

SEARCH and RESCUE DOGS TECHNICAL NOTE

TRAINING A SEARCH DOG

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Many units have rules which prohibit publicity of handlers and dogs with successful finds, since most SAR successes are a team effort. This article is, thus, the anonymous biography of the training of a SAR dog leading to operational status and a successful find. It was submitted by a member of a recognized SAR dog unit.

This is the summary of a training log for one dog's first year. During that whole first year, I was constantly asking myself, "are we moving too fast? or not fast enough?" I couldn't find any guidelines. The purpose of this paper is to offer at least a basis for comparison – recognizing that some dogs (and handlers) will move faster, some slower, and that not every dog will respond to the same training program. Maybe this will elicit comparisons from other handlers.¹

I don't pretend that our program was perfect. It was influenced by handler convenience and availability of victims. And our progress wasn't always straight ahead and up. We hit a slump that had me in despair – until it ended as suddenly as it began.

In that first year we neglected some aspects of a well-rounded SAR dog education: tracking, scent discrimination, disaster and avalanche work, advanced obedience and agility. But then, there's always more to learn. I think my dog and I developed a good enough working relationship, the first year, to build the rest on.

Birth to 2 ½ months

Because she was a home-bred puppy, I could be sure that my dog's early environment was a good one. Most important, I made sure she received lots of human contact in those first weeks, not only from members of the immediate family, but from every visitor who came to the house. As a result, she's never met a "stranger" in her life.

From about five weeks on, I spent extra time with her almost every day, taking her off to a quiet part of the house or yard to play with her and let her explore.

When the litter was six weeks old, the pups began their five weeks of "puppy testing" and training, a program we adapted from Guide Dogs for the Blind. For 20 minutes once a week, each pup was taken away from its littermates and kennel area, into a strange environment, and handed to a stranger, who first made friends with the pup and then put it through its paces: heel on leash (lots of coaxing and praise, no harsh words or strong jerks), come and fetch; test the pup's reaction to strange sounds (whistle, gong, alarm clock, car horn) and unfamiliar people, both singly and in groups. I was happy to see my choice confirmed by the tests: the pup I'd picked, almost at birth, looked like a winner.

	Sessions	Avg. Time hrs:min	Total Time hrs:min
SAR Training	-	-	-
Obedience Training	5	:10	:50
Confidence Training	5	:05	:25
Socialization ¹	<u>5</u>	<u>:05</u>	<u>:25</u>
Total	15	:06	1:40
Actual Sessions ²	(5)	(:20)	

¹Only special activities to further socialization have been included, usually involving strangers. Dog was home-raised and spent many hours daily with handler, in home, in car, meeting visitors at home, etc., which are not documented..

²Actual sessions may have involved more than one kind of training and thus is often a lesser number than the times SAR, obedience, or other training is listed.

2 1/2-4 months

At the end of “puppy testing” I enrolled her in a ten-week puppy kindergarten class, where she continued her education in on-lead heeling, stand-sit-down and stay. The class was good socialization with other people and puppies; we regularly passed the puppies around, so each pup was held and petted by other people in the class.

I was exposing my puppy to as many new situations as possible, starting with those that wouldn’t be too frightening for a pup her age: heeling around shopping centers and school playgrounds, meeting children on skateboards, and various kinds of livestock.

At the same time, I started her search training with little run-away games; she would find me or other members of the family: three quick finds, three or four times a week. When she found, she immediately received much praise, petting, and/or rough-housing. By the end of the first week she was responding to the “go find” command and had learned to work a simple scent cone to its source. Also, by the end of the first week, she was enthusiastically finding other handlers in the unit. I was soon able to introduce an occasional short (five-minute) “blind” search for a member of the family who had gone off without the puppy seeing him leave.

Separately, we had daily play sessions, retrieving balls, finding balls I’d hidden, playing tug of war with old socks, etc. I wanted to develop a good play-relationship with the puppy so I could use it as a search reward later on.

SAR Training ³	16	:18	4:48
Obedience Training	5	:50	4:10
Confidence Training	3	:15	:45
Socialization	<u>11</u>	<u>:33</u>	<u>6:00</u>
Total	35	:27	15:43
Actual Sessions	(22)	(:43)	

4-5 1/2 months

During this period the puppy was working five-to-ten-minute field problems (in daylight or dark) finding other unit handlers, members of the family, and strangers. Through this procedure, she developed a good ranging pattern in open field work, and I was able to direct her as she moved out well ahead of me. She would work up to ten minutes on a problem without losing interest, and in difficult airscenting conditions. I gave her an occasional runaway exercise to keep up her speed and enthusiasm.

To prevent the puppy from locating her victim visually in open fields, I frequently had the victim hide under a camouflage cloth. It became apparent, in later training, that this had taught the puppy to find people “buried” and served as a natural transition to debris and avalanche work.

Her reward continued to be praise and petting, with ball-playing to the extent that she responded to it. At this age she usually seemed to prefer petting and praise after the excitement of the find.

Puppy kindergarten ended when she was about five months old, and I started her in an informal weekly sub-novice obedience class. This class included five or ten minutes of exchange of handlers, so the pup was accustomed to doing basic obedience work for other people.

New situations she was exposed to, at this age, included a concrete plant, gas station/garage; riding in an elevator, in a cart behind a tractor, and in her own automobile while it was hoisted on a hydraulic lift for repairs; and watching a parade.

SAR Training	19	:09	2:55
Obedience Training	5	:58	4:50
Confidence Training	5	:51	4:15
Socialization	<u>6</u>	<u>3:01</u> ⁴	<u>18:10</u>
Total	35	:51	30:10
Actual Sessions	(26)	(1:09)	

³This counts only the time dog was working a problem. A two-to-three-hour round trip plus another 1:45 while handler helped others train would mean five hours devoted to dog training when the dog only got 15 minutes. Many sessions were all-day affairs, but we never averaged over 24 minutes training per session in a 2 1/2 month period.

⁴Included 15 hours in Base Camp while handler was in field on search.

5 ½-7 months

I was working my puppy two to three times a week during this period. Sessions ranged from five minutes to half an hour. Searching appeared to be the highlight of her life, by now, and she eagerly looked forward to her search problems. There was no need to “warm her up,” and we frequently had a single quick problem that fit easily into a busy schedule. At other times, we would work two or three short problems, or one longer one. We began searching in open woods and sometimes found victims in unusual places (in a hole covered by debris, for instance). I tried to set up problems that would last longer than ten minutes, but she usually solved them much quicker than I intended. During this period she started to return to me, rather than staying with the victim after a find, and I encouraged this by instructing the victim to play dead. When the puppy didn't return to me automatically, I called her back, and she then led me in.

I began transferring from ball-playing to stick-game for her search reward but – especially in the very hot weather – found she often preferred to lie down in the shade after a find and be told she was a good girl.

Besides her weekly obedience class, she was put on extended down-stays (for varying lengths of time and with varying degrees of success) with other dogs in the unit during unit workouts.

SAR Training	15	:20	5:05
Obedience Training	5	:54	4:30
Confidence Training	1	:05	:05
Socialization	<u>2</u>	<u>2:15</u>	<u>3:30</u>
Total	23	:37	14:10
Actual Sessions	(19)	(:44)	

7-8 ½ months

By this time the puppy was searching everything from open fields to dense brush. I continued to aim for 30-to-40-minute problems, which she usually completed in 15 or 20 minutes. When she was seven months old she worked a multiple-victim problem in medium-to-dense brush; she worked for 45 minutes with enthusiasm and found both victims. By the time she was 8 ½ months old, she was very reliable on refinds, and I never had to call her back. This was a good thing, because she now worked well out of my sight when she hit a scent in the woods. She was an enthusiastic stick-fetcher-and-tugger by this time and really enjoyed her play sessions after a find. Her ranging and refind were impressive enough that she was used as a demonstration dog in presentations by our unit, including nighttime demos.

SAR Training	17	:13	3:44
Obedience Training	1	1:00	1:00
Confidence Training	1	:10	:10
Socialization	<u>2</u>	<u>:55</u>	<u>1:50</u>
Total	21	:19	6:44
Actual Sessions	(19)	(:21)	

8 ½-9 ½ months

This is where she went into a slump. She no longer ranged the way she used to; she'd work a scent when she hit it, but she just wasn't out there looking. Worst of all, I couldn't count on her for a refind. She might find a victim and I'd never know about it. We went back to short “motivational.” I placed my victims so I knew exactly where they were, and insisted on a refind; or else I followed close behind the puppy and rewarded her as soon as she made the find. I couldn't see that either method solved the problem. One day she would work well, the next poorly. Then, all of a sudden, she was her old self again.

SAR Training	8	:13	1:45
Obedience Training	-	-	-
Confidence Training	-	-	-
Socialization	<u>2</u>	<u>1:00</u>	<u>2:00</u>
Total	10	:22	3:45
Actual Sessions	(8)	(:28)	

9 ½ months-1 year

At this point the handler went into a slump, I think. Except for introducing the puppy, briefly, to scent articles, we didn't try anything new or challenging. A two-hour search problem showed she world work for at least that long without losing interest, but most of the problems were short (15 to 20 minutes). We worked once a week, in fields, open woods, and very dense brush.

SAR Training	12	:24	5:50
Obedience Training	1	:30	:30
Confidence Training	-	-	-
Socialization	<u>—</u>	<u>—</u>	<u>—</u>
Total	13	:24	5:20
Actual Sessions	(13)	(:24)	

Followup - 1-1 ½ years

After a winter break from obedience training, we started novice work in earnest, and my dog earned her AKC Companion Dog degree. I introduced her to formal tracking to assure myself that she'd work a fresh track when she hit it. (I'd frequently seen her follow a good track on our search problems, but leave it in favor of an airscent.) We intend to follow up on this further, and perhaps try for a tracking degree.

We practiced occasionally on agility courses to develop her coordination and, most of all, her confidence and readiness to go over, under and through anything I asked her to.

Search training continued with weekly workouts. The first time my dog found a moving victim, she wasn't sure he was the one she was looking for, but a quick repeat of the problem taught her to take me in fast, before he could get away again. A heavy snowfall gave an opportunity to introduce her to avalanche work. Because she was used to finding victims covered by the camouflage cloth, she understood that people could also be under snow, and we dispensed with open-trench problems. Her first snow problem was for a victim buried under six to nine inches of snow; she airscented him from a good distance, zeroed in, and immediately began digging eagerly to find his head.

When she was 14 months old my dog was evaluated on what turned out to be a multiple-victim problem (all but one of the victims were unintentional – but that made it interesting, at least). A month later she went on her first search, working two three-hour shifts with sustained vigor. On her second search, she contributed, through her alerts, to the subsequent location of the victim.

At a little over a year and a half, she's given me one of those finds that put shivers down a handler's back, because he knows he never could have done it by himself, without his dog: this when she led me to a critically injured victim in less than 15 minutes in pitch dark. It makes me think our training program couldn't have been too far wrong.

SAR Training ⁵	29	:21	10:09
Obedience Training	24	1:04	25:45
Confidence Training	2	1:45	3:30
Socialization	<u>3</u>	<u>2:00</u>	<u>6:00</u>
Total	58	:47	45:24
Actual Sessions	(50)	(:54)	

TOTAL 0-1 ½ years

SAR Training	116	:17	33:01
Obedience Training	57	:44	42:04
Confidence Training	17	:37	10:40
Socialization	<u>31</u>	<u>1:15</u>	<u>38:54</u>
Total	221	:33	123:54
Actual Sessions	(162)	(:45)	

⁵Does not count five searches in which dog participated.

Special Note:

This account was written nearly 25 years ago. The anonymous handler was Judy. Her puppy here, Sardy, was an outstanding search dog with finds to her credit in Virginia, California, and Mexico City. She successfully worked "wilderness" and urban searches, water and disaster. ~hg