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A solemn day as K-9 hero is laid to rest

The death of a dog can move police officers to poetry and tears.

Police treat the funeral of a police dog much like that of a fallen human officer. An American flag covers the dog-sized coffin. A bagpiper plays "Amazing Grace." Two uniformed police officers carefully fold the flag into a triangle. One squarely marches to the handler, presents it, and salutes sharply.

So it was with the memorial for Aryn, an 11-year-old German shepherd euthanized last week. The Gwinnett County police dog is credited with saving the life of his handler, Cpl. Mike Wadell. And about 100 K-9 officers from around metro Atlanta turned out in tribute on Wednesday.

Aryn had been shot while trying to catch a suspected murderer in 2004. Wadell had taken care of Aryn since. Last week a combination of age and various ailments took its toll.

In the background, a few antsy police dogs stood obediently beside their human handlers. Their handlers cried a bit and tried not to think about when it might be their turn.

One by one, a handful of speakers read odes to the virtues of a good dog. They spoke of loyalty and sacrifice, and unconditional love.

They spoke while Wadell sat stone-faced in the Oak Rest Pet Gardens' cemetery gazebo near Dacula, a few feet from Atlanta's equivalent of a K-9 Arlington Cemetery, where a platoon of police dogs lay buried. Wadell sat silently as fellow K-9 officers around him talked about his dog, the one that saved his life.

Wadell still isn't much for talking about Aryn's death. Other police officers who work with dogs explained why.

"It's like losing a family member," said Derrick Davis, a K-9 officer from the Atlanta Police Department. Davis has buried two dogs at Oak Rest -- Bandit and Rusty. At each burial, he thinks about how he will come to terms with burying the dog serving with him now, he said.

After the funeral, K-9 officers gravitated together in the area of the cemetery where some of their own dogs were buried.

Most left their current dog partners in their cars and trucks. The funerals serve as makeshift reunions for K-9 officers here. And while burying a dog is an expectation for their handlers, it's never easily prepared for, Davis said.

It's hard to explain the relationship between a police officer and a police dog, said Cpl. Bots Finnegan of the Gwinnett County Police Department. Some people equate police dogs to family pets, he said. But people generally don't rely on a pet to stand between them and someone trying to kill them.

Aryn's shooting in 2004 served as a stark reminder to the community of K-9 officers.

Gwinnett Police Sgt. Don Merchant read the eulogy, adding detail to the oft-told story of the night Aryn was shot.

In January 2004, Wadell and two other officers had been chasing Terry Chaney through the woods. Chaney, 19, was suspected of shooting and killing Tucker High School coach Billy Venable and his son Bill, a varsity football player.

As Aryn bore down on the suspect, Chaney fired. The officers returned fire, killing Chaney. But Chaney had shot Aryn twice -- once in the leg and once in the sternum. Body armor is available for police dogs, but Aryn wasn't wearing any that night. Aryn limped back to the officers. He endured three hours of surgery. And he walked out of the hospital on his own.

Speaking for Wadell, Merchant said it broke Wadell's heart, knowing he would go to work without him.

"He would have worked every **day** if he could," Merchant said.

Photo

Area **K-9** police officers and their dogs pay their respects at the funeral for Aryn, an 11-year-old Gwinnett County police dog who was euthanized last week. Aryn, a German shepherd, was buried Wednesday at Oak Rest Pet Gardens near Dacula

Photo

Pallbearers fold the flag to give to his handler, Gwinnett Police Cpl. Mike Wadell at a funeral Wednesday.

Photo

Aryn's handler, Cpl. Mike Wadell, his wife, Ruth and their daughter, Nikki, follow the funeral procession Wednesday.

Photo

Pallbearers (left) carry the flag-draped casket of police dog Aryn.