



U.S. ARMY

A plastic dog with low-level explosives is being used at the Picatinny Arsenal to train troops in avoiding hidden bombs in Iraq.

Fake pups train troops about hidden bombs

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Jessica Woods recently "adopted" a dog named Boomer whose main purpose in life is to save lives.

Boomer is not a real dog, but a fake one made in Hollywood and developed by researchers at the U.S. Army's Picatinny Arsenal in Rockaway Township. He's a fuzzy yellow Labrador retriever made of high-impact, fire-resistant plastic and he may be used in upcoming military training missions when filled with low-level pyrotechnics.

Boomer's primary purpose is deadly serious: To prevent U.S. and Iraqi troops fighting in Iraq from being victims of roadside bombings, one of the insurgents' most effective weapons against the convoys of U.S.-led forces.

The bombings are carried out by the insurgents using "improvised explosive devices," as they are known in military-speak. The explosive-packed devices are hidden along roadsides by the insurgents and are detonated by cell phones or other remote-control devices.

"A lot of times, they put IEDs into dead dogs or into artillery rounds on the sides of roads. We would lay the fake dogs on the ground on the side of a road during regular training missions," to teach trainees in vehicles not to drive by unknown objects, said Woods, an engineer at Picatinny and a guest speaker Monday at a Women in Engineering class at High Point Regional High School in Wantage.

And if a trainee drives near or approaches the phony dead dog?

"The dog is hollow inside and equipped with a pyrotechnic simulator. Basically, it's a 'flash and bang' experience for the trainee," said Woods of Roxbury, adding that she picked up Boomer on Friday from Animal Makers Inc. in Hollywood, Calif. Boomer is a prototype and is expected to be used in training exercises at Picatinny next week.

Accompanied by one of her supervisors at Picatinny, Woods was among four young female engineers from Picatinny who attended the WIE class, the only such class in New Jersey high schools, to give the 16 students from High Point a primer on the life of a young female engineer.

Woods, a graduate of the College of New Jersey, and the other

female engineers, Mary Kate Giurfurta, Gretel Raibeck and Shawna Showalter, all graduates of Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, are among a growing number of female engineers. Each has about two years' experience working at Picatinny.

"We need more women in the fields of science and technology, which have been traditionally only for men," said Jim Wejsa, chief of the pyrotechnics team at Picatinny and father of two daughters who attend High Point.

"Our job at Picatinny is to bring people home safely and get the soldiers what they need," said Wejsa, a 22-year veteran at Picatinny, which employs some 3,000 people, mostly scientists and engineers.

The life of a young female engineer can be stressful, especially during wartime when the lives of American troops may depend on the development of a new offensive weapon, or "countermeasure," a preventative weapon designed to stop an incoming enemy missile.

"Unfortunately, we're at a state of war now and we have a sense of obligation to help," said Wejsa. "At war, the (job) requirements are more demanding."

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