Hate mail tie to 'bombing'

Attacker fed dog before fire

By WARREN GAMBLE

RANCE: Detective Garner's dog Max, fed by the attacker to gain his trust, gets a hug ighbour, two-year-old Dylan Pain. HERALD PICTURES / MARTIN HUNTER

PALMERSTON NORTH — A detective tied up and doused with petrol in his home early yesterday had been sent threatening letters which forced his wife and young family into hiding, neighbours said.

They also revealed that Detective Brent Garner was to have been reunited at the house with his family tomorrow.

"Thank God they did not come back sooner," said a neighbour.

The *New Zealand Herald* learned that the attacker told the policeman he had visited the house in Oak Cres, Ashhurst, on several nights this week to feed his dog and keep it from barking when he entered the property.

Beaten, bound and gagged, Detective Garner cheated death by getting out of his open bedroom window shortly before the single-storey home exploded in flames.

He was attacked as he slept around 4 am, gagged and strangled with a rope before being tied at his ankles and wrists.

The police said the 32-year-old Palmerston North CIB officer then had petrol poured over his body by the unknown assailant.

He was left on the bed, but escaped before a fireball engulfed the house in an explosion which some neighbours thought was an earthquake.

Last night Detective Garner was recovering in the city after being treated in hospital for cuts and bruises.

A team of 30 was hunting the offender, and some Palmerston North officers were being given extra security as a precaution.

The man heading the inquiry, Detective Inspector Doug Brew, said it was too early to speculate on a motive, and he declined to comment on whether Detective Garner had received any threats.

But neighbours in Ashhurst, a small country town north-east of Palmerston North, said they understood the quiet family man had received threatening letters.

FIREBOMB: Detective Garner's Ashhurst house after the explosion, strong enough to blast tiles from the roof.

As a result his wife and two baby daughters, aged one and seven months, had left the house six or seven weeks ago to stay with relatives in a northern city. The family was due to return to Ashhurst tomorrow to celebrate the older daughter's second birthday on Monday.

A neighbour, Mr Graeme McGrath, said Detective Garner was an "excellent neighbour, an excellent bloke, and an excellent family man."

Mr McGrath said he was jolted awake by the explosion, which he thought was an earthquake.

The house was fully ablaze when he went outside.

Other residents found Detective Garner still bound and gagged in the backyard.

Another neighbour, Sandy Pain, said the tightly knit community was finding it hard to believe what had happened.

"Things like this are not supposed to happen in Ashhurst — in New York or somewhere — but not here," she said.

Mr Brew said the assailant's face had been concealed when he first attacked the tall, well-built detective, but he had been unmasked during the assault.

An identikit picture of the man, who Detective Garner had not recognised, is due to be issued today.

Mr Brew said police officers often received threats.

"It is really a case of analysing and taking some sort of measurement of matters that may be implied as threats."

The attack appeared to be aimed at Detective Garner as a police officer and cases he had been working on were being studied.