

OPD K-9 in lockup after biting boy

*By David J. Lee
Odessa American*

A police dog named Flappy was in lockup Friday after biting a 13-year-old Odessa boy in the backyard of his handler's home.

The male Belgian Malinois assigned to Odessa Police Department Cpl. Andy Blackburn tore a golf-ball sized bite out of the back of the teen's leg on Wednesday, Deputy Chief Don Orren said. The boy, identified only as a friend of Blackburn's son, also suffered bites to an arm. The teen was treated at Medical Center Hospital and was recovering at home Friday.

"From what I understand, he's doing fine," Orren said.

Blackburn has been temporarily moved to patrol and Flappy was locked up at K-9 unit Sgt. Jerry Harvell's house, Orren said.

Orren said the teen was playing with Blackburn's son in the backyard of their home in the 8600 block of Lamar Avenue when he was bitten.

"This is simply, but exactly what happened," Orren said. "Blackburn and K-9 Flappy were called to go on a S.W.A.T. run. They completed it and went back to the residence.

"The handler released the dog into his backyard not knowing that two children — one of them his own — were playing in the backyard," Orren said. "The dog bit the other child."

Orren said as Blackburn realized there were children back there, he got control of the K-9. "But the K-9 did exactly what he was trained to do."

The incident, which happened Wednesday, wasn't made public until Friday, said Cpl. Sherrie Thompson, because the case was "under investigation."

"We always regret it when anything like this happens," Orren said. "It was an unfortunate accident. We never want anyone — an innocent third party — to have to go through something like this. It's the last thing we'd ever want to happen."

OPD retires K-9 with history of bites

*By David J. Lee
Odessa American*

After a record of biting when he wasn't supposed to — including attacks on two children — an Odessa police dog has been retired and his handler transferred.

K-9 Flappy was retired last week after biting a 13-year-old boy who was in the dog's backyard. It was the fourth incident in which Flappy used undo force.

And come mid-May, Flappy will be on his way to Somerset near San Antonio where he will become a training dog for Global Training.

"Although the K-9 has reacted as it has been trained, due to the fact that these two children have now been bitten, the Odessa Police Department has chosen to retire the dog," Capt. Jack White said.

White added that Global Training in Somerset agreed to take the dog and use him in a training capacity only.

On Feb. 19, Flappy bit the finger of a 9-year-old boy who put his hand inside the dog's kennel in the 8600 block of Lamar.

On April 20, while in the same backyard, the dog attacked a 13-year-old boy.

The end of the 9-year-old's finger was bitten off, his mother said. The dog bit a golf ball-sized hunk out of the back of the 13-year-old's leg, according to police reports. The 13-year-old also sustained bites to his arm.

But Chief Chris Pipes said the dog has also bitten a K-9 handler, as well as another K-9 dog in the past.

"This was the straw that broke the camel's back," Pipes said of the attack on the 13-year-old.

"That dog has had too much of a history. I'm just not comfortable leaving him out there — even with a different handler — after these four incidents."

The Families' Take

Karen Lester, the great aunt of the 13-year-old, said in a letter to the editor that she's unhappy that the dog is being retired.

"I am appalled to find out that Flappy has not been destroyed," Lester, of Lubbock, said. "Any K-9 dog that would attack without command is a time bomb waiting to go off again and perhaps kill an innocent person the next time."

According to police reports, Blackburn and Flappy were called to go on a S.W.A.T. run. They completed it and went back to Blackburn's house. He released the dog into his backyard not knowing that two children — one of them his own — were playing in the backyard.

Cpl. Sherrie Thompson said the boys had been playing in the backyard and were leaving as the dog came in.

"He was coming in as they were going out — the boy turned around and Flappy bit him," she said, adding that the dog probably thought the boy he didn't know was fleeing, which he is trained to stop.

The boy was treated at Medical Center Hospital.

But that wasn't the first bite. Shanna Weir, a nearby neighbor of K-9 unit Cpl. Andy Blackburn, said her 9-year-old son didn't know the dog would bite when he went to Blackburn's house.

Weir said her son had gone over to the Blackburns to ride go-carts in the alley.

"They let him in the backyard with this dog, but they didn't tell him it was a K-9 or that it was dangerous," she said. "He went over and walked up to the fence and, like kids do, put his fingers through the fence— he wanted to see the dog. That dog bit the tip of his finger off.

Weir said OPD officers investigated the bite. "I didn't want to create a bunch of trouble for them, but I told them, all I wanted done is for them to make this sure this can't happen again. There was no reason for this second little boy to get bitten."

The Department's View

Capt. White said police didn't place any blame on Flappy in the case.

"The dog was not held at fault in this case and continued to be utilized in its official capacity," he said. "He's a tactical dog, not a pet. Anyone who sticks his hand in there runs the risk of being injured. He will bite."

Weir said she agrees with that.

"They'll say my son shouldn't have stuck his finger in there, and I agree," she said. "But 9-year-olds don't make intelligent decisions."

Weir said the event has traumatized her son.

"He's got a scar, but the main thing is that he's scared to death of dogs now," she said. "He used to be a dog lover ... He now has an unnatural fear of dogs."

And Weir said she hopes the police department will look at its policy on all its dogs to make sure no one else is bitten.

"It shouldn't be this dog only, but they need to look at their entire program again," she said. "They need to make sure every safety measure is being taken so that it doesn't happen to any other person ..."

"My main deal is, I'm wanting public pressure on the police department so that something is done with all the K-9 dogs to make sure that there is no way for them to come into contact with children," she said.

White, however, said he believes the police department has reacted appropriately.

"We believe due diligence has been shown by the department in responding to the situation," he said.

What about the officer?

Pipes said Blackburn has been disciplined by being transferred to patrol. The police corporal, who's been with the department since 1987, faces no further discipline.

"The purpose of discipline is not to punish, it's to modify behavior," Pipes said. "By moving him out of the K-9 unit, we'll ensure he won't be able to have any more problems with the K-9 again. There's no further need for discipline."

Pipes said Blackburn may face a written reprimand or counseling but no "heavy discipline."

Pipes said the four K-9 handlers and sergeant now in the police department's unit will continue to keep dogs at their homes.

"This didn't happen because of the way we maintain the dogs," Pipes said. "It happened because the handler didn't check his backyard before he let the dog in. It's not an animal issue, it's a human-error issue, and we've moved the human."

What now?

In the meantime, Flappy, who's been with the department since 1998, is under lockup at K-9 unit Sgt. Jerry Harvell's house.

And while the police department cannot afford to replace Flappy right now, there will be no deficiency in the unit, Pipes said.

Cpl. Melissa "Missy" Butts has been assigned to the unit, and the Ector County Independent School District board of directors approved Tuesday the donation of the ECISD police department's bomb-sniffing tactical dog, Brenda, to the OPD.