

## \$1.4 Million Dollar Jury Verdict for Dog Attack



### **Dog trainer survived 4-legged lethal weapon**

Wednesday, December 24, 1997

### **Pa. Prison concealed attack animal's 'savage' history**

By Monica Maske Fisher  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The Rottweiler was so vicious it could not work with other dogs at a maximum security prison in Pennsylvania.



PHOTO BY RICHARD RASKA

Martin Abbott of Belleville and Curtis Reynolds of Maine in front of a premises protected by dogs from their company.

So prison authorities gave the animal to a Newark-based guard dog company, with assurances that Diesel was otherwise a great dog and ideal for lone security work.

Turned out the praise and promise was untrue; the dog's real history was one of unprovoked attacks and what a dog psychologist called "indiscriminate lethality" and "savage aggression" against friend and foe. That information, however, was withheld in May 1995 when the prison transferred the Rottweiler to Curtis Reynolds, owner of Guard Dogs Unlimited in Newark.

Three weeks after getting the dog-- who arrived from the prison tranquilized -- Reynolds was savagely attacked, the dog ripping a bicep muscle and severing an artery in his right arm.

Last week, a Newark jury found the Lancaster County Prison guilty of negligent concealment for hiding the true viciousness of the dog. The jury awarded Reynolds and an assistant, Martin Abbott, who had been attacked before Reynolds was, a total of \$2.7 million. Prison authorities and the prison's attorney, Robert Kretzer of Jersey City, refused to discuss the case or whether they will appeal.

Meanwhile, Reynolds, the father of two young children, is trying to put his personal and professional life back together from his home in Maine. Six months ago, he finally allowed the family's black Labrador retriever back into the house. The dog had been banished to an outdoor kennel after the attack left Reynolds traumatized and fearful of harm to the children.

When he and Abbott, who ran the Newark operation, recovered from their injuries and tried to revive the neglected Newark business, it fizzled and finally was dissolved.

"What I want to know is why," asked Reynolds. "Why didn't they (the prison) just kill this dog? Why did they put my best friend and me through hell?"

Prison officials were found negligent for failing to inform Reynolds that the dog had been involved in five prior unprovoked attacks, found against its prison handler Kenneth Geib and two of which were within two weeks of the transfer. The prison argued in court that it withheld substantial parts of the dog's training history because it was procedure not to release that information to the public.

Also withheld from Reynolds, his lawyer said, was the dog's prison record which was stamped "Deceased," indicating that the prison had decided to kill the dog. The copy of the record given Reynolds contained no stamp, said the lawyer. To find a home for the dog, the prison randomly called dog training centers around the country.

Reynolds, 37, told the court, he had been training and handling dogs for a decade and was unsuspecting when he entered Diesel's kennel in a Newark warehouse on Frelinghuysen Avenue weeks after getting the animal.

According to court testimony, the dog rushed the opened door and pounced, sinking his teeth into Reynolds' right arm. Reynolds even tried the defensive tactic of plunging a thumb and forefinger into the dog's eyes, but to no avail. With blood spraying from his arm and feeling faint, Reynolds said, he choked the dog until it backed away.

As Reynolds reached into his pocket for his licensed 9mm Beretta, the dog got up and lunged again, this time sinking its teeth into his thigh. As the teeth sunk in, Reynolds fired point-blank into the dog's back. The dog let go of his thigh and grabbed Reynolds' ankle. Another point-blank shot was fired into the dog's back. No release. A third shot penetrated the dog's neck and still the animal held its grip. It took a fourth shot into the neck before the dog released its hold and retreated.

Using a 4-foot kennel pole, with a noose at the end, Reynolds began dragging the still-struggling dog back into the kennel and padlocked the door. Just then, Reynolds' wife, Dionna, arrived at the warehouse. She took her husband to University Hospital, where Reynolds eventually underwent three operations and skin grafts to repair his arm and other injuries, court records showed. After the incident, Dionna Reynolds returned to the kennel and, with an assistant, killed Diesel.

Reynolds testified Diesel was "altogether different" than a trained attack dog. Diesel, he said, was "a dog without control." Before that incident, Reynolds said, he had never been attacked.

His new company, Tri-State Guard Dogs, also based in Newark, rents out some 140 dogs, mostly Rottweilers, akitas, and German shepherds, for security work at 75 locations in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut.

Reynolds began training dogs as a hobby, eventually attending command dog school in New Jersey, where he met his wife. Until the attack, the couple were involved in national Schutzhund competition, rating as high as 297 points out of 300 with their dogs in off-leash protection, obedience and tracking.

According to testimony at the three-week trial held before Superior Court Judge Arthur Minuskin, Geib, the Lancaster County Prison canine officer, was responsible for training and handling the Rottweiler, which had been given to the prison when it was 18 months old.

Rottweilers, which have strong guard dog ability, are extremely territorial and aggressive, said Daniel Tortora, and holds a doctorate in animal behavior and psychology and who testified at trial.

In Diesel's case, aggressive bite training was out of balance with obedience training to such a degree that Geib testified that the dog had "an irreversible medical problem" in its uncontrollable aggressive behavior, court papers show.

Tortora said the information given Reynolds about the dog was misleading. The materials included a release form and three award certificates for obedience, agility and protection.

"However, this dog was in a state of progressively increasing loss of behavioral control and escalating uncontrollable, indiscriminate, savage aggression when it was turned over to the plaintiffs," Tortora said.

"The false picture that these documents present would mislead any professional and did mislead the plaintiffs concerning the controllability of this dog's aggression, lulling them into a false sense of security with this dog, which certainly was part of the cause of the attacks on the plaintiffs."

The animal psychologist said that without knowledge of Diesel's training history by guards at the prison, there was no way the dog's aggression could be anticipated.

Livingston attorney, David Mazie, who represented Reynolds, said there was no direct testimony about the prison's motive in giving away such a dangerous dog.

"Our theory? Well Geib admitted (in court) he had feeling for the dog, which was the first guard dog he trained," Mazie said. "We believe he had such an emotional attachment to the dog he just didn't want it to be killed."