

SEARCH DOG FINDS LOST CHILD

By Barbara Adcock

The story repeats itself every year. You see searchers with their golden retrievers and Aussies on TV. You say *my* dog can help. He likes to sniff. He can find his ball every time I throw it into the bushes. He'd be great at search and rescue. Maybe he would.



Teri and Barbara at Mission Ready Test – Nov 2005

What does it take to field a SAR dog? It takes training. Lots of training. It takes time. Lots of time. Since it is volunteer work, it takes money. It takes a handler that can do the work. Mostly, it takes a life style that permits it.

Search dogs come in all sorts of shapes and breeds. Medium sized dogs, like retrievers and many of the herding and sporting dogs make up the core of SAR dogs. You will find mixed breeds as well. They need to be agile, confident, social, persistent and well conditioned. To us it is serious. To the dogs, it is play.

A handler needs to decide which discipline he wants his dog to pursue on their way to becoming “Mission Ready”. There are two basic roads to take. One is trailing and the other is area search.

In the movies you see a bloodhound on lead crashing through the trees looking for the lost person. **That is trailing. The handler works his dog on a line that is anywhere from about 15 feet long to perhaps 40 feet.** The dog is started from an article of clothing that belongs to the subject. The dog follows the scent trail left by the lost person. Every person has a unique scent picture. It is made up of thousands tiny particles that we shed as we walk. We also disturb the ground as we walk over it. It is influenced by what we have eaten, what our ethnicity's is, what we used to wash our hands, how much we weigh, etc.

Aspiring trailing dogs in the California Rescue Dog Association, Inc., the largest search dog group in the United States, must complete many months of training. They have to have trained on trails that are up to four days old, and to have passed preliminary trails that are about a half mile long on trails that are two and three days old in “wilderness” settings. In addition they have to be able to handle urban trails that are that are about 12 hours old. Then the dog can take a Mission Ready test. The 18-24 hour test trail is somewhere between a mile and a mile and a half with several turns and decision points along the way. It may be on trails but also must have some cross country travel to get to the subject. Some people who have trailing dogs get their AKC Tracking Dog titles as well. It is not a requirement.

Area dogs work off lead. As the name implies, these dogs search a piece of land defined on a map to see if there is any human being in the area. They usually are not scent specific like the trailing dogs.

They do not need a scent article, so the handler must decide if they find anyone, if it is the person that they are searching for. Usually there are not many four-year-olds wandering in the woods by themselves. Area dogs work off lead, so are away from their handlers and are out of sight much of the time. They wear a vest so that they are identifiable and so that the handler can see the dog when it is working in the brush. They must be able to search independently. Area dogs need what is called an "alert" which tells the handler that the dog has found someone. Dogs come back to their handler and alert. They jump on them, bark, or sit. Then the dog must do what is called a "refind", since the dog must take his handler back to the person that he has found.

In addition, CalEMA, California Emergency Management Agency, expects the dogs to alert not only on live subjects, but also on recently deceased subjects, so the dog must pass a preliminary test showing that he will respond to dead scent and alert. The team must also pass a preliminary one person 40 acre test. The Mission Ready test is a minimum of three hours to cover 120 acres in a maximum of four hours. There are anywhere from one to three subjects for the dog to find. It tests the team's stamina as well as the handler's ability to search the area well.

All the dogs must be able to do the equivalent of a CGC test, ride in a group in a van with their handlers, complete a simple agility course, be able to be lifted over a fence or onto a helicopter, crawl under a fence and through a tunnel and be able to swim. One of the scarier things a dog must do is to get into a helicopter with the rotors running. Dogs that work off lead must be able to heel, stop on recall, do a send away, plus a five minute out of sight stay. These do not have to be AKC competition quality, but must be accomplished before the dog is Mission Ready.

So far, all of this pertains to the dogs. What does a handler have to do besides train his dog? He must keep the American Red Cross First Responder class which includes CPR for the professional rescuer, current. There is a timed fitness test of an eight mile hike with a pack; helicopter safety class, Incident Command System class, radio communication, wilderness navigation with map, compass and hand held GPS. Rope, litter transport skills plus familiarity with low angle rescue techniques, have some "mantracking" skills, and knowledge of what to do if one encounters a crime scene. Then there is the Unexpected Night Out where one goes into the field with only a few items in his daypack and stays overnight with his dog. That means no tent or sleeping bag. When all of the handler skills have been checked off, the handler gets to go on searches *without* his dog in order to get the search experience with a mission ready team.

When the dog and handler have done all of these things, they get to take the Mission Ready test. All of the preliminaries take about two years to complete, so it is best to start with a young dog. Most dogs working life is up to about ten years. Some work longer and some work less. Once a team is Mission Ready, they continue to be re-certified by taking a test every other year.

A Mission Ready team is on call all the time. Most calls come about 2 a.m. If you can go, you pop your dog, your pack and yourself into your vehicle and are on the way in a matter of minutes. Looking for that lost child is serious business for us. To the dog it is a terrific game.