



# Search & Rescue Rottweiler Handler Spotlight: Sharon Ward - Part 2

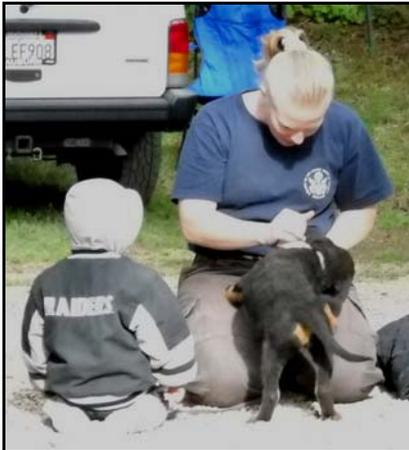


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*Knox vom Fields Haus learns about base camp*

Last weekend, we hosted obedience and gave classes for our statewide Search and Rescue organization. We were up in the rugged mountains of Northern California at around 6,500 feet. Giant pine trees and ancient granite rocks surrounded us. In the background, a soft mountain breeze blew and you could hear the sounds of rapidly flowing

water. About 100 volunteers gathered like a small army, each with a dog eagerly waiting to go to work. There were Golden Retrievers, Border Collies, several Blood Hounds, and, of course, a ton of German Shepherds! I always get looks when people see my Rottweiler for the first time. Today, I also had two young pups in tow. It is better now than it was just a few years ago because our Rottweilers have already helped to change preconceived notions regarding this breed doing Search and Rescue in our organization. I was pleased that I did not receive one warning about Rottweilers doing SAR work. In fact, I had several inquiries about the pups from people considering them for search work! Things are getting better for our breed here although it was not always that way. The Search and Rescue Handler Spotlight will appear from time to time with the goal of honoring and drinking from the experiences of those who went before us. There are not many certified Rottweilers doing this work in USA, but those who have



*Air scent & HRD certified Pepperhaus Z Kunga*

gone before us have done it well. The following is part two of an interview with Sharon Ward, a SAR handler, who is working with her third SAR Rottweiler. Sharon is one of the few who have gone where not many have gone before with a Rottweiler "so that others may live."

***With trailing dogs, do you start with a tracking foundation, or do you start right with trailing behavior through runaways? I think it is a great controversy, so I would love to pick your brain.***  
We do trailing. We do not do tracking. We are not trackers. Do you know a guy named Jeff Schettler?

***Yes, I have trained with him.***

Jeff Schettler wrote Red Dog Raising; he was an Alameda police officer for a while. He runs Georgia K9 National Training Center LLC. Basically, I train with Jeff and I very much like and appreciate his common sense style. You know, if you teach a dog to stay on a track, and he crosses the pavement and the scent is not there anymore, and you push him to stay on the track, you are going to create a "Ghost Trailer." The scent is just not there for them. They are just going there because you say that is where they are supposed to be.

***Those are my two controversial questions: tracking vs. trailing, and single-discipline vs. multi-discipline dogs. When I come across Schutzhunders, I like to ask their take on when they start puppies. It is one of those things most do not agree upon. So it is always great food for thought. Thanks Sharon.***

There is one thing about dog training: we always make a joke that "There is only one thing that two dog trainers can agree upon ever, and that is what the third trainer is doing wrong." You know, that is the temperament of the dog trainers.

***Yes, I agree, and it does not matter the genre, from Schutzhund to AKC to SAR you always see that.***

[Laughter].

***[Laughter]. At what age, or what do you look for, when considering retiring one of your SAR dogs? When is it time?***

Well, I am actually just starting to look at that now because again, it totally depends on the structure and diet and how he does the job. I have an 8-year-old Rottie who is still in the field. Now, I will not put him in rugged terrain anymore. One thing is that he is not showing signs of age, but I do not want to hurt him. I have to acknowledge that I have an eight year old dog, and in the next six months or so I most likely will remove him to doing just cadaver, which is not as demanding on the body.

***I always consider cadaver as a possible retirement job for my dogs. Right, right.***

***Especially for small source, crime scene type stuff. What were your goals when you first started Search and Rescue and how are they different now?***

Well, my goal in the beginning, I do not think it has really changed. It was to find the person. The person comes first, which is really what our team is about. It is the effort to train

each other's dogs. We help each other a lot. We do not care which dog makes the find. We do not care if the Trackers find them; we just want them found. So, for us, for example, one of my teammates had a dog who passed an evaluation and she said, "No, I am not taking that. She did not do well enough." So, basically, for us the bar is always, "Do I trust this dog to find my 2-year-old child?" The answer might be no, even if the dog passed the evaluation, because you can pass by dumb luck. It is really, do we trust this dog to find the missing 2-year-old? If not, we are not going to deploy this dog. We are not going to put him in the field.

**Awesome. As it should be! I like it. What do you know now that you wished you knew when you first started Search and Rescue?** Gee, it is hard. I do not know how long you have been doing this but when you see new people come in, at first you go, "oh brother, they so misunderstand." Then you think back: "So did I then." Basically, I think that when I started I did not realize how very difficult it is to train a trustworthy dog. You know, you think you go out once or twice a week and you do a few 15-minute problems and you got a search dog. Now, I know that if you are not there on a 4-5 hour Air Scent problem at least every 3-4 months, a long good one, then you are not training hard enough. If your dog has only ever done 20-minute search problems, then that is all you can rely on them to do.

**That makes sense.**

There are lots of people who do a 15-minute problem and think, now I am good. Then, on a search, their dog works for 15 minutes and gives up. Or, when there is more than one subject, and he has never found more than one subject, a lot of dogs find one and they cannot finish.

**Yes, for me I thought in the beginning it was all about the dog aspect. I did not realize how many handler skills were involved. From navigation to First Responder Stuff, it was a lot.**

Oh, yeah. It takes time to figure it all out. It is like "wow, why is he sniffing up that tree for cadaver?" You really need to be attuned to what is happening in your environment. You know, even with a Trailing Dog you find if you are in a big parking lot, the dog is in the bushes on the side because that is where the scent is. Your dog is not doing anything wrong; your dog is just following his nose. So, I think that understanding working scent is important. It is really important learning what is going on with the scent picture. It is far more complicated than what any of us imagined would be the case.



Waiting for the helicopter to arrive

**Who were your mentors? Was there someone you trained under that you felt brought that extra something special to your program? You know, one individual you leaned on, or not?**

Well, I think at this point in the dog world it is Jeff Schettler.

I've taken classes from all of the "known" Dog Gurus in the area, and I have to say that Jeff Schlettler has the most practical no BS foundation of any of the people I have worked with.



Kunga during cadaver water recovering training

**Nice. Okay, what do you enjoy the most about Search and Rescue?** What I enjoy the most...God, what happened to me most recently. We found this little camper, you know, mushroom picker who was soaking wet and hypothermic out in the woods. He looked at me and said, "What is your name?" I said, "Sharon." I am a big girl. I am 5'8" and he was about 4'8". He put his arms around my waist and he said, "Thank you so much, Sharon. I know if I'm out here one more night, I would be no more." [Long pause].

**Beautiful.**

One of those every once in a while to reinforce all of the dead bodies you find and all of stuff that goes wrong; it sort of keeps you going.

**What do you like the least about Search and Rescue?**

Hmm. What do I like the least? Honestly, when you are given an assignment that you know is not going to be fruitful, and if you are with an IC (Incident Command) that will not listen to the reasons why this is not a good idea.

**Frustrating....**

When the I.C. does not respect the ability and knowledge of the dog handler.

**I did not realize that it would vary from county to county. Some counties it seems like I.C. has it together and others I go, "What am I doing here?"**

Yeah, yeah. So either you try as politely as you can to suggest another way, or you throw your hands up. I will tell you what. If I have a reservation about this assignment, it is pretty hard for me to go someplace where I know there is not going to be profitable search.

**Let us see, are there any searches that really stick out in your brain? Is there a most memorable search?**

Ah, I have been around the block. There have been some terribly funny ones [Laughter] that is not much of a difference from memorable. I think my sort of favorite one because of its offbeat nature was when two 19-year-old men took some underage girls out in the woods and were sort of showing off for them and jumped into a river buck naked. The river pulled them downstream and when they came out of the river, they were way down on the other side that had no roads. So the young girls, not being of driving age, had to walk out of the woods and it took them many hours. By the time we got called

to the scene, they had been out naked sitting in a clear-cut for probably 10-12 hours. It was well after midnight, and well, do you know how a dog greets a naked man? [Laughter]. You can quite imagine! So as were walking these guys out the dog kept coming up behind them and sticking his nose in their spot under the blankets. It was so funny! These kids were not hurt; they were just mortified. But because they had been so dumb, I sort of had a hard time stopping the dog from doing this as we walked back to the car. So for me I will always call that the "Buck Naked Search." [Laughter]. It is the one that tickled me the most.

*Yeah, I like it. [Laughter]. I guess they learned a lesson. I guess they did. They were pretty mortified.*

*Statistically speaking, is there an average subject? You know, a target that you tend to be after more often?*

No. Ours is more seasonal. We have a set hunting season where people go out looking for antlers, rock hunters, mushroom hunters, regular hunters, so once we know who, we get the picture. If it is a mushroom hunter, it is okay, they are going to be doing this, or a bear hunter is going to be doing this. We get a surprising number of autistic or mentally disadvantaged kids who go walking off. Then, we get a fair number of elderly who go walk about. So, we get a very wide range. We get lots of overdue hikers too.

*So what can people do to help avoid becoming a subject for SAR teams when out in the wilderness?*

You should go look at my video clip from Channel 8, on KGW.com. If you look this up it is called "Lost and Survive." It is with Grant McOmie. We did a video clip on how not to get lost. What he did was all of the things people typically do. They go out with cotton on when it rains, the cell phone does not work, and there is a flashlight with no batteries. They do not have any communication, no GPS, and they go out after dark and take a shortcut. That is what this video clip is about. It is a recipe for getting lost.

*Besides your dog, what do you consider your most important piece of search equipment?*

My own eyes. I am also a visual tracker, so if I work with my trailing dog, I can often confirm that they are on the right track because I can see it on the ground.

*Nice. We have a "Man Tracking" class that I have taken several times, but still struggle with the skill sets. It is more difficult than it looks. I have much respect for Man Trackers.*

They can make our jobs so much easier if they can tell us that the guy went in this 30-degree angle. You know, we do not have to search all the way up to Canada because we know the person did not go in that direction.

*Let us talk about certifying rates. What percentage of people who start in Search and Rescue do you see becoming a Mission Ready or Operational Team?*

You know, we are lucky. I used to be on a bigger team, but now I am on a small team so our completion rates are pretty darn good. Here is how we deal with our new people. They say, "I have a dog and I think he is pretty darn good." Okay, so the first thing we do is ask them a bunch of questions about what does your dog like to do? They answer "Uh, he likes to sit on the couch all day." Then I will say, "Uh, no, no, no. I don't think this is going to work." So we do a certain screening process along the way. So we usually say, "Why don't you leave the dog at home and just come out and hide for us a couple of times?" That eliminates 80% of the people. You know if someone is not willing to come out and hide because they just want to work their dog, then it is

probably not going to work. So, if they come out a few times, and we look at their dog, and if it has good drive and structure, then we are willing to work with them. So, basically we probably take ten percent of the people who call and say they are interested, and because of that we have a very good certification rate.

*Where do you see Search and Rescue going in the future?*

You know that is a really hard one with all of these electronic devices that people are using out there, but for us you still have the very strong need because with all of our tree canopy, GPSs tend not to work. And, in the whole Mt. Saint Helens Basin, that whole area there is a lot of lava that has a lot of metal in it, so it often makes your compass not work right. So up here were pretty confident that we will be in the business for a while for those who are in need. Then, there is urban searching that is always going to be there. We have good trailing dogs that can do urban searches.

*Yeah, I figure there will always, in the foreseeable future, be the need for cadaver recovery, and as you said earlier, people will not have batteries for their GPS, or they will not take their personal locator beacon, or are mentally challenged. I think to some degree we will always be there. In what fashion, only the future can tell. Our number of yearly deployments is going down, but there is still, at least for the immediate future, the need for us to be there.*

Yep, that is true.

*Well, excellent, Sharon. That concludes this interview. Thank you so much for your time and sharing with us your thoughts in regards to Rottweilers and Search and Rescue.*



*Wet and cold after finding a lost and injured hunter*



*Sharon Ward with Kunga &*

*Editor's Note: Please refer to Issue 2 of 2010 (pages 70-72) for Sharon's bio and Part 1 of the interview. Thank you Sharon for your time in sharing your knowledge and viewpoints on Search & Rescue with everyone.*