

# The Great San Bernardino Train Wreck

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Contributing Editors

“I saw sparks, then I heard the screech and all of the cars just started pushing together,” a resident of Duffy Street was quoted in the San Bernardino County (CA) Sun.

On the morning of May 12th, a runaway freight train traveling at an estimated 90 m.p.h. derailed on a curve in the Muscoy area north of San Bernardino. Tumbling down a 25-foot embankment, the train - six locomotives and 69 loaded hopper cars - crashed onto a row of homes on Duffy St.

“The train was all over the place,” Associated Press quotes an eyewitness. “It looked like a toy in a sandbox. Pieces of the (train’s) axles were in people’s yards.” And over everything was tons of damp, powdery trona, a mineral used to make soda ash. According to one account, the ash filled the air with what seemed a heavy fog for almost an hour after the accident.

The engineer was brought out by witnesses, news sources reported; he was in serious condition with broken ribs, but alive. The conductor in the lead engine wasn’t so lucky; he was found dead. The bodies of two half-brothers, 7 and 9 years



*The train wreck near San Bernardino, CA. Houses were buried under tons of potash. Photos courtesy State Office of Emergency Services.*

old, were recovered from their home, apparent victims of suffocation from the ash.

This left two persons missing: The brakeman, and a 24-year-old man, Christopher Shaw, who had been asleep in his mother’s house.

### Special-purpose dogs needed

Local police K-9s had been on scene in the early stages of the operation, and reportedly alerted on and helped locate one of the small boys. But the K-9 handlers readily admitted their dogs weren’t trained for disaster search.

California Office of Emergency Services personnel arrived on scene as San Bernardino City was setting up an incident command system to integrate help from nearby jurisdictions, and determin-

ing what other outside resources they’d need to cope with a disaster of this magnitude. Over the years, OES has come to rely on volunteer SAR dog teams as an important resource for finding lost hunters and hikers, young children and elderly walkaways, victims of drowning, homicide and avalanche, as well as urban disaster. Surveying the Duffy St. site, OES officials thought immediately of dogs.

There were SAR dog teams close at hand in southern California, but they were primarily wilderness search and urban trailing dogs. Like the police K-9s, they weren’t disaster-trained.

The closest available disaster dogs were located in the San Francisco Bay Area. Two California Rescue Dog Assn.



*Shirley Hammond and Cinnamon search for human scent beneath the potash and rubble*

teams—John Koerner with his big black long-haired German Shepherd, “Alf,” and Shirley Hammond with her red Doberman, “Cinnamon” - were soon aboard Civil Air Patrol planes, headed south. After a 2-1/2 hour flight, they landed at Rialto Airport and were met by a San Bernardino County Sheriff’s helicopter.

### “It looked like snow”

Before setting down, the chopper pilot circled the site several times to give the handlers a good view of the disaster. “It looked like it had snowed,” Shirley remembers, and wondered how effectively the dogs could search in this medium.

The CARDA teams were briefed and began searching as soon as medical and heavy rescue teams were in place to back them up. First assignment was to try to find the man missing in his mother’s home: a collapsed wood frame house with four hopper cars perched precariously on top.

The heavy rescue coordinator, a deputy fire chief from the Lorna Linda Fire Department, sketched a floor plan of the house, and Shaw’s mother indicated where her son had been asleep in the front bedroom when she left.

“What we didn’t know,” Shirley says, “was that he had gotten up and was coming out of the bathroom, down the hall, when he heard the world coming to an end, the sky was falling. And he said he just booked!\* He didn’t quite make it to the front door.”

Initially the two dog teams began a free search of the site, then started a directed fine search. John reports that, contrary to their usual procedure, both dogs and handlers worked the same area together as a team. The rubble where Shaw was presumed buried was “a semi-confined area, and in the interest of saving time, we worked them both simultaneously. I don’t know if I’d recommend it” as a general practice, he

I cautioned, but said that in this case it worked very well. “I’ve got to commend both dogs. They really worked together.”

The trona was something of a problem, causing the dogs to sneeze when they



*John Koerner and Alf continue the rubble search, a fundamental part of any disaster dog program.*

got a noseful; still, they kept searching. Shirley reports she squirted Cinnamon’s muzzle with water from her bicycle bottle each time the dog had a sneezing episode, and this seemed to help.

### Dogs pointed the way

In one area of the collapsed house, the dogs alerted by scratching and digging. Seeing a direction to move, fire heavy rescue personnel cleared ash and rubble down to ground-level, leaving a vertical wall of debris for the dogs to again sniff. As each successive layer was removed, the dogs would recheck. “They continued to alert in the same area,” the handlers report.

While the alerts were consistent, they weren’t what the handlers had come to expect in a disaster situation. Shirley and Cinnamon are veterans of the Mexico City earthquake mission as well as fires and mudslides. John and Alf searched the Bay View Industrial Park fire, so this wasn’t their first disaster search, either. Among CARDA’s oldest and most experienced search dogs, Alf and Cinnamon have developed a strong barking/digging response to indicate disaster victims they can’t reach through the rubble.

But in the soft soda ash their reaction was different. “Cinnamon would dig and dig and dig, and then turn around and look at me, and then she’d go back and she’d dig again,” Shirley reported. If she tried to direct the Doberman to search somewhere else, Cinnamon would soon “come back and say ‘No, it’s in this area.’” And dig some more.

John described his dog’s reaction as “digging, smelling, sort of whining,” not his “characteristic jubilant dig and bark” for live victims. He attributes this to the depth of soda ash - at least 12 feet - covering the missing man.

In any case, the dogs’ interest was evident. Someone was down under those tons of ash and rubble. Following up on the dogs’ alerts, the fire-fighters’ task was a slow one. Hoping for a live rescue, they were using hand and light power tools. Bringing in heavy equipment could endanger Shaw’s life - if he was still alive. Confronting the situation, officials acknowledged there was perhaps a 1 percent chance of bringing out a survivor. But OES personnel and the incident and site commanders agreed: that one chance in a hundred was worth holding off the cranes.

While rescuers continued removing debris by hand where the dogs had indicated, the CARDA teams searched the other damaged houses and the train wreckage. One dog and handler also worked back along the tracks in case the brakeman had jumped from the train before the crash.

### The 12-foot-deep surprise

Pools of diesel fuel and antifreeze on the ground around the wrecked: locomotives, and dripping battery acid, made this a risky place for the dogs to search. Alf showed interest at the front end of one of the engines, but John couldn’t get him in position for a definitive alert. Early next morning the missing brakeman was found here under the wreckage, completely covered by ash; workers reportedly had to cut the train into pieces and remove it in small sections to reach his body.

Meanwhile, four semi-dump truck loads of “tons of steel, wood, house debris and ash” had been removed from the site where Christopher Shaw was presumed buried. At about 9 p.m., more than 13 hours after the accident, a fireman removing debris discovered a void in the rubble. He stuck in his hand - and felt another hand!

From under the rubble Chris Shaw squeezed the fireman’s hand. “The shout rang out, ‘He’s alive!’” Shirley recalls.

It took over an hour and a half for rescue and medical specialists to carefully remove the trapped man. Describing the painstaking process of clearing debris and ash, John commends Deputy Chief Gene Brooks of the Loma Linda Fire Department who supervised the operation. 'That guy's alive today because of him. It was like digging in loose sand,' he said. 'Normally in a situation like this, the victim has a wall or something on top of him so he's got an airspace. This guy didn't. All he had was the soda ash sort of packed above his head.'

OES officials also praised the search dogs and handlers; 'The dogs gave us a



*Richard Andrews, Deputy Director of OES congratulates Koerner and Hammond for their victim rescue.*

direction to go. That's their function in disaster search."

Shaw owes his life not only to the trained dog teams, heavy rescue personnel and emergency medical contingent, but also to a well-coordinated incident command that brought together many different agencies and jurisdictions, and that was willing to proceed slowly and carefully, on that 1 percent chance that Chris Shaw might still be alive under the rubble.

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*\* Street parlance for getting the heck out of there is a major rush. Or so I'm told. -Ed.*