

Training for Water Search

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We've seen it happen in warm and ice-cold water; in lakes, reservoirs and ponds; in slow-moving creeks, whitewater streams and tidal rivers. There's growing evidence of what many SAR dog handlers have come to realize through personal experience: dogs do scent people through water.

They can do it, yes. But how do you train for it?

Many of the dogs that have solved water searches had had no previous training in locating people underwater. They were trained, simply, to find people. And if the people happened to be underwater, that's where they'd find them.

Nevertheless, water training is one more facet of a well-rounded education for handler as well as dog. The dog learns that people can be underwater, and he becomes accustomed to searching from a boat. The handler learns to read and trust his dog's alerts in what usually is a no-find situation.

There are some things you can do before you even get near the water. To introduce a puppy (or older dog) to the idea that people can be underneath something (water, snow, disaster rubble), hide someone under a large tarp, camouflaged parachute or blanket— anything that disguises the human form. This teaches the puppy to seek by scent alone and to indicate something that, when found, doesn't look like a person.

How do you set up the actual water training?

The first step is to find "victims." It's hard to come by drowned bodies for water search training, so most handlers settle for divers. For safety's sake, use trained divers. They know their business and will take the necessary precautions. If possible, try to recruit divers who are normally involved in body recoveries—the people you're likely to be working with on actual SAR missions. You and the divers will gain a better understanding of each other's capabilities, and the divers will learn about scent transport through water: "If the dogs alert here, that means the body is likely to be here or here."

When training with divers, be aware of your search dog's prejudice toward live "victims." For a nose trained to save lives, a living breathing diver isn't really a simulation for a drowned body. So the dog may



give a more pronounced, enthusiastic alert on the diver than he will on a dead body.

How about the air bubbles? Won't they cue the dog? To some extent, yes. But you're teaching the dog that human scent can come from underwater, and the bubbles help bring up that scent. If you're worried about the bubbles, try working in water that isn't still. Another approach: some divers have rigged their exhaust hoses into a lifting bag, so there aren't any bubbles.

Lacking divers, or to vary the routine, some handlers submerge well-scented articles of clothing weighted with rocks. These give off less scent than the divers and helps train the handler to recognize his dog's water alert.

You can set up water search problems for working the dog from shore or from a boat. In actual search situations, you'll probably be doing some of both, so it's good to train for both.

Shoreline search

Make sure there's good breeze coming off the water, so your dog can get down-wind of the diver. It's a good idea to have the diver enter the water from a different direction than the dog will be working, so the dog doesn't intercept his track.

Tie a line to the diver, to signal him when the dog alerts. The diver can then surface so the dog sees that there really is someone out there. It's best to have the tie-line operated by someone other than the handler, at some distance from the location where the dog should pick up the diver's scent. Dogs are good at alerting on that human-scented line and giving it a premature tug,

In an actual water search, the victim isn't going to come up to reward your dog. Most commonly, you won't know until hours or days later— if at all— whether your dog was right. So in training, let your dog see the diver pop up the first one or two times. After that, train for the real situation. Praise and reward your dog for his indication alone.

How will your dog alert? This varies considerably from one dog to the next, and may even vary from one time to the next. Searching from shore, many dogs will wade or swim out toward the source of the scent. The dog may swim circles around the point of maximum scent. A dog who doesn't like to get his feet wet may "point" from shore. Some dogs will reward themselves with a stick, if there's one handy. Other dogs will bite or grab at the water; some will bark or whine.

And how do you communicate to your dog what you want him to do? What command will you use for water search? You want to focus the dog's attention on the water, so don't use the command you use for wilderness search. A dog trained in avalanche or disaster work—where the victim is out of sight and underneath something— can respond to the same command for a person underwater.

Boat search

Previous obedience training is a real plus in working your dog from a boat. You'll want the dog sitting or standing quietly in the prow. When working from a boat, some handlers prefer to use a general work-up command, like "work," which cues the dog that he's on duty, but doesn't give him a specific, active thing to do.

What kind of boat? The slower, more stable, and lower-to-the-water, the better, John boats, propelled by polars, are ideal. Rowboats are also good. In many situations, you'll have to settle for powerboats; try to keep

the exhaust blowing away from your dog, and have the boat operator move slowly. And remember, the motor will have to be turned off if you need to take compass bearings to triangulate the location of an alert. Propellers can be a real hazard if your dog should jump overboard.

As the boat grids back and forth across the search area, you'll be watching your dog intently. Particularly with a drowned body, your dog's alert may be no more than a turning of the head, or bending down toward the water, or intensified nose work. A dog who moves around a lot may suddenly become still. The dog may whine or simply seem uneasy.

Some dogs will leap overboard and swim circles around the point of maximum scent. While this can be a positive indication, in a real search situation it may be unsafe, from boat or from shore. A creek at flood stage can be as treacherous for searchers as for the canoeist they're looking for. We're also hearing about waters so contaminated that they're unsafe for dogs—and divers. In any case, it isn't a good idea to put all your training emphasis on a swimming-alert. Better to learn to read your dog's expression and body language.

After your dog indicates the scent of the victim, if you want the diver to surface and give your dog a "find," you can signal by pounding on the bottom of the boat with an oar.

We've listed a few of the advantages to water training: introducing the dog to the idea that people can be underwater; getting him accustomed to searching from a boat, and fine-tuning the handler to his dog's indication of a submerged body. There's another real advantage. By paying attention to where the dog alerts, in relation to the diver's actual position, the handler will gain insight into scent transport through waters of different velocities and turbulence. It's hard enough to figure out what scent is doing above ground indifferent wind and weather conditions, and in different terrain and vegetation. Water is a whole new medium. We need a lot more information in this area.

For many SAR dog handlers, water search training may be fairly low in the list of priorities. Dogs that are highly motivated to find people will find them in just about any situation. Nevertheless, training helps, particularly for teams living in areas where water search constitutes an important part of the SAR mission load. And, like all of the other aspects of training, water work broadens a dog's horizons and helps sharpen dog/handler communication.