



Two Four-Legged Co-Workers Join CAL FIRE's Arson and Bomb Unit



“Best Friend” is often how dogs are referred to, but the dogs in the Canine Unit within the CAL FIRE - Office of the State Fire Marshal Arson and Bomb Unit (ABU) are closer to heroes.

On Feb. 2, 2024, a canine swearing-in was held for Ignitable Liquid Detection Canine, Mocha, and Explosives/Firearms Canine, Flash. Their handlers, Arson and Bomb Investigators Nick Schroeder (Flash) and Charles Elder (Mocha) assisted their canine partners

during the swearing in and ‘pawing’ their oath of office.

The ABU's mission is to investigate the origin, cause, and circumstances of fires, explosions, and bombings on State of California property. The unit also examines the same incidents in jurisdictions that don't have the investigative resources to determine if a fire or explosion was criminal and to seek justice when needed.



To understand the origins of the Canine Unit, we must go back to May 23, 1923, over one hundred years ago, when Assembly Bill 409 was signed by then-Governor Friend William Richardson, establishing the Office of the State Fire Marshal.

Sixty-one years later, in 1984, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, in partnership with the Connecticut State Police, created a program to understand the practicality of using canines for Ignitable Liquid Detection.

As a result of the positive outcome, CAL FIRE - Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) created a similar program. Six years later, two Black Labrador Retrievers named Sam and Bugs were acquired in May 1990 under the direction of State Fire Marshal James F. McMullen. Sam and Bugs worked with the Arson and Bomb Investigators until their retirement in 2001.

To mark the 100th anniversary of the OSFM, under the direction of State Fire Marshal Daniel Berlant, after extensive training and certifications by canines and their handlers, the Canine Unit

was reintroduced to the ABU and expanded. The expansion included Ignitable Liquid Detection Canines and Explosives/Firearms Detection Canines, allowing the unit to help in jurisdictions across the state.

During the ceremony, State Fire Marshal Daniel Berlant discussed the purpose of the program/dogs.

“The Canine Unit is an essential tool for our arson and bomb investigators to investigate the origin, cause, and circumstances of fires and explosions on State of California property,” stated [Chief Daniel Berlant](#), State Fire Marshal.



Flash ready to be sworn in.



Mocha

“We are proud to be able to continue to support local public safety agencies throughout California with these four-legged tools, as we often support jurisdictions that do not have investigative resources,” he continued.

The dogs are already hard at work. Flash’s handler, Nick Schroeder, recounted an early success story at the event. “Canine Flash was called to assist a local agency in Southern California and ultimately found a convicted felon out on parole who had firearms hidden within cabinets in his kitchen. They were missed initially, but

when the dog ran through, he alerted, and guns were found behind the dishwasher.”

Canine Mocha has also had a successful mission. She was called out to a local sheriff’s department in San Bernardino on a suspicious fire death. “With Mocha working the case, we were able to rule out that accelerants were used. The investigators initially thought it was a homicide, however, per Mocha not detecting an accelerant, that shut down the homicide possibilities.”