



# ATF Pioneer: Grace Reisling - First Special Agent Canine (K-9) Handler

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In 1995, Grace Reisling embarked on an ambitious goal of becoming an explosives detection canine handler during a time when there were very few women law enforcement officers, especially in leadership roles. Her initiative, leadership, and drive established the foundation for the globally recognized National Canine Program. This program continues to serve as the authority in explosives and bombings investigations due to her efforts.

## Early Lessons



*Special Agent Grace Reisling and K-9 Charlie at work\_1996*

As a child, Reisling's parents raised her with a clear understanding of the importance of giving back to society in a positive way. As a member of a military family, she looked for a career that both mentally and physically challenging and that would require a lot of self-discipline. She decided on two choices she felt were right for her: law enforcement or the military. Reisling set out to find which career would use her full skill set and test her mettle and choose to focus on in law enforcement. Decision made; she began looking at opportunities with federal law enforcement agencies.

## New Career

Some people are born leaders, while others take a risk to lead new programs in support of a greater mission. During the mid-nineties, women made up only 14% of the full time sworn officers according to the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#). In addition, minorities made up just [28% of federal officers in 1996](#). Despite this, Reisling maintained her focus in entering this new field and was sworn-in as a special agent in 1988. She successfully completed the demanding training and was assigned to the Philadelphia Field Office Division as part of her initial duty assignment.

Special Agent Grace Reisling and K-9 conduct canine explosives detection

The job requirements were daunting and rigorous mandatory training that tested her mental capabilities. She excelled in from weapons qualifications, law enforcement tactics, defensive maneuvers applying case law, which required her to of information in a short amount of time. determination and strong work ethic made impact in not only at ATF, but also in enforcement.

## New Challenges and an Expanded Mission

Law enforcement agencies recognize that real world have a direct impact on their operations and strive emerging programs. Increasingly several terrorist groups were targeting public venues like sporting events or contained environments like commercial flights and military bases in an effort to gain attention. Local and federal law enforcement agencies and other public safety organizations noted the trends in activity and acted, creating plans to help prevent mass incidents. Despite that planning, on Dec. 21, 1988, terrorists detonated a bomb on Pan Am Flight 103 and the explosion killed all 259 passengers on board.

ATF, in response, expanded their mission to include a new explosive and bombing tactical program as part of future preventative measures. The Assistant Director (AD) at the time, Patrick Hynes, was seeking an agent to lead and build a strong program that would not only create policies and standards, but also establish ATF as a leader in this area. AD Hynes reached out to Reisling asking her to take on the challenge, recognizing that her background as an explosives investigator contributed to her being a natural fit to lead the new explosives detection canine pilot program. Grace in turn knew this was a great opportunity and rallied to develop a top-notch new program area, developing strategic partnerships with other law enforcement agencies, creating training a system for monitoring, evaluation, and sharing best practices. Her groundbreaking work included the implementing a scientific approach to the use of canines in post-blast situations that helped to detect evidence in volatile situations while keeping special agents safe. Additionally, Reisling pioneered new techniques to meet probable cause requirements needed to secure arrest warrants.

## Trailblazing to Lead Change

In order to expand the explosives detection canine program, ATF needed additional funding and resources to keep it operational. Members of the ATF executive team reached out to Reisling and asked her to share her insights about the program during a briefing on Capitol Hill in front of the Appropriations Committee. Although it was unusual for mid-career agents to testify in front of congress on March 6, 1996, Reisling was asked to brief senior leaders and members of Congress to secure funding for the ATF Canine Division and



Charlie sweeps

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Training Center. Grace commanded everyone's attention in the room, excellently representing the bureau and educating members of the House Budget Hearing Committee about the benefits of investing in the program. Her briefing was a success and set the foundation for ATF's pilot canine program.

Leading the change, Reisling and her K-9 Charlie served on many high-profile missions and investigations, including the [Unabomber Case](#) (link is external) and the [Eric Rudolph – Olympic Bomber](#) cases with interagency partners. They also developed lessons learned for future canine handler trainings. Her hard work was recognized, earning her new roles with increasing responsibilities based on her efforts. Grace served on new explosives assignments such as explosives training, profiling and national security operations with the military and FBI. During her tenure, she also managed all of the explosives programs under the Arson and



Explosives Programs including the [National Response Team](#). This required her to oversee a number of explosives detection/law enforcement and criminal profiler teams and served as the explosives training program manager. Moreover, she helped develop national policies such as [Homeland Security Presidential Directive-19](#), which called for the creation of a national strategy to prevent, detect, deter and respond to terrorists' use of explosives in the United States.

ATF National Canine Training Center Instructors Team and Special Agent Grace Reisling

## Leaving a Legacy

"We owe everything we do here to Grace. If it were not for her unwavering commitment to the bureau, the National Canine Division would not exist today," says Shawn Crawford, Canine Team Lead for [ATF's Canine S.E.E.K. program](#). "She recognized an opportunity to make communities safer from explosives with the launch of the Explosives Detection Canine Program while amplifying ATF's law enforcement mission." Since Reisling helped with the launch, the [ATF National Canine Division](#) and [Canine Training Center](#) trained more than 974 explosive detection canines and 280 accelerant detection canines and hosted 4,194 canines during the annual National Odor Recognition Test events. ATF's program is also the only one that is scientifically based, and operated by law enforcement.

Grace has a legacy of leading change over her career with ATF, and throughout her career, she embraced every challenge set before her. She accepted and excelled in a number of roles including her current role of

Ombudsperson. This new role allows her to apply her experience as a special agent to work with management and employees to find mutually agreed upon solutions for workplace issues.