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## Pups for Peace' Grads Embark for Israel to Help Sniff Out Terror

### A Novel Gambit For Peace in Israel: Send In the Dogs

#### U.S. Jews Foot Bill to Train Bomb-Sniffing Canines; Nitro's Graduation Rite

By PETER WALDMAN

LOS ANGELES—At a secret location in the Southern California hills, 17 Israeli soldiers stood side by side along a makeshift stage, facing an audience of about 200 special guests.

It was graduation day for Pups for Peace, and each of the Israeli soldiers had a dog at his side, his new partner in an unusual program by some American Jews to help combat Palestinian terror.



Mike Herstik

In coming days, the canine cadets and their military handlers will be flown to Israel to embark on careers sniffing out explosives in the streets, at bus stops and cafes of the Jewish state.

"By enhancing Israeli security, by saving lives, you're helping keep hope alive," Yuval Rotem Israel's consul general in Los Angeles, told the Pups for Peace cadets and donors gathered at the ceremony. "I don't know whether to hope this is the first Pups for Peace graduation or the last."

The Israeli army plans to deploy hundreds of the Pups for Peace dog teams to screen people moving through the narrow urban, desert and farming areas that separate Israeli and Palestinian populations, forming a canine olfactory belt around the terror-plagued nation.

The unusual L.A.-Israel dog connection. Please Turn to Page A15, Column 1

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tion opened up after the Passover bombing in April that killed 26 Israelis—perpetrated by a suicide attacker who was observed walking in and out of the hotel ballroom before he exploded.

After the tragedy, Glenn Yago had a brainstorm. Mr. Yago is the director of capital studies at the Milken Institute, the Los Angeles think tank founded by former junk-bond king Michael Milken. He contacted the Israeli army to inquire about their use of bomb-sniffing dogs. He was surprised to learn that Israel had fewer than 200 of the canine sniffers, he says, used mostly at military checkpoints.

So the 51-year-old Mr. Yago, who spends several months a year teaching economics in Israel, raised more than \$500,000 in the American Jewish community in a matter of weeks—the bulk of it from the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles—and set about building the world's first private industrial-scale dog-training facility. He rented a few acres of rattlesnake-infested land on the outskirts of Los Angeles, hauled in some dilapidated mobile homes for guardhouses and classrooms, and hired an Arizona Indian tribe to build a giant aluminum teepee for a 60-cage kennel.

Though now reliant on contributions, the group hopes to subsidize its charitable efforts some day by also training bomb-sniffing dogs for hire. "This is one of the most scalable and exportable businesses I know," says Isabel Maxwell, daughter of the late Sir Robert Maxwell and a San Francisco entrepreneur who is heading up the group's commercialization efforts.

The group enlisted Mike Herstik, who has trained dogs for the Los Angeles bomb squad and the U.S. military. Mr. Herstik, 48, was deluged with work offers after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. He took a pay cut to help set up Pups for Peace.

"This is a life's dream," says Mr. Herstik, the son of Holocaust survivors who emigrated from Israel to the U.S. when he was three years old. He went back for the first time last summer, when he vis-

ited Tel Aviv to confer with the army's dog command.

Under a baking sun at the recent commencement exercises, the burly Mr. Herstik stood stage-left watching an Israeli singer in spandex pants belt out the Israeli and American national anthems. Clad in jet-black commando gear, black sunglasses and an out-of-season turtleneck, the chief trainer was doing all he could to restrain Nitro, the small black Labrador retriever at his side. The dog sniffed the air excitedly, whipping his tail with every breath and jerking the chain in Mr. Herstik's hand.

Unleashed during a high note of the "Star-Spangled Banner," Nitro bounded onstage and thrust his nose at the wooden podium, inhaling its seams with evident glee. Then something seemed to click inside the dog's head. He sat down about a foot away from the lectern and stared at it intently, ears cocked, tail wagging wildly. That is how Nitro has been trained to signal that he has found the scent of explosives: His eyes point directly at the source of the odor to show his handler.

Mr. Herstik, who planted the substance in the podium before the cere-

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mony began, tossed a rawhide chew toy in front of Nitro. The dog grabbed the toy and leaped offstage to Mr. Herstik, who gave him a hug and put the toy back in his pocket.

Even as suicide bombers began striking civilian targets in the mid-1990s, the army's dog corps was slow to beef up, Mr. Yago says. That might be because

peace was still thought to be at hand back then, he speculates, but it also may reflect the belief among many Middle Easterners that dogs are unclean. Many Muslims do a ritual hand-washing after touching dogs. Some Israelis associate military dogs with the savage beasts of the concentration camps—a worry expressed in the Israeli press recently when news broke of Pups for Peace's plans to cover the countryside with canines.

Dogs are a suicide bomber's worst friend. With 40-times more olfactory cells than humans have, dogs can differentiate smells among a cocktail of scents wafting around them. When properly trained and motivated, dogs are considered superior to the most sophisticated machines at detecting explosives—and dogs are a lot more mobile.

Mr. Herstik's dogs are known among his clients for minimizing "false hits"—erroneous bomb detections that, in today's hair-trigger Mideast, could cost lives. He buys the animals from breeders in Oregon, Holland and the United Kingdom, preferring Labradors, German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois, with the odd spaniel and pit bull in the mix. Training begins at age one, and bomb-sniffing work usually lasts about six years. Good bomb dogs must be smart, energetic and excessively driven to hunt, retrieve and play.

It's all about getting their teeth on the chew toy. Unlike dog trainers who use food as a reward, Mr. Herstik conditions his dogs to seek a quick romp with their favorite toy as reinforcement for good work. The toy is put right in front of them when they sit and fix their gaze on a detected substance, and that rivets their attention on the job at hand. When food is the reward, a dog's focus tends to stray from bomb sniffing to interpreting cues coming from its handler-feeders. That causes more "false hits," says Detective Joe Pau, a 20-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department bomb squad and coordinator of its dog program. He buys Herstik dogs.

"Mike's the only one I've ever seen do it that way," Detective Pau says.