

The Handler's Role In Search & Rescue



By Jack Fields *It takes a village to raise a child (African proverb)*

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It is amazing what a search and rescue dog does. Simply watching a SAR dog work will often leave people scratching their heads and asking "how do they do that?" I'm the first to agree that, yes, it is very cool what these dogs do. But, at the same time, I'm very quick to point out that it is a team, and the team is only as strong as the weakest link. Usually it is the handler who needs work, because "dogs are perfect at being who we teach them to be!" When I first entered the world of search and rescue, I figured I had a strong dog background so it wouldn't be too much to learn, and I'd fast track into the field. Man, was I in for a surprise! I was about to embark on a journey like no other I'd been on before, and I was about to learn that I did not know what I thought I knew.

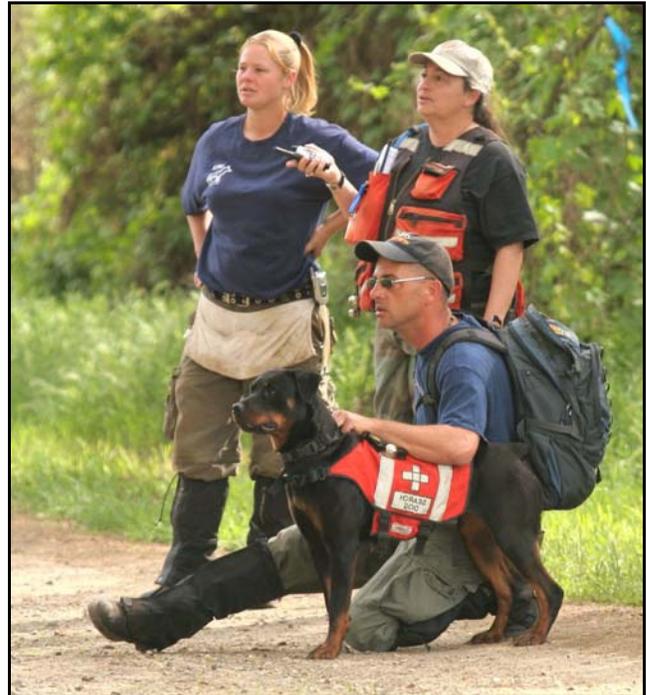
When you become involved in SAR, you become a part of a bigger community. It is similar, yet different, to being a member of a good Schutzhund club. You become close to the people you train with. As I've said before, it is different than any dog sport I've been a part of because it's not about the winning and losing, but about living and dying. You quickly realize this is serious stuff and people are counting on you. If you make mistakes, people can die. It is vital that you have your act together. If not, you will be put in line, or encouraged to find another team to work with. Many times, it has all of the seriousness of being in the military, and for some, this is just too much. SAR isn't for everyone; but, for those who have what it takes, there is a team out there for you that would love for you to sign on!

SAR team commitments vary, and much depends on the team you join and the discipline you train in. While there are many consistencies, there are just as many inconsistencies. You'll need to meet with the team and find out what their requirements are. I'm going to talk more about my organization, CARDA (California Rescue Dog Association), and our requirements. This should, at minimum, give you a general idea of what to expect.

CARDA uses what I call the "Padawan System." You will have someone called a sponsor. This is the classic master/apprentice relationship like in the old Samurai movies. The other option I've seen is the progress check system that the



CARDA uses the sponsor/apprentice system



Training a SAR dog & handler is a team effort

FEMA Task Force uses with Disaster Dogs. Here, everyone is on the team and progress checks are made to make sure team members are progressing at a desirable rate. The system may also be very different from the two methods mentioned above. Again, the only consistent thing I've found from organization to organization is that there really is no consistency. At any rate, make sure you understand what you will be signing on for and what will be expected of you.

The first step will usually be signing a guest waiver. This protects the team as well as yourself and your dog. At this point, you are considered a guest. It is a honeymoon period to check out what the team does and how they do it. For CARDA, this period lasts ninety days. During this time period, you are encouraged to go and check out different teams within the organization. Some organizations will have only a single team. In the case of CARDA, we have teams nestled all over our state. As with anything else, teams vary, so your job is to find what works for you.

If you decide you like what you see, the next step is to find a sponsor. A sponsor is someone who is going to be responsible for overseeing your training program and to help you through the many hurdles that may get in your way. It is important to find the right person because you will be spending a lot of time with them and they will have a lot of influence over the many decisions you will be making. Once you find a sponsor, then you will graduate to what is called a Pre-Apprentice.

The Pre-Apprentice period lasts a minimum of three months, but you can stay in this mode for up to one year. At this point, you are considered a member of the organization, but you do not have voting privileges, and you cannot attend real searches. As a Pre-Apprentice, you will take your physical fitness test. The purpose is to make sure you meet the minimal physical endurance and capability needed for wilderness search and rescue missions. These are just the



You will train in all weather conditions

minimum requirements, and only a general indicator of fitness, as many operations require greater endurance and capabilities. Our test requires you to hike eight miles with a twenty pound search pack, excluding water. There must be a 500 foot cumulative elevation gain and it must be completed in three hours or less. The team wants to know that you will be able to meet your goal of being a search team in the field. If you can't pass the physical requirements then there is no need to pursue the process any further. Physical fitness tests vary from organization to organization, with some being harder, and some teams may not require it. I believe it to be a good thing as someone in poor physical condition in the field can actually become a liability and ultimately part of the problem. There is nothing worse than the rescuer who needs rescuing! Once you pass the physical fitness test, then your next job is to find a second Sponsor. CARDA requires two Sponsors. It is kind of a balancing system. This way, no single person has the total responsibility of developing you as a team. For CARDA, you must have one sponsor who has certified a dog in the discipline you are training in, but the second sponsor can have a dog trained in a different discipline than what you are training your dog for. I was told in the beginning to find one sponsor who is good with training, and one who is good with political maneuvering. Another thing to consider is making sure your sponsors can get along! There is a lot to do and you're going to need help. So finding the right sponsors will make things go much smoother for you.

It seems like a lot of stuff to do just to get started. In the beginning, I had a hard time agreeing with the process. Now, looking back, I understand. The teams don't want just anybody. They, too, are looking for the right fit. The teams spend a tremendous amount of time getting you trained, and sacrifice their own dogs' training and time spent in the field. It is usually a tight-knit group and the fit really needs to be right. You're going to be counting on each other for many things. As I said before, SAR isn't for everyone! So now you're considered an Apprentice and the clock starts ticking. You've got roughly two years to develop into a certified team. Most organizations will put a time limit on your training program, as they are not a dog training club. With clubs, we put different values on our members. Some people just love their dogs, or

it is a social event for them, while other club members are very serious about making titles. Clubs are made up of many individuals with different motivations and goals. This works, and our clubs are made up of many types of members. For SAR, there is only one mission: training and fielding teams.

So now you're an apprentice with lots to learn and do. If you look at everything that needs to be done, it can be overwhelming. Someone once told me, "Just look at it like eating an elephant: you take one bite at a time!" Not only are you going to be responsible for training your dog, but you have much to learn yourself. I was thankful I had a handle on the dog end, because just the human side of learning was enough to put me over the top. In the end, there was much dog stuff to think about, too. I can only imagine how someone with little or no prior dog experience could do this, plus learn all of the searcher skills required in two years. Teams do it all of the time, but I guarantee it's not going to be easy. It's not supposed to be!

As an apprentice, you will be given a packet that shows you everything you're going to need to accomplish. There is a sign off sheet that you will take with you to have signed as you complete your tasks. At this point of the journey, your physical fitness test should be filled out and signed, so now you can focus on the rest. Your sign offs are good for two years, you will need to redo them and always stay current. So as long as you are on a team, you will have sign offs to keep current. It is important to have a check and balance system as we only want to field good teams. A good team will stay current on their sign offs. Those who fail to stay current are pulled from real searches, or pulled off the call out list. You will also be required to keep a log book. This is a log of your training. You will write down the details from every training session, from what your training entailed, where it took place, wind and temperature and who your subject (victim) was. Keeping a good log book is important, as one day it may be subpoenaed for court. I could write an entire article just on log books, but for now it's enough to say that you will need to keep one. If you come from a tracking background, you're probably used to keeping one. If not, you'll learn, as it is required just like with many other forms of professional canine occupations.

You will be expected to train with your team about twice a week. It is not only important for the training of your dog, but it is also important for the bonding with your team. You will be spending a lot of time with your team, so it becomes very important to have the support of your family and employer. When I first started training my dog for SAR, someone referred to it as a life style.



Like the military, it's usually hurry up & wait



Java takes a break during a hot dusty training session

Again, it is a big commitment. You'll log thousands of hours and spend a lot of money on equipment. The good news is you'll be spending lots of time in beautiful places, and you'll have the added bonus of having your dog off leash in places where many times dogs are not even allowed. Depending on the discipline you train in you may also spend time in more urban settings,

sometimes even nasty or potentially dangerous environments. When we train for Cadaver work, I often think of where someone might dump a body. So we prepare by training under freeways, condemned buildings, and places people normally don't spend time at. There is training at the local landfills, green piles, and, of course, rubble piles. I love the look and feel of the Schutzhund field on a summer's evening: it is almost dreamlike. SAR, on the other hand, is usually never have the same experience twice. We need to make sure our dogs work in all environments. Also on that note, we train in all weather conditions. Be it hot, wet, or cold, there is no questioning if the team will be meeting! SAR isn't for the faint of heart, we need a hard charger that is determined and committed to get the job done. When you feel like quitting, you're more than likely drinking fully from the cup!

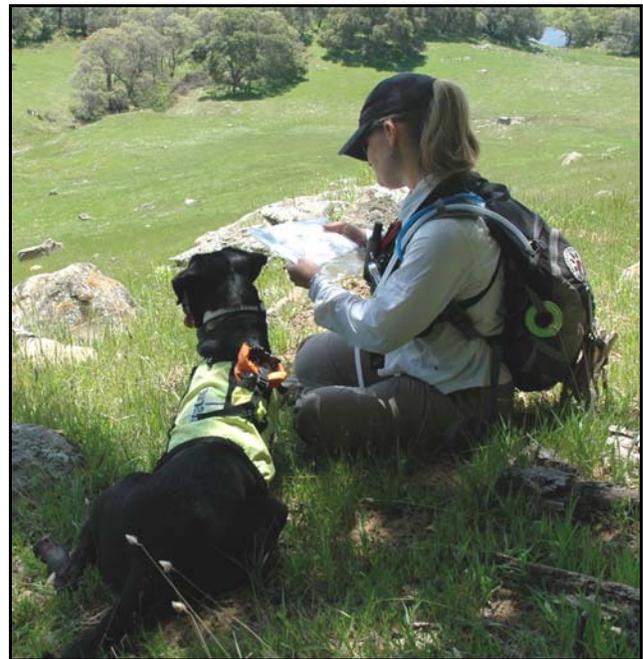
In the beginning, you'll be doing very short basic exercises with your dog. Usually you'll spend more time driving than training (what else is new?). You will more than likely end up being a subject more often than not. As the subject, your job will be to sit in the middle of nowhere for extended periods of time and wait to be found by Search Teams. I find I really enjoy the quiet time alone in the woods. It is a great time to take in the views, catch up on some reading, and even get some sleep. Like being a helper in Schutzhund, you are pivotal in the training of these dogs. I think it is an area that is taken for granted too often. You know: like no helper, no Schutzhund. So please take care of your helpers, and subjects! In the beginning, someone experienced will walk out with you and put you in a place they want you to be. As you gain experience, you will be expected to place yourself. It becomes a great opportunity to work on your navigation skills and to look at the terrain and wind to help determine the best hiding places based on the training program's needs. You will have a radio and you will be informed how to react to the dog who finds you. This may be giving them praise, treats, or a toy, or simply ignoring the dog. There are many ways to train these dogs, but knowing your job as a subject becomes very important. Learn this job well and it will take care of you and you'll make many friends. I have also found it important to never go and be a subject without your pack. I take it everywhere with me in the field. The times I have hiked out without it, I find the weather changes and I'm freezing, or worse, wet and freezing! I don't have bug spray and the mosquitoes decide I'm the best meal in town, or I simply get the urge to munch on some candy. There are also times when a simple little search problem can turn into an extended

event. So my advice is to always be prepared. You can end up in the field for as little as 10 minutes or for as long as hours. Search base will check in with you, and you will have opportunities to be relieved, but at the same time being a good SAR handler requires you to be able to be self-sufficient and being a good subject is a great start.

Besides your weekly training with your team, there will be opportunities to take classes either offered through the organization you train with, or in the private sector. Knowledge is power, so the more you can learn the better off you will be. Our organization does what we call monthly trainings. Each team in the organization will have a weekend where they host the monthly training. It is an open training, and members from all of the other teams come together and train. It is usually a big pow-wow, where there are classes offered, opportunities to test or get sign offs, guest speakers, and the opportunity to work with helicopters and local ground pounders (search teams that do not employ dogs). The monthly trainings are usually held in remote places. Most monthly trainings are two-day events, so you'll be camping and cooking out. It is also a good chance to network with other searchers and catch up with old friends. Every month in California, there is usually a Monthly Training going on somewhere. They are great events, but at the same time they are required events. As an Apprentice you will be required to attend six monthly trainings sometime during your two-year apprentice period.

So it's two training sessions per week with your team, a monthly training here and there, and extra classes when you can. Then, in your spare time, it's obedience training, working your own search problems with friends (you can never work enough) socializing your dog, and perhaps if you're motivated, an exercise program for you and your dog. There is a lot to do. Now it's time to knock out one of the big hurdles: a First Responder class.

As a SAR dog handler, you must never forget you are a First Responder above all. Our organization requires you to have both a current CPR card and a First Responder Card. You are going to need medical training, because the odds of you finding



You will spend a lot of time in beautiful places

someone in need is very real. Plus, it is important because most of the time we are away from civilization, so if someone gets hurt, you will be the first trained person on scene. We took a 17-week course at our local college as part of their fire science program. It is the entry level course that firefighters and EMTs take. Knowing how to protect yourself and help others in time of medical need is vital. It's a lot to learn, and I found it to be one of the most difficult parts of the training, but now I feel much more capable than before. It is an ongoing process and you will need to recertify every three years. At trainings, you will have opportunities to practice your First Responder skills, and it really is important to keep your skills sharp. Ongoing education is recommended, because again you never know when you'll need it. My good friend never needed her First Responder skills in 30 years in the field, but was first on scene to two car crashes and saved a choking grandchild.

So you're training your butt off, finished First Responder and working on your sign offs. At this point, you're feeling a bit overwhelmed, and friends and family are starting to think you don't like them anymore. Well, you're just getting started! There is much to do if you want to be the one responding when that pager goes off in the wee hours of the morning.

You're going to want to knock out your obedience sign offs. It is a good thing to get out of the way, and it is our opinion that "search is an exercise in obedience." For obedience, you will be required to show that you and your dog can do heeling (on and off leash) perform a sit and down on command, recall, a drop on recall (or what is commonly referred to as a emergency drop), a long wait (handler places dog in a down and the dog is required to hold its position for five minutes, then a stranger comes to the dog and moves it to another location for five more minutes). The long wait is a important exercise, as it demonstrates the dog can handle being away from the handler, but even more importantly, it demonstrates that the dog will accept handling from a stranger in the field. There is also a traditional down stay (five minutes), and agility tasks such as a plank walk, climbing and balancing, tunnels, and strangers lifting your dog over obstacles. There are sociability tests, both dog on dog and dog on human. We have to make sure our dogs have excellent temperaments in the field, and aggression is a trait we don't want to see in a SAR dog. Then there is helicopter training: you and your dog



Being a good subject is important

must learn how to load and unload on helicopters, as many times you will be inserted in the back country by helo. You will become very familiar with helicopters, as many times they are the backbone of SAR operations.

The obedience phase typically has lower standards of performance than what we are used to with competition dogs, but the thing one always needs to remember while training in obedience is that the odds are you'll need good obedience some time in the field. I believe in training hard, because you never know when you'll encounter a bear, rattlesnake, or cliff. Your obedience better be right and finding out it's not when it's too late is bad for everybody. My friend walked around a blind corner on a trail and came upon his search dog toe to toe with a mountain lion last year. Being clear headed under stress helped, but being able to tell his dog to stay more than likely saved his dog's life. If the dog would have returned to him, the dog could have become a prey target and hurt badly or worse. When the lion saw the handler, it took off, and if the dog would have chased it, that also could have complicated things. Believe me when I say you'll need good obedience out there!

There is still much to do. Your journey is just beginning. You're working hard and making progress, "Grasshopper." In the next issue, I'll go deeper into handler skills, classes, gear and testing. Sometimes you start to question, "Why am I doing all of this training?" SAR isn't for everyone, but for those who want to make a difference and be part of the solution, this just might be your calling. So "suck it up and drive on!" We have lots to get done, because it is just a matter of time before someone doesn't return home from that hunting trip, a child wanders away from camp, a tornado strikes, or someone's grandparent with Alzheimer's wanders away from a nursing home. It's much more than points, much more than a trophy on your mantle or titles in a pedigree. Someone out there is in trouble. You're a part of a greater whole, a machine of rescuers, law enforcement, medical personnel, volunteers both paid and unpaid: all professionals giving of themselves "so that others may live."

Jack Fields lives in Central California with his wife Amy, daughter Bryanna, and their four Rottweilers. He has been a professional dog trainer for the better part of 24 years. He has trained dogs for a variety of roles from Schutzhund to AKC performance. Jack is a certified Wheel Chair Assistance Dog instructor, and also oversees the training of Animal Assisted Therapy dogs. Over the last 8 years, he has been involved in Search and Rescue. He has trained and/or consulted for numerous State and County agencies. At the current time, Jack and his young Rottweiler "Java" are certified "Area Dog Team" with the California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA).



You will have the opportunity to take many classes