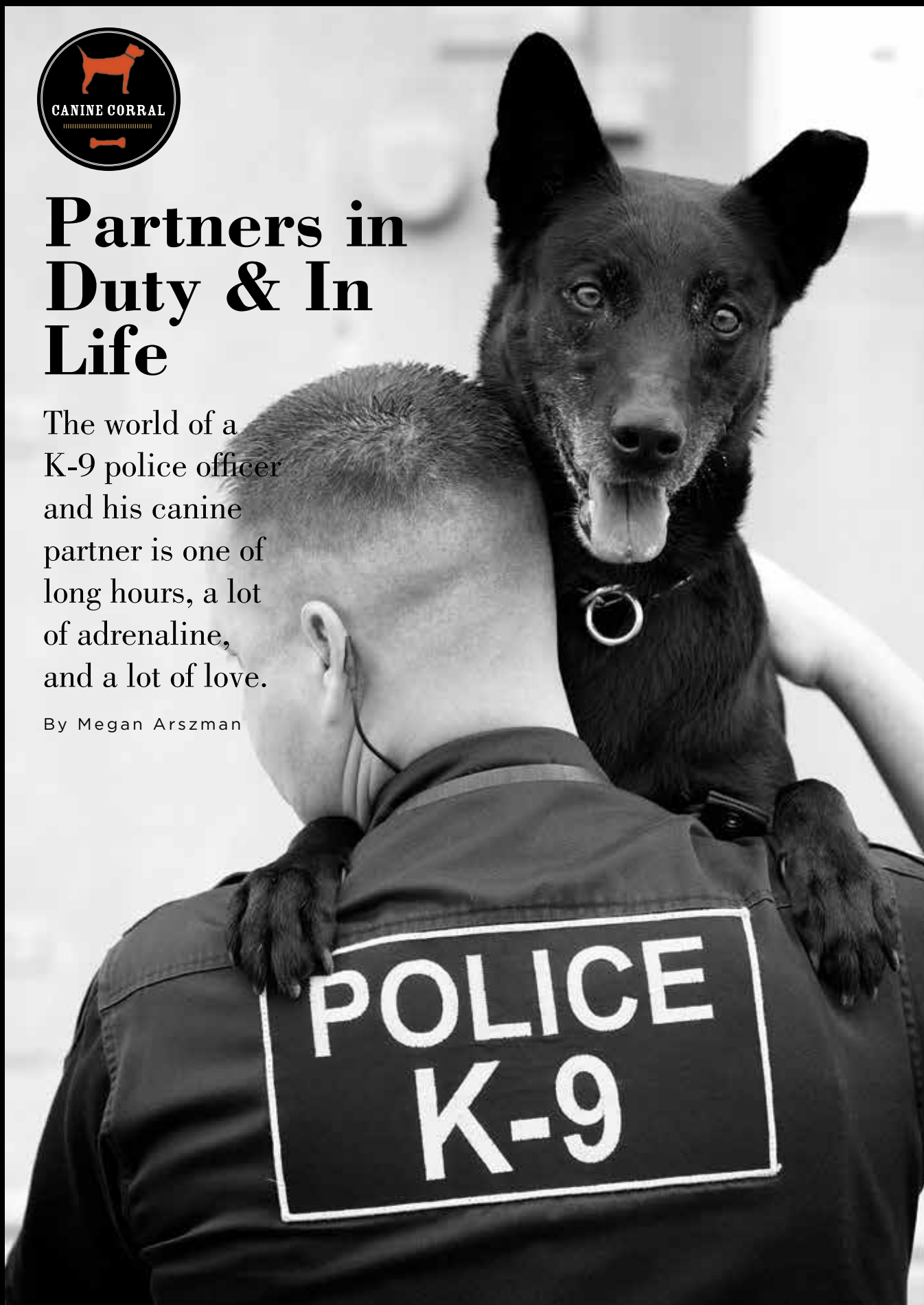




# Partners in Duty & In Life

The world of a K-9 police officer and his canine partner is one of long hours, a lot of adrenaline, and a lot of love.

By Megan Arszman





Some of the best police officers in the nation serve only seven to nine years. They require significantly more training than their counterparts. But their value to the department is unmeasurable.

Since the Roman times, dogs have been used for security detail, then used in times of war with the Romans and Spanish conquistadors. Dogs have been used by law enforcement for more than 100 years for search and rescue, drug and bomb detection, suspect apprehension and so much more. The partnership between a K-9 and his handler is a special one.

For Sergeant Joey Mitchell, it is a bond that he grew up with. As the son of a police K-9 officer, there has been a time he hasn't had a dog as part of his life. Mitchell is currently with the Clinton County Sheriff's Department in Indiana, where he has been a member for 12 years, and a K-9 handler for 10.

*"I've always loved dogs," says Mitchell.*

*"When I got out of the Marines I knew I wanted to be in law enforcement...and when the opportunity (to be a K-9 handler) presented itself, I jumped on it."*

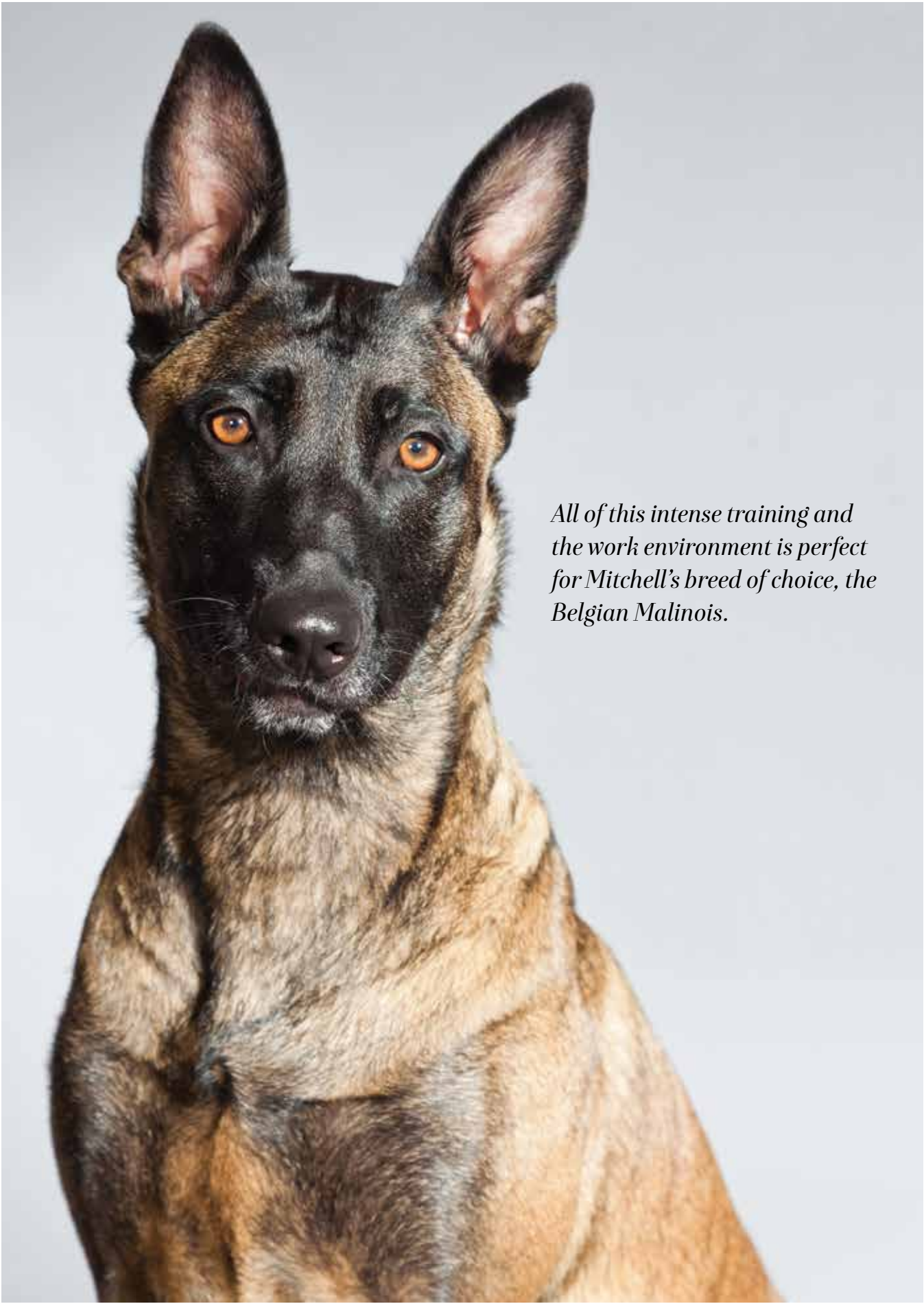
Before becoming a handler himself, Mitchell spent his time working with other K-9 handlers doing anything that needed to be done—wearing the bite suit, laying scent tracks or hiding in fields. After receiving his first K-9 partner, he attended seminars and training workshops to learn how to handle the dog. He handled K-9 Neils for five years before getting his current partner, K-9 Riz in 2002.

K-9 Riz and Mitchell's partnership started with intense training—40 hours a week for six weeks, initially.

"You never really stop training, though," he says. "Even on weekends off we'll go to the kennel to train, or we're training at home."

K-9 Riz does narcotics detection, suspect apprehension and tracking, and article, building and area searches. While training can be intense, handlers do their best to make it fun and positive to keep their dogs' drive going.

"With narcotics, we do a lot of positive training," he says. "For me, it's all about fun. But when it comes to bite work, they have to listen to their handler—if I let him bite someone, and they don't let go when I tell him to, there is a correction. The means of training depends a lot on the dog and their temperament."



*All of this intense training and the work environment is perfect for Mitchell's breed of choice, the Belgian Malinois.*

A big part of training with a K-9 is gunfire certification. During certification, the K-9 cannot leave the handler's side when blanks are fired at them. "They can't bite us, nor can they bite at the gun," says Mitchell. "They can bark, but there has to be obvious control with the handler."

Mitchell will take K-9 Riz with him to the gun range to do live-fire

exercises. As a measure of caution, he'll put a muzzle on the Belgian Malinois while training. If they're in an open field and they hear gunfire, both handler and K-9 drop to the ground together. The dogs get used to the action of any situation, and must exhibit control with their handler.

"Any type of K-9 handler needs to be working gunfire with their dog," says Mitchell.

All of this intense training and the work environment is perfect for Mitchell's breed of choice, the Belgian Malinois. Police departments employ Belgian Malinois, German Shepherds, Dutch Shepherds, and even Pit



Bulls and other breeds.

"I just love the Malinois," says Mitchell. "They want to work for you, and they have great personalities and attitudes."

One prime example was one day, while on duty, K-9 Riz helped apprehend a suspect, battling him as he tried to escape from police. Two hours later, the ferocious police dog was laying on the floor next to Mitchell's then-4-year-old daughter, Brianna, licking her face and relaxing at home.

"Just to see him go from ass-kicker to lovey-dovey pup is kind-of crazy," says Mitchell.

When it comes time for K-9 Riz to retire, he will stay with Mitchell and his family to live out his life at home. Mitchell, on the other hand, might look to move on from being a handler.

"That's a conversation my wife and I will have—it'll depend on the time in our lives, our kids and see where we are. (Being a handler) takes a lot of time away from your personal life, and I'd like to work in drug detection, which you can't do while you're a K-9 handler," he says.



*“As a female handler, I felt like I had a lot to prove for a few different reasons.”*



**W**hile the majority of police K-9 handlers tend to be males, there is a select group of women who take the challenge of handling some of the most intense animals. Erin Dean of Sheridan, Ind., has been a reserve K-9 officer for 13 years, starting first with K-9 Tori, a Bloodhound used for scent work, tracking, and search and rescue, and currently with K-9 Cinch, a 9-year-old Belgian Malinois. She also has a new K-9 partner started—a puppy by K-9 Cinch who is slowly starting his journey to be his father's replacement when the time comes to retire.

“At first I was concerned about being a female K-9 handler, especially when I became a dual-purpose handler,” she says. “Being a K-9 handler, you can be the first one in some times. When we’re looking for someone in a building, the K-9 team goes in first to clear the building. As a female handler, I felt like I had a lot to prove for a few different reasons.”

Dean says that through hard work and dedication, she has shown to her fellow handlers and officers that she’s just “one of the guys” and just as good as the male handlers. “I have a lot of respect for all the guys I train with, and I know they respect me and my partner.”

Echoing Sergeant Mitchell, Dean believes her partner is a part of her family.

“For K-9 handlers, these dogs become part of our families,” she says. “K-9 Cinch loves my family, especially my niece, nephew and my parents. It is never an easy decision for a handler to decide to deploy their partner into what is possibly a dangerous situation. The dogs are officers, and family.” 🐾