

UNDER THE HANGING CEILING: MEXICO CITY

by Judy Graham

Sardy padded ahead of me between the rows of sewing tables. The east side of the room was mostly intact, with a thick layer of cement dust on bolts of cloth, sewing machines, scissors, fabric scraps, the floor. But on the west side, just inches from my shoulder, the ceiling sagged. Great chunks of concrete hung suspended, apparently on nothing more than chickenwire. All the floors above us, I didn't know how many, were being held up by -- what? I tried not to think.

We had entered through a hole cut into the wall from the undamaged building next door, where racks and racks of clothes hung as neatly as they had before the great earthquake. But here in this devastated sewing room it was, as my teammate Caroline Hebard said, "like a time capsule: half-finished sodas and cups of coffee, even food that the rats had not yet devoured -- photographs of children and husbands -- a bag and mirror with makeup, and in one corner, children's books and learn-to-read-and-write primers. There was an eerie silence that even the cooing of pigeons and the cacophony of a big city could not interrupt."

And everywhere there was the odor of cement dust and a pervasive stench of death.

Our engineer had evaluated this building before we went in to search it. "This factory must come down," he said. "It is very dangerous. But we want to know if anyone could still be trapped alive inside. Factory workers were in there when the first earthquake struck, and afterwards people could hear them crying, but after the second earthquake, nothing."

People could still be alive, four days after the quake. It was worth a risk. I remembered the advice: "Stay on the east side of the room and let your dog check the dangerous parts. Walk softly and don't touch anything structural." And the other warning, "we're not here to trade lives."

But it was hard to judge, in the rubble left by two major earthquakes, what was or wasn't structural anymore. I was glad that Sardy, too, walked softly.

Sardy ("Search and Rescue Doggy") had been my search partner for seven years. She was a steady worker who had learned, on boulders, cliffs and logjams in the woods and practicing disaster search in junkyards and on piles of

debris, to navigate carefully. Now, with ears alert and nose scanning for scent, she worked along the edge of a portion of the room that was totally collapsed. "

"Nothing but death here, her posture told me."

And then she disappeared under that terrible hanging ceiling.

A minute later she came back, with a look in her eye as if to say "come with me, it's important." I stayed put. She turned back under the hanging ceiling, trying to find a better way in to whatever it was she smelled. Then she went back to where she'd been before, and I heard her scratching at debris.

"Good girl," I told her softly. She came back again, her tail wagging slightly and that anxious look in her eye. I was convinced there was someone alive in there, probably severely injured.

We called in Caroline Hebard and her big, dark Shepherd Aly. I took Sardy out to the safety of the adjoining building while my husband Hatch, who had watched Sardy work, acted as observer for Caroline as well. In a few minutes they all came out.

"Aly grabbed my flashlight. He couldn't find a stick, so he had to grab something else to tell me. There's someone alive in there, I'm sure of it," Caroline said. Hatch agreed. "He alerted right where Sardy did." It was directly above where Linda Wallace's dog Bourbon had alerted earlier, on the floor below, "barking and jumping up and down like a pogo stick," as Caroline described it. All three dogs were probably scenting the same person or persons, and all three were telling their handlers, with their own individual body language, that someone was alive there, trapped somewhere in the collapsed floors hanging on that terrible ceiling.

Through our interpreter, we conferred with the engineer in charge of the building, and soon workers were bringing timbers to shore up the ceiling as a precaution before sending anyone in to check where the dogs had alerted. But a few minutes later the engineer came back. "We cannot shore it up. If we even touch it, the whole thing will come down. How sure are you that there is someone alive?"

I thought about Sardy's behavior under the

hanging ceiling, and it brought back a night, six years earlier, when she had come back to me with that same look in her eye -- and led me through the black woods to a critically injured woman. I thought about all the other times Sardy had been my extra sense, telling me things I never could have known with only my human senses. I thought about how we'd learned to communicate with each other, and how I'd learned to read just about every cock of her ear and tilt of her tail.

The same thoughts, I knew, were going through my teammates' minds. They'd followed their dogs through many a dark forest, too. Over the years they'd come to trust their canine partners -- as Caroline put it, to empathize with them, just as I did with Sardy.

We were sure.

But it was a difficult decision. We didn't want to trade lives. We finally suggested they might send in their smallest, lightest, and bravest man to "mole" in where the dogs had been; to touch nothing, but just look around.

And then we had to leave to search another building in another part of the city. This was one of the biggest frustrations of the Mexico City mission: we were never there to see the results of our search. After we left a site, the extrication crew would begin removing debris where the dogs had alerted. It was slow, laborious work, using hacksaw blades and sledge hammers to cut rebar and break apart slabs of concrete. We couldn't wait. There were too many other buildings to search.

We moved on to another site then, a huge apartment complex that had toppled, killing hundreds of people. But our minds were still full of that factory and the image of a garment worker lying trapped under the hanging ceiling.

The next day we got news that two corpses -- and a woman, injured but alive -- had been brought out of that factory, and then demolition began.

It was almost three months later when we heard the last about the hanging ceiling. We were comparing slides and experiences with a group of California paramedics who had also worked the Mexico City rubble. And there, among their slides, was our factory! On the day we left Mexico they had rescued a second woman there, right where the dogs had told us.

"They tunneled in to her and sent a medic in," one of the rescuers said. "He couldn't get

any vitals on her, but she was breathing. She was trapped between the floor and the ceiling. We worked all afternoon to get to her. When we finally got her out, we put her on a crane to bring her down, and I started an IV on her.

"She was breathing, she had a heartbeat, but no other signs of life. And as I was working on the IV, all of a sudden she reached up and grabbed my hand and squeezed it. It was very definite. I have a lot of emotions and fear, a lot of memories wrapped up in this one."

All of us who were under that hanging ceiling have a lot of memories.

Sardy (Kuskokwim Firebird CD) is a daughter of Ch. Tucker Hill's Oracle UDT and Bee Jay's Sandy CD, from a litter we planned with a search dog just like Sardy in mind. I picked her at eight weeks of age, based on puppy tests, and set out right away to show her that finding people is the very best game. She's become a professional at it.

So has Aly (Aly von der Heissener Höhe SchHI KKI AD AV). A German import, Aly was sired by Barry vom Harberg SchHIII AV out of Gina vom Haus Reolich SchHI AV. He came to this country as a Schutzhund I and, at the age of a year and a half, went into training as Caroline's search partner.

Bourbon (Linda's Bourbon Ball), a daughter of Don Lucento of Padua and Santa Lucia Di Lammermoor, is now known as "Bourbon on the Rocks," after her experiences on the rubble in Mexico City as part of the U.S. Dog Team that searched for survivors of the Sept. 19-20, 1985 earthquakes.

Sardy, Aly and Bourbon were among the 13 dogs that made up the U.S. Dog Team, with their handlers and support personnel. The Team was drawn from volunteer SAR dog units on both coasts: from DOGS-East in Maryland/Virginia, Search and Rescue K-9 Service (New York/New Jersey/Vermont), and California Rescue Dog Association.

The U.S. Team searched dozens of damaged buildings, some still standing but with major internal damage, some completely pancaked. An 11 story office building might be no taller than an undamaged four-story structure next door.

Searching for people trapped under rubble, the dogs worked off-lead, directed by voice and hand signal into tunnels, up ladders, and be-

tween sandwiched floors and ceilings. Dogs and handlers had to pick their way over chunks of concrete, up inclines of slick marble and tile, and through tangles of rebar. Thanks to years of training and search experience in many different situations, not a single dog or handler was injured in the five days of searching the rubble in Mexico City.

A true count of "saves" will never be known, but at least 15 survivors were pulled from the rubble at locations where the dogs gave "live" indications. The dogs also found countless dead bodies. But they seemed to sense what their handlers knew: they were there to find the living in the midst of the dead.

For more information on search and rescue dogs, write SAR Dog ALERT, P.O. Box 39, Somerset, CA 95684.

This article appeared in the *German Shepherd Dog Review* in 1985 or 1986. Judy cleverly failed to mention that Bourbon was a Yellow Lab. Later, someone from ARDA (an all-Shepherd unit) complained in a letter to the editor that the "US Team" had "non-standard" dogs searching. Tsk, tsk.