

# Wood River Police to lay Canine Officer Degen to rest tonight

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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**WOOD RIVER** - Canine Officer Degen has served the people of Wood River, East Alton and Madison County at large since 2012. Tonight, the community will honor him.

Degen, a Belgian malinois was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma or leukemia within the last three weeks, and treatments have not been effective, his handler, Wood River Police Officer Mike Young said Wednesday afternoon. Degen would be 10 this coming spring, but due to the nature of his illness, will instead be laid

to rest this evening at Hawthorne Animal Hospital in Glen Carbon, where he has been receiving his treatments over the better part of the last month.

To honor him, several members of the community and area police officers will honor Officer Degen with an escort from the Wood River Police Department to Hawthorne Animal Hospital. The escort will depart from the station around 6:30 p.m. this evening and is set to arrive at the animal hospital around 7 p.m.

Officer Young has been Degen's handler since 2013, and said he "jumped at" the opportunity to take that role. He even continued handling Degen when he moved from the East Alton to the Wood River Police Department.

"East Alton had discussed retiring him," Young said Wednesday afternoon. "But, I wanted to take him with me to Wood River. East Alton and Wood River worked out a deal, and they were O.K. with me handling him in Wood River. I feel fortunate to keep working with him and handling him."

Agreements between area law enforcement agencies were a focal point of Young and Degen's work together. Often the two were called to assist other agencies across Madison County and its neighbors. Young said he felt as if he and Degen were the only available officers during some of those calls.

One such call occurred in the winter of 2013-2014 in Highland. Young and Degen were called to track a suspect of a recent bank robbery. Young said the conditions at that time were blizzard-like with blowing winds, snow and ice - conditions making the job of tracking exceedingly difficult.

"It seemed like I was the only one available in Madison, St. Clair and the adjoining counties," Young recalled. "Highland PD called, and we went there in ice and snow. We tracked the direction of the suspect to a point he got into a vehicle. They were able to find video footage of the suspect entering the vehicle, and were able to locate the suspect up in Michigan. To be in conditions like that when you can hardly see, and for him to have success doing that is a big monumental moment to me."



Harsh conditions did not seem to impede Degen's work, Young said. He described his canine partner as trained in everything from narcotics detection to tracking to pursuit and apprehension. The only major law enforcement field in which he was not trained was explosives, Young said.

Another example of Degen braving harsh conditions in pursuit of a suspect occurred in Dupo. An officer had been fired upon and the suspect subsequently fled into a nearby forest. It was raining, and the woods were filled with puddles of standing water. Degen was able to locate narcotics and paraphernalia discarded by the fleeing suspect as well as a firearm hidden in a small pool of water. Degen was able to chase the suspect from the forest into the custody of officers waiting on the other side of the thicket.

Degen's most recent episode of heroics came when the Wood River Police Department received information a suspect who had threatened to harm officers and civilians was in East Alton. Degen was able to track the suspect, who fled in the presence of the dog.

"With the dog's presence, people either give up or increase their desire to escape," Young said. "It really changes the risk/reward factor in fleeing."

The suspect then went into a local retail establishment and attempted to evade capture by pretending to be an employee of the store, Young said. He and Degen were able to secure his arrest.

Since breaking the news of Degen's honorable demise, Young said people from across the country, state and region have been offering their condolences. Degen and Young were certified through both the Illinois State Police and North American Police Work Dog Association.