

Investigation underway into why officer shot dog in its own yard

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Published: June 19, 2014 3:05 pm

SALT LAKE CITY — Internal Affairs detectives are investigating why a police officer shot and killed a dog that was in its own backyard in Sugar House.

"The department regrets the unfortunate outcome of this incident," the Salt Lake Police Department said in a prepared statement Thursday.

The dog's owner, Sean Kendall, however, is "very, very upset" over what happened.

"I understand the concern for a missing child. But that doesn't negate my rights as a property owner. And it doesn't replace my dog," he said. "It doesn't justify what that officer chose to do, and that was use lethal force on my animal."

About 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, an officer searching for a missing 3-year-old boy in the area of 2500 South and 1500 East walked into Kendall's fenced backyard. Detectives had received information "that the child was largely nonverbal and likely would not respond to calls by name," said Salt Lake Police Sgt. Robin Heiden.

"Given the urgency to find the child, an officer entered the backyard to see if he had possibly wandered back there," she said.

Geist, a 110-pound Weimaraner who was believed to be in his kennel, confronted the officer. The officer reported that Geist acted in an "aggressive" manner, forcing him to draw his gun and fire.

"He felt threatened by the dog," Heiden said.

But Kendall believes his dog was doing what dogs normally do — protecting his property. He said while Geist would bark at an intruder, he was never known to be aggressive.

"Other than the fact that the officer was on my property uninvited, he was doing nothing but what a dog should do. You buy a dog to help protect your property, and that's exactly what he was doing," he said.

A neighbor said she heard two gunshots and saw the officer leave the yard. Kendall said the dog had a single gunshot wound to the head.

The missing child was found safe in his home about 30 minutes after the shooting.

Heiden said the department feels horrible about what happened and the chief's office called Kendall Thursday to offer condolences. Police officials also plan to meet with him when he returns from burying his dog on his parents' property in Vernal, where Geist loved to run.

"He was just goofy and funny and he loved to play. He was a big cuddler, big cuddler. But now he's gone," Kendall said of Geist, whom he called part of his family. "Now he's dead, I have him wrapped up in a blanket in the back of my truck and I get to go bury him."

"Just the sheer sight of seeing my dog laying there was traumatizing," he said.

Kendall said Geist, whom he got as a puppy 2 ½ years ago, was the first dog he owned that he could call his own.

The Internal Affairs Unit is expected to look at what exactly the dog was doing that made the officer feel threatened.

The Utah Humane Society has also been in contact with the police department and offered specialized training for officers on how to handle situations involving dogs and other animals. Heiden said the department would likely take the Humane Society up on the offer.

The unnamed officer involved in the shooting, who has more than 10 years' experience with the department, was not on paid administrative leave Thursday as is standard procedure with officer-involved shootings involving people. Heiden said the rule does not apply to animals.

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