

DNA dogs are a criminal's worst friend

K9 unit officer Jack Haskins needs his partners by his side

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SEARCHING through crash debris on a mountainside covered in mist, wading into flooded rivers or gathering evidence at a murder scene... there's never a dull day for Lieutenant Jack Haskins and his two best buddies, Butch and Udain of the SAPS K9 Unit in Pietermaritzburg.

Working with both dogs sees Haskins reporting for duty with Udain at the K9 Search and Rescue Unit, or with Butch at the Biological Body Fluids Unit.

Udain is a Belgian Shepherd, while Butch is a cross between a Labrador and a Pointer.

This week, Haskins has been out with Udain searching for missing people in the province's floodwaters. The previous week, he and Udain were among the first to arrive at the scene of the SANDF plane crash in the Drakensberg in which 11 military personnel were killed.

In the same week, Haskins and Butch were at the Garden of Hope and Healing in the Botanic Gardens, Durban, where the SAPS Forensic Unit and the DNA Project highlighted the importance of DNA evidence in fighting crime, as part of the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children.

Known as the "DNA dog", Butch has been trained to identify body fluids, such as blood or semen. Haskins said Butch has assisted in hundreds of rape, murder and assault cases in a seven-year career as a police dog.



ABOVE: This tiny drop of blood is all Butch 'the DNA dog' needs to set him on the right trail.

LEFT: SAPS K9 Unit member Lieutenant Jack Haskins with his trusty canine partner, Butch. **PICTURES SAUSO NOLUVO**

A police dog's basic training takes five months to complete, followed by "practise, practise, practise" according to Haskins.

He said Butch is able to pick up the scent of the smallest drop of blood, even if it has been diluted.

At one crime scene the carpet was spotlessly clean, but Butch was adamant something was wrong in a specific area. When police pulled up the carpet, there was a blood stain hidden below.

"Sometimes the dogs work to-

gether on a case, such as when searching for a missing person, and they are a great team. Putting your life on the line together, forms a bond that can rarely be broken," he said.

"Butch is my psychologist. We have some very traumatic cases and I can feel down in the dumps.

"We sit down together, I talk to him and he understands me," said Haskins, adding with a twinkle in his eye, "the best thing is, Butch and Udain don't talk back."

And when it comes to chasing down the bad guys or finding a lost child - chances are this highly skilled trio will find them.

DNA may be the only tool in nabbing a suspect

ALSO highlighting the importance of DNA as a tool in tackling crime, and as part of the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children awareness, Dr Carolyn Hancock from the DNA Project says when it comes to solving sexual offences cases, DNA is often the only way to link a suspect to a crime.

She said dogs in the K9 Unit played a key role in the fight against cracking down on crimes against women and children.

The DNA Project, an NGO, has been the driving force behind the passing of the DNA Bill, which should see the implementation of an efficient DNA database to fight crime in South Africa.

"The number of reported rapes in South Africa is about 200 every day, but we suspect the actual number of rapes taking place is much higher than that with statistics suggesting that a woman or child is raped every 18 seconds," said Hancock.

She added that according to the United Nations, South Africa ranked first in the world, per capita, for sexual assault and up to 76 percent of cases dealt with by the biology unit in the police forensic science laboratory, are sexual assault cases.

"An equally frightening fact is that 90 percent of rapists re-offend and may assault more than 30 women and children before finally being held accountable for their actions," said Hancock.