

Union, Towns host Explosive Ordnance Detection K-9 training marathon

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Law enforcement participants in the Georgia Emergency Management Agency/Homeland Security Explosive Ordnance Detection K-9 Program held their annual group training in Union and Towns counties from June 24-27.

EOD K-9 Program Manager William Tod Keys coordinated with the governments of Union and Towns counties, the Union County School District, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and Young Harris College for the annual training exercises.

The “bomb dogs” and

their handlers began arriving in Blairsville on Monday, June 24.

Keys said 36 teams from all over the state came to North Georgia for the marathon training week, plus seven instructors and one FBI explosive ordnance specialist.

Lead Instructor Donald McVean said the training involved odor detection regarding both traditional explosives and nontraditional homemade explosives.

Day 1 of training was held at the Union County Middle School, the school bus barn and Meeks Park.

“The first day we do a back-to-the-basics, just letting the dogs come in and

get comfortable, just regular ‘schoolhouse’ training,” said McVean.

Target scents were hidden in suitcases and cinderblocks outside, as well as in classrooms, hallways and bathrooms inside, and both inside and outside of school buses.

The second day of training occurred at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center and the old Blue Ridge Mountain EMC headquarters, with the third day of training taking place at Young Harris College.

Both the second and third days consisted of scenario-based training exercises.

All of the training locations were meant to mimic real-world settings and give both the dogs and their handlers experience in learning to search in all sorts of venues.

Part of the training was for handlers to learn to think like someone who is going to plant an explosive, said McVean.

College Police Chief Ken Henderson and Assistant Chief Robbie Rich were present at the Thursday training in Young Harris.

“It’s always an honor and a pleasure on our end to host this,” said Henderson. “We’re very pleased that they use us here at Young Harris College to host their training event.”

“Having these people here that we get to know on a first-name basis is, I think, a very big plus for Young



A bomb-sniffing K-9 and its handler practice as part of a GEMA training exercise last week at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson



This K-9 is using his nose to find explosive substances during a GEMA training event on Wednesday, June 26.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Harris College and the college community, as well as our local community here in Towns County.”

As for the Fairgrounds, General Manager Hilda Thomason said she and her staff were always excited to accommodate the K-9 program.

“They come here every year and use the Fairgrounds and train the dogs, and we always welcome them here and are happy to help in any way that we can,” said Thomason. “They use our facilities because they say we have the best facilities to train the dogs.”

Union County Schools Police Chief Chad Deyton was in separate GEMA training class in Tifton while the dog training was going on in Blairsville.

“We appreciate GEMA coming up here to Blairsville to use our facility, and we’re proud to be chosen as one of the venues for their group training,” said Deyton.

Keys said that Georgia’s Explosive Ordnance Detection K-9 Program started in 2008 with 18 dog teams, and it has since expanded to 62 teams today.

GEMA/Homeland Security helps local agencies

with training, certifications and equipment, and it also helps with the cost of the dogs as well.

Of course, Keys, too, is happy to have found so many positive relationships in Union and Towns counties.

“We like to train up here,” said Keys. “Everybody is so welcoming and good to us and lets us use their facilities. It’s a nice environment, but also, everybody supports us well up here. We’ve been coming up here now for about eight years.”

Independence Day...from Page 1A

the lake. This is going to be a bigger show than we have ever had. It’s going to be a 40-minute show, and we have normally been having a 20-minute show.”

Thomason added, “This year, we are doing the fireworks ourselves with the help of

several local sponsors. Not having to pay anyone to set them off, we were able to purchase enough fireworks to last 40 minutes.”

The firework display will be viewable from around the Fairgrounds, the Towns County Beach across the street,

from Lake Chatuge and the surrounding area.

“There is no charge for the fireworks, and admission is free,” said Thomason. “We do ask for donations to offset the cost, and the Lions Club will be out with buckets to collect any donations.”

Made in GA...from Page 1A



Nicole Duvall of the Mobile Dairy Classroom with Jazzy the Cow at the Made in Georgia Festival on June 29.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

of Commerce. “We ran out of parking places early on.

“So, we had to put someone down by the entrance to direct people to an empty space because of how busy it is this year. We have 110 vendors, and last year, we had 80, so we have 30 more this year, which is great to see.”

Having a Made in Georgia Festival helps Towns County by bringing people into the area, but it is also good for the entire state because it highlights crafts and products made by people in Georgia.

“We are promoting the artists, crafters, farmers and

anybody else in Georgia that grows a product or makes a product just for Georgia people,” said Lee. “It does limit the amount of people that you can include in the event, but it also puts a limelight back on the people that you can bring in, so it’s really great to have these people here.”

Vendors for the festival came from all around the state, with some even traveling from South Georgia.

Apart from the 110 vendors at the expo, the festival also included a variety of shows that let attendees learn something from each of the

classes that were available on both days.

These classes included things like how to grow lavender in the South, a Georgia Grown cooking demo, a coaster making class, and other classes that focused on the state and the crafts that are available locally.

Outside of the building, many attendees took part in events like ax throwing, though one attraction in particular garnered a bunch of attention, and that was the Georgia Mobile Dairy Classroom, which showed viewers how milking a cow works.

“Cows can’t begin milking until after they have their first baby,” said Nicole Duvall, who gave the presentation. “The cow we have here is 4 years old and has had two babies already.

“She is going to produce milk seven months into each additional pregnancy, and they stay pregnant for nine months. She’s actually two months pregnant right now, so she will milk for five more months.”

“Then, she is dried off, that way she is not making milk, and the nutrition she eats will go to the calf for that last trimester and her body conditioning as well. We give them a break until after they have their babies to ensure that they have the nutrition they need to develop.”

Duvall demonstrated how milking a cow – in this case, a cow named Jazzy – worked by hand and by pumps, showing attendees how the cow reacts to the different milking styles and how comfortable the pumps make the cows while they are on.

The Made in Georgia Festival will return next year with even more vendors and more demonstrations celebrating homegrown Georgia production.

Movers & Shakers...from Page 1A

that are available to the local veterans in the area.

He retired from a 30-year career in the military in 2012, and he went to work for the Department of Veterans Service office in Blairsville in 2015.

Like many service men and women, Fontaine said he struggled with PTSD after retiring, sharing that one of the main things he was trying to cope with was survivor’s guilt.

After three years of dealing with his guilt and thoughts of giving up, his wife found an ad for a job with the Georgia Department of Veterans Service.

“The reason I am here today is because I’m a survivor, and if I can help other veterans get the truthful answers on how this process works, I believe I can do a service to veterans and their families,” Fontaine said.

He spoke about the many improvements in veterans benefit programs and helping people through claims processes.

Fontaine also touched on the importance of helping surviving family members with claims and pensions, though his No. 1 concern is helping veterans struggling with suicidal tendencies.

Johnson urged everyone to visit the Iwo Jima Memorial at Foster Park, which was dedicated in 2015, and he said the Historical Society would be hosting an event there to honor veterans on Saturday, July 13, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., with a sack lunch to be provided for all veterans.

Also speaking Friday morning was local man-about-town Philip Haines.

Haines spoke about the many adversities and challenges he has faced throughout his life, even since birth.

Doctors didn’t think he would live past a year due to extra cerebrospinal fluid going to his brain, which was causing Haines to have seizures. Fortunately, doctors were able



Eddie Fontaine



Philip Haines

to perform surgery, placing a shunt inside his brain to allow the excess fluid to drain.

After Haines survived brain surgery, he moved to Blairsville when he was 5, though his mother passed away when he was just 11 years old.

“I can go out there and feel sorry for myself because I have short arms and short legs, but I choose not to let it stop me,” he said. “There were many times that I wished I could have

been in the Armed Services like these wonderful service men right here, but because I was unable to, I devote my time to helping others in the community.”

Haines’ message that Friday was one of hope, as he urged those around him to never give up and never feel sorry for themselves. Having faith in God and believing in oneself can help anyone overcome anything, Haines said.

Apply now to add Veterans’ names to monument

The Memorial Wall Committee will hold meetings for those who wish to sponsor their beloved Veterans of Towns County to be remembered on our Towns County Memorial Park wall. The meeting will be Saturday, July 6, 2019. Begun shortly after 2012, we had many meetings with former commissioner Bill Kendall trying our best, ironing out any kinks and removing obstacles from our primary objective of inscribing deceased Veterans names who currently were Towns County residents. Our current Towns County Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw supports our Veterans community in this effort.

Requirements are: 1 - Must have served in one of our primary branches of the armed services: US Army; US Navy; USMC; USAF; USCG. 2 - The Veterans surviving sponsor must have proof of residency at time of passing and provide proof of military service and discharge under honorable conditions. 3 - The proposed Veteran must have no criminal record. 4 - There should be no duplication of Veterans names which are already inscribed upon, thus recognized upon the original existing walls of honor. 5 - Name and branch of service to be inscribed, no rank or other recognition is available. 6 - Time of passing of said Veteran should be after January 1, 2012, or the sponsor will be told their loved one will go on the “waiting list” to be decided upon by the last public meeting in September of each year. This is based upon space available on the small granite wall of that specific year and upon annual basis. 7 - Sponsor must provide a check or cash for covering the cost of engraving only. The five summer month meetings to meet with sponsors will be at our VFW Post #7807, Sunnyside Rd., Hiawassee upstairs in back from 3 till 5 PM on Saturdays typically the first Saturday of the month excluding holiday weekends.