

**A BRIEFING ON BASICS
FOR
SAR DOG HANDLERS ©**

By

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This article is straight-forward on the topic of Search and Rescue dog training. It addresses some issues that other articles may not. Its intent is to help you understand what being involved in this field is about... to aid you in avoiding some of the pit-falls that many have fallen into. It is to help you see the challenges and learning that exist for both dog and handler. There are so many excellent Search and Rescue dog handlers in the SAR community throughout the world. Hopefully, this article will assist you in recognizing those true professionals. Search and Rescue work is a Team effort and success involves many people! There is no room for egos in search work!

Studying, Training and Learning never stop. Although I have been involved in search and rescue since 1991 and have worked with both dogs and the training of lions, tigers, dolphin, etc. (formally and informally) for over 40 years ... I have learned how much there is to learn and how much more I need to learn. That desire should never cease. If you feel this field is for you then “welcome” - and be prepared for a hard-working but exciting and rewarding journey “... so that others may live.”



It takes *at least* one year (sometimes two) of intense training, in one discipline, before a dog is consistent and reliable enough to be trusted with the task of a real mission. Someone’s life may depend on it! It is not just the training of a dog...the Handler also has *much* to learn. If your only reason for wanting to be involved in search and rescue is because you “*have a dog you want to give a job*” re-examine your thinking. Being credible to the mission of search work means you must be involved for the right reasons... and that includes the willingness to get another canine partner if your current dog doesn’t work out. First-time Search Dog Handlers, who believe they and their dogs are “mission ready” after only a few months are a danger to themselves and others. Glory Seekers, Ambulance Chasers (those who self-deploy) and Untruthful Handlers and Teams are not only a danger but a disgrace to the SAR community.

PART I

A SEARCH DOG HANDLER SHOULD HAVE --

***HONESTY** - truthfulness, honorable in principles, intentions and actions - trustworthy:

Do *not* exaggerate your capabilities, qualifications or experience.

Do *not* lead the authorities to believe you have a wonder dog.

Know your limitations and be truthful about them.

Anything you say you and your dog can do or have done should be *verifiable*.

***INTEGRITY** - doing what's right even though no one is watching.

Adherence to moral and ethical principles.

***CONFIDENTIALITY** - is of utmost importance. You should never discuss a case with anyone without the approval of the agency. *Whatever agency calls you or your team out (Law Enforcement or Fire Dept.) is in charge of the search. You are there to assist. It is not your job to "take over" nor is it your job or your business to talk to the media.*

***ETHICS** - No team should show up on a scene (self-deploy) without the official request or approval of the agency in charge of the search. Credible, well-trained teams know this is not acceptable and are aware of the problems this can create. If your services are not requested don't go!

***REPUTATION** - is all a person really has.

***PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL FACTORS:** The Handler must be physically capable to work for hours in the field. Whether you work in a wilderness or urban environment, each possesses its own dangers, obstacles and challenges. The dog and Handler must be capable of working for extended periods of time, regardless of the terrain. The Team must also be able to work in inclement weather. Many searches occur under the worst weather conditions and it is common to be called out in the middle of the night.

The Handler must also be prepared for the emotional/psychological aspect of searching and what they may encounter during the search, including the condition of the victim if found. Not all searches have happy endings. There are the unresolved searches where the victim is never found. There are searches where the victim is found but is deceased and there are searches where the victim is found alive but in critical condition and dies a short time later.

***FAMILY AND FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF SAR WORK:** Search and Rescue work requires time...and a lot of it. Whatever your position is in SAR, it will require continual training and personal commitment for as long as you are involved. It will mean time away from your family if they are not also involved in search and rescue. Time away may mean missing holidays or special occasions because you are needed on a search. Search and Rescue work is not a hobby or a pass-time it is a way of life.

Being involved in Search and Rescue has a financial commitment also. Almost all members are volunteers. All members pay for their own training, equipment, dogs, uniforms, travel, etc. - with the exception of those who are paid firefighters or law enforcement. Most SAR personnel spend an average of \$2,000 per year on SAR related expenses and that is a conservative figure.

***SEARCH TEAMS:** Meet with the different search and rescue teams in your area. Consider their ethics, philosophies, written standards, training practices and so forth. Inquire if you can attend a team meeting and also a training session or two. Learn of their reputation and decide if you would like to be a part of that organization. Some teams conduct background checks on prospective members. Many teams have probationary periods before someone is considered a member. You also have the right to check out the team. You may decide you'd rather drive a couple of hours to be a part of a different organization further away.

***INSTRUCTORS AND "TRAINING DIRECTORS":** Some team "training directors" receive that title simply because they are the one on the team who knows the most about dogs. It does not necessarily mean they have comprehensive training, knowledge or experience with search dogs. There are also many so-called "experts" out there. Learn the *honest* credentials and qualifications of the "instructor." Find out *who taught them and how long they've been in search and rescue and training/working search dogs, etc.*

The Search Dog Training Instructor should have vast knowledge and experience in working and training Search and Rescue dogs. People who have experience training dogs in obedience, AKC events, Shutzhund, Agility, etc., should still have extensive training and experience in search and rescue and actually working search dogs before they classify themselves as a SAR Dog Instructor. *Please note: Most national seminars are comprised of several speakers and/or instructors and a variety of search related topics. A three-day or even week-long seminar does not constitute "extensive training" or "education." In addition, it is wise to find out if the organization conducting the seminar has verified the training, claims and credentials of the instructors they are using. This includes the credentials of the instructors of the sponsoring organization itself. It is your time and money that is being spent. It is you and your dog that may be affected.*

There are many right ways to train a search and rescue dog but there are also some training methods that are just plain wrong. Listen to what someone tells you and what different instructors say.... Think.... Ask Questions.... Do your own Research. Ask yourself - does what is being said make sense?

A *SMALL* SAMPLING OF BASIC QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER AS A SAR DOG HANDLER

What is scent?
How long does scent last?
How do terrain and weather effect scent?
When is the best time for Air Scent vs Tracking/Trailing dog use?
What search strategy is most effective when localized pooling has occurred?
How do you keep your dog motivated during a search?
How long a period should you work your dog on a search?
How often should you give your dog a break?
How do you re-acquire a lost scent cone?
How do you pick up a scent article?
How long is a scent article good?
What are the qualities of a good SAR dog?
What is proper crime scene preservation?
What is “looping”, “fumigating”, “pooling”?
What do strong winds do to a scent cone?
What do you do if your dog loses the scent?
What happens to scent around traveled roadways?
What happens to scent around running vehicles?
What is the Incident Command System and how does it work?
What are indications of heat exhaustion in a dog?
Who is in charge of a search?
When do you respond to a search?
When should you and your dog be considered “operational” or “mission ready”?
How do you calculate the POD and POA?
What is post traumatic shock/stress?
What are the search urgency determination factors?
What is the proper way to increase time and difficulty in a problem for your dog?
How many different SAR dog disciplines are there and how are they used?
What is the role of the Handler?

A FEW OF THE THINGS YOU MUST LEARN

Being a Search Dog Handler involves many things - this just begins to touch on the necessary skills

Land Navigation /Map and Compass Skills
Basic Survival Skills
Search Strategies
Clue Awareness
Legal Aspects for the Searcher
CPR & First Aid (Human and Canine)
Improvising in the Field
Hypothermia and Hyperthermia
Containment & Confinement
Rescuer Safety & Scene Safety Awareness
Lost & Missing Person Behavior
Hasty Search & Grid Search
Critical Separation
What to Ask/Obtaining Victim Information
Working with Law Enforcement Agencies
Proper clothing and equipment
Multi-jurisdictional Searches
Incident Command System
Crime Scene Preservation

BRIEFING ON BASICS - PART II

***K9 SEARCH DISCIPLINES** - Decide what the Primary Discipline for your dog will be. Let your dog help you decide by watching what they excel in...Air Scent, Trailing or Tracking. All other disciplines are built around Air Scenting principles. E.g., Article Search, Disaster Search, Water Search, Human Remains Detection (Cadaver Search), etc. *Please note:* All these disciplines require lengthy, additional studying and training in a host of subjects. For those who say they want to work in Human Remains Detection because it's "easy" or because their dog couldn't handle the rigors of live victim search...think again!

***TRAINING IS "TRAINING" AND TESTING IS "TESTING."** You should know where your "victim" is 85 to 90% of the time. This will enable you to focus on your dog's body language and the way your dog works out the problem. It will also help you to be more cognizant of the wind, the terrain and obstacles, and how they may deflect or collect scent. You can then learn to adjust your search strategy based on the ambient conditions, terrain and what your dog is doing, to help them work out the problem. If you don't know where the "victim" is in training you can't appropriately encourage or correct your dog. However, periodically you should work "blind" problems - these will help you build confidence in yourself and your dog. Set up realistic problems and train as you will work. Develop scenarios for your training problems.

Do Not Rush Your Dog - *There is no "fast" way to train your dog. Training should consist of small steps, each is a building block to a strong foundation. Consistency and repetition in training are key elements. Do not rush your dog or add new elements to a problem until your dog is solid in one area. When you do introduce something new, add only one thing at a time and lighten up on other areas until the dog is ready for the combination of elements. E.g., (in trailing) If your dog has reached the level of doing one mile, 3 hour old problems with three turns - don't give them a two-mile, 24-hour old problem with 6 turns all at the same time. Increase only one element at a time. In Air Scenting, if your dog has never worked a night problem or an unresponsive victim, don't combine both in the same problem. Wait until the dog is proficient in one of the scenarios.

Prior to each training decide what you are going focus on *that day* with your dog. Set up your problems to achieve that goal and take the wind and terrain into consideration. Don't try a variety of new situations in one day. Stick to one element and stay with that element until your dog is solid with it. Don't start a new discipline until your dog is consistent in its primary one. E.g., *Don't start your dog in Air Scenting live "victims" one day, then do Trailing the following week, then switch to Article Search and so forth. Focus.*

If you start becoming frustrated with your dog it's time to put him up. No big fanfare...no strong emotion...just calmly put your dog back in his crate or in your vehicle.

***Don't Be Afraid** - of taking a step or two backward in training for a period of time.

Sometimes it's even necessary to go back to "kindergarten" and the basics for a day or two regardless how far along you are in your training. Reinforce what you and your dog have learned. Dogs have bad days just like people and remember "Poop runs down the lead." If you are having a bad day you can transmit your emotions to your dog.

***TRAINING LOGS:** Training Logs are essential – but keep them simple. Don't complete a training log and file it away. Review it immediately. If you diagram your search area, look at that. Look at the area, wind direction, obstacles, terrain and points where your dog indicated scent or had a problem. Maybe you can determine why your dog did what it did, where it did it, so this will become second nature to you on actual searches. There are some instances, however, where you will not be able to figure out why your dog reacted in a certain way. Although great strides are taking place in scent work research it is still somewhat of a mystery.

Your training logs should be truthful and not always reflect a perfect dog. If your dog had a problem - address it (but don't get too detailed). Make sure your next few training logs show you have worked on that issue.

***You and your dog are a TEAM** - that is you BOTH must contribute to the search effort.

Don't leave everything up to your dog! As mentioned previously, you can transmit your *emotions* to your dog. In addition, you can also transmit *information* to you dog with your body language, thus inadvertently (or purposely) cueing your dog into an alert.

Can you see scent?? Never tell your dog to "leave it" unless you are 110% sure there is not and could not be any human scent at that spot. If you give the "leave it" command and there *was* scent there you have just told your dog that what he was doing was wrong. A simple "get to work," "you got something?" or "lets go" will work better than the reprimand of "leave it."

Praise vs. Encouraging Words - Do you say "Good boy" or "Good girl" when your dog does (or completes) the behavior you want (find the victim.)? If so, I find it wise to use something else as encouraging words rather than your "final praise" word. Consider your tone of voice when praising, encouraging and correcting. When you know your dog is on the scent and trying to work out the problem, use words like "that's it" or "atta boy." That is telling the dog "you're doing good but not quite there yet." "Good Boy" or "Good Girl" may be telling the dog you believe he's completed the job.

***REWARDS** - The reward should be something your dog just loves (not something you want them to have)! Try many things, both food and play toys. Once you find one or two, give them ONLY as the reward for making a find. Is praise enough to be the only reward for your dog? My feelings are a strong “no”! You reward your dog with praise for many things. Why should the dog consider it special for making a find? You need to have something else! Also, use a variable reward system. Sometimes they get a good deal of food (or play) and tons of praise; other times they get only a little and some praise. They shouldn’t get the “mother lode” every time. For those who say “the search itself is the reward” consider this: *You have a job you really enjoy and you work hard and diligently at it but don’t receive any compensation – not even a pat on the back and a “well done”. How would you feel?*

SUGGESTED GENERAL READING

“Scent and The Scenting Dog” by William Syrotuck

“Don’t Shoot the Dog” by Karen Pryor

“Search and Rescue Dogs-Training Methods” by American Rescue Dog Association

“Search Dog Training” by Sandy Bryson

“Ready!” by Susan Bulanda

“Search and Rescue Fundamentals” by Donald C. Cooper, Rick LaValla & Skip Stoffel

“Analysis of Lost Person Behavior” by William Syrotuck

“K9 Scent Detection” by Jan Kaldenbach

“Ready To Serve...Ready To Save - Strategies of Real-Life Search and Rescue Missions” by Susan Bulanda

This list is just for “starters.” There are numerous additional books and articles in other areas and disciplines of Search and Rescue that are necessary to study. However, no book can take the place of working with a qualified SAR dog instructor! But remember, there is more to search work than just working a dog. So whatever area of search and rescue you chose to participate in, whatever discipline you train your dog in ...***The Quality Should Go In Before The Name Goes On!***

