

Ready or Not!

When Are The Dogs Really Ready?

by Judy Graham

Search training, as any SAR dog knows, is one big game of hide and seek. (For some of the infinite variations on the theme, read a SAR dog handler's training log.) Hide and seek translates into searching is fun. It plays on a dog's natural instincts of pursue and seize: find the "victim" and grab a stick, or whatever else the handler offers as reward. Stick chasing and tug-of-war, after a good find, are search dog heaven.

Training is fun for the handler, too — or it should be. If it isn't maybe he should look into some other form of activity. But there's a serious side, too. A SAR dog handler knows this game is often played for keeps.

How does a handler know when he and his dog are ready? And what are the penalties if they're not? Let's look at the penalties first. The legal ramifications of a botched search haven't been tried in the courts yet, as far as we know. But with the proliferation of law degrees, the possibility of this happening in the near future is a good one.

Beyond the law, there are plenty of penalties. Walking by a victim — hidden by brush, under a log, or unnoticed in the dark — is a searcher's nightmare. How much more so for the SAR dog handler, who can't plead darkness or dense brush? That's what he has a dog for!

The searcher who claims competence and gets the assignment, like a prime search sector of the first chance at the missing person's track, has just aced out some other searcher. Let's not forget that a victim is presumed alive until proved otherwise. But he won't stay that way indefinitely. The sooner found, the better. A dog handler accepting a prime assignment had better believe he and his dog can do at least as good a job as the next team. Then there is

the less-than-prime assignment. How often have victims been found where they weren't supposed to be? The responsibility is just as great, no matter what the assignment.

So much for the penalties. How does a handler know when he and his dog are ready? If he's lucky, he's part of a well organized SAR dog unit with standards and evaluation procedures. In an evaluation, mission-ready handlers will set out "victims" in a sizable piece of real estate. They'll follow along as he and his dog tackle the problem. He'll probably be harassed on the radio, to simulate what happens on a real search. If he and his dog pass the test, he'll have a real sense of accomplishment.

But what if there's no SAR dog unit within hundreds of miles? Handlers should keep a training log. Here the handler records what he's done with his dog: type of searches (track/trail, airscent area search, building search, disaster, avalanche); terrain and weather conditions; duration of problem; how the dog worked; how the handler worked; and victim's behavior ("unconscious," running away or strolling; in a tree, under a pile of tarps, in the park restroom). A careful look at the training log should point up obvious omissions or weaknesses.

Then the handler should ask himself some questions.

Has he taken his dog into all sorts of situations? Starting with those that aren't too intimidating to a young pup, the exposure progresses as the dog develops confidence in himself and trust in his handler. A playground full of screaming kids, or a parade with drums and horns and fireworks shouldn't faze a well socialized search dog.

Have the dog and handler spent a few nights together in a tent, or kept each other warm on survival exercises? Dog and handler should feel like a team; the respect, affection and trust should be mutual.

Is the dog under control at all times, on or off lead? Or is he so "obedient" that he won't leave his handler's side? A search dog needs to get out on his own and work inde-

pendently, and sometimes he needs to override his handler's commands. After all, if the handler knew where the victim was, he wouldn't need a dog.

How often does the dog get to search for people he doesn't know? Does he find them as eagerly as he finds familiar "victims?"

How many problems has the team worked where the handler didn't know where the "victim" was? How many night problems, when he was as good as blind in the dark and had to rely totally on his dog? How many problems where he thought he knew where the "victim" was, but the "victim" fooled him or didn't understand instructions and was somewhere else? How often has he searched not knowing whether one or more — or no — "victims" were in the area?

Has the handler really learned to read his dog? He should be able to tell when the dog has gotten just a whiff of scent — not enough to be able to follow through, but enough to report to search base as a clue. When the dog makes a find, his refind should be so persistent that it compensates for the times when the handler isn't reading his dog.

Can the handler really trust his dog? That's half of the question.

Then there's the other half. While dog and handler have been playing games of hide and seek, the handler should have been getting his first aid/CPR certification, learning radio communications, wilderness survival and land navigation (map and compass, or how to adequately cover an assigned sector without getting lost and compounding the search problem). Beyond that, there's basic mountaineering including getting around in rough country, on snowshoes or skis or, if necessary, lowering yourself and dog on ropes down a cliff or out of a helicopter (see *Response!*, Fall 1983). There's physical fitness, aerobic (cardiovascular) conditioning, so the sudden change to high altitude or the need to pack up a steep slope won't suddenly make the handler a medical case. There's on- and off-loading under a helo's whirring rotors so the team can get to the search in the first place.

And then there are the basic non-dog search skills every handler should have: signcutting and mantracking. A dog handler who blithely obliterates the missing person's footprint hasn't contributed much to the search.

From a dog's standpoint, search is one big game. His handler is the one who had better understand that it's serious. □

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