

# The Handler's Role In Search & Rescue Part 2



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

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*You are developing into a solid team*

You have a goal. You and your dog are training hard to become a certified SAR team. When you first began, this goal seemed almost unattainable; but, now as you look back, you realize just how far you have come. Things are making a bit more sense; but, there is still uncertainty and much more to get done so you and your dog can get out there and help make a difference in a stranger's life.

You are looking pretty good at this point; but, if not, your sponsors and team members will be pushing you to dig deeper! You have knocked out your physical fitness test, obtained your First Responder and CPR cards and have attended several monthly trainings. You are beginning to understand what it takes to be a good subject and you have found a team to work with and be a part of. You have been working your dog in foundation search skills based on your chosen discipline and have tackled an obedience class or three! You've got the momentum now and, hopefully, your family and friends are still talking to you. You are looking good solid, now it is time to drive on!

As an apprentice, you are required to take many classes (listed in your apprentice package) that will help you become a qualified SAR dog handler. Your job will be to make sure you get these classes, and not only get the sign offs for taking them, but truly understand the skill sets because they are not there by chance. Some day, you are going to need these skills in the field. When team members expect you to know these things, it is vital that you do. Classes are a big part of your journey to becoming a qualified handler. Once you are certified, you will be placed in charge of a search team in the field. You will be

assigned foot searchers (ground-pounders) to assist you in clearing areas to locate a lost person. It is important to note that a single dog team is more efficient than a small army of foot searchers; therefore, the "ground-pounders" and other search personnel are basically there to support Dog Operations or "Dog Ops". Your grasp of the knowledge and skills learned in classes will not only help you run your team more effectively, but, it will also enhance your ability to oversee your support personnel. You want your team to run like a well-oiled machine, because someone is counting on you, and rarely are there second chances out there.

You can take the required classes in any order and often there are different people teaching a particular class at each event. Do your research and find out from whom it is best to learn because some people may have more expertise in a certain area than others. Just like with Schutzhund, it is knowing who to do obedience with vs. tracking or bite work. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. It is important to know who is the best at the work you need to learn. If you take the time to understand what you are getting yourself into, it will be a much more rewarding experience for you and your dog. It is also beneficial to take classes more than once. Each time you take a class, you will pick up something new, and therefore, have gained knowledge that may help you in the future. Ultimately, as one of my teachers, Dean Calderon, once said, *"There are no masters; you must make yourself the master"*. There is much wisdom in this statement; learn from the best, and become the best you can at what you do. Shoot, even if you learn how not to do something, you have learned. An old-timer I refer to as "Grandpa SAR" teaches a Search Strategy class that I have taken five times now and plan on taking again. You should never be fulfilled!



*Seek out the best teachers*

So, we have talked about the importance of classes, and learning the material; so what are the classes already?

### Radio Communications

Knowing how to use your radio is important. Not only do you need to understand the mechanics of it, but you will learn legal requirements and handler responsibilities as defined by the FCC for specific frequencies and protocols. There is much more than just turning it on. It is critical that you are able to communicate comfortably and that you can convey information clearly over the radio. Sounds simple, but then again "don't always judge a book by its cover." The radio is your lifeline to search base.



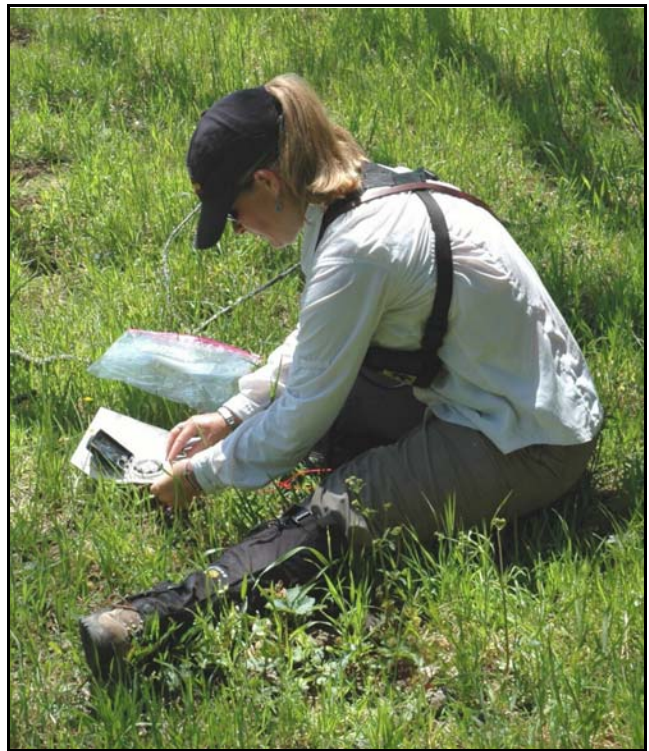
*The radio is your life line to Search Base*

### Land Navigation

If radios are your life line, then navigation is the beating of your heart. Poor navigation skills are usually the reason that many people end up in trouble in the back country to begin with. There is no greater danger than deploying in the back country and not being sure of how to get from one point to another and back again. In this class, you will learn about the compass, maps and their many scales, how to read terrain features and also how the map and compass work together. You will also be expected to have a solid, working understanding of the GPS and how to use all of its features. Make sure that you do not become totally dependent on this great tool. You must never forget that batteries may fail and high tech items are prone to break. In addition to becoming proficient in map, compass, and GPS, you will also learn more natural or primitive ways to navigate.

### Rope Skills

The Rope Skills class was tough for me, demanding lots of practice. You will learn basic knot tying and rescue skills using rope or webbing. In the field these skills are used more often than you might first imagine. You will use it, whether it is securing equipment, your dog or something entirely different. My friend once secured a blind, disoriented subject to her own body so she could lead him out of very difficult terrain on an exceptionally dark night. Believe it or not, those knots could save a life, possibly even you own!



*The ability to navigate is vital*

### Low Angle Skills

This is a basic awareness class. If you like low angle work, further instruction will be required as the lives of many people will be dependent on your abilities.

This level of class is not sufficient to qualify the handler for low angle rescue teams. In this class you will learn about personal safety, team safety, anchor systems, belay skills, and raising/lowering techniques.



*You will learn about ropes and low angle skills*



### Litter/Patient Transport

The purpose of this class is to teach you to assist in the transport of a patient in a litter. If you thought that all you were going to do was to find lost people, then you have another thing coming! In this class, you will learn how to properly package a patient for transport, lifting and lowering techniques, and litter crew procedures and commands.

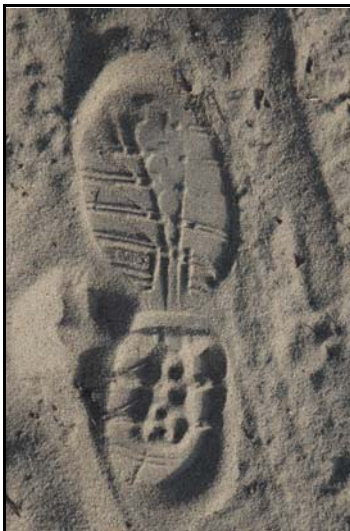
### Man Tracking

This class teaches you the basics of following human track, just like the Indian scouts in the old western movies. I thought this was very cool; but, then I had to struggle to acquire a rudimentary skill set. This is another class that I will be taking repeatedly. Some SAR units exclusively do man tracking, and their work is amazing. In man tracking, you will learn how to describe and document tracks, how to use a tracking stick, label tracks, understand lighting and techniques for dealing with poor conditions (i.e. high sun angle, cloudy days). You will also learn all about sign and sign cutting jump tracking, step-by-step tracking, track traps and the preservation or protection of sign. Man tracking is often difficult work, but, having a good grasp of this skill can be a tremendous help in the field. Many times, you will find subtle clues that will tell you that you are in the right area. It is not uncommon for a

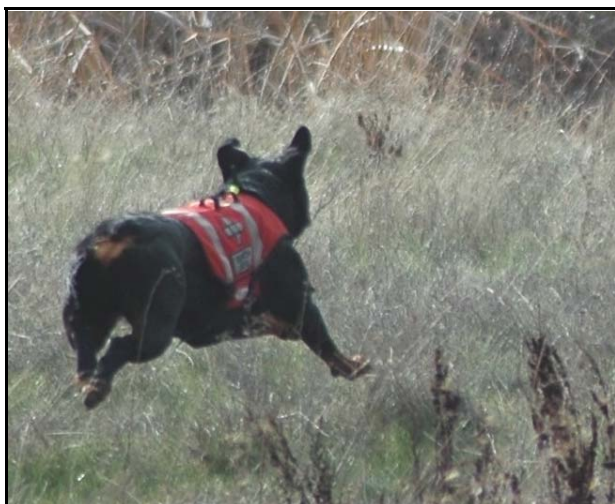
SAR team to request the size and type of footwear a subject was wearing. Using this information you can match up sole patterns in the field to either confirm or rule out a possible clue. Clues are everything in the field and the better you are at understanding them the better equipped you will be.

### Crime Scene

This is a very important and interesting class. You will be working with local law enforcement, so you better learn how to do it right. Often,



*Could this be our subject?*



*Inca says it is, you will learn to trust your dog*



*You will spend lots of time around helicopters*

what might begin as a lost person case, will end up being a case of foul play, and so understanding how to work in and around a crime scene becomes vital. You will learn about the chain of evidence, protecting the crime scene, and proper documentation of the crime scene.

### Helicopter Safety

In this class, you will learn about helicopters: how to keep yourself and your dog safe, the helicopter personnel and their roles, and how to properly enter and leave the bird. You will find that you often review the information learned in this class. It is such a high criteria event that you will get a safety briefing every time you work around a helicopter.

### Knowledge of Scent

Now this is the "bread and butter" for the dog handler. As a dog handler, it is most important that you understand what scent is doing at any given time. Knowing this will allow you to set up effective search strategies based on weather conditions. In this class, you will learn techniques for collecting scent articles (with caution regarding clothes hampers, shared closets and other potential traps), collecting scent articles from vehicles, and how to properly store scent articles. You will learn about the unique scent behavior near lake edges, streams and steep slopes, and about conditions that lead to inversion layers. You will learn how sunlight, wind and humidity affect the scent and the factors that contribute to unique scent pictures such as a chimney effect, and looping plumes. Understanding scent will enhance everything you do as an SAR dog handler, from real searches to how you set up training problems.

### Unexpected Night Out

This is your basic survival class. It is not often, but, sometimes you may find yourself on your own and being able to sustain yourself is a must. In this class, you will learn about the survival attitude, surviving with minimal gear, food and water issues, the importance of the right clothing, and shelter building. This is a great class and one that should be taken repeatedly until you feel comfortable if the helicopter cannot make it back to pick you up for a day of two!

Ok, you have made it through your mandatory classes and your handler skills are complete. Even though you have completed the classes, you must remember that your





*Understanding scent is a big part of your journey*

mission is to master the skills. We take classes at each monthly training, and continue to look for classes in the private sector that we think might be useful. Remember that knowledge is power, and the more complete your skill sets, the better off you will be.



*Swimming is one of the many dog sign offs*

Next, you are going to need to finish off a few more dog sign offs. You should have a swimming sign off in which you verify that your dog is not afraid to get its paws wet. You will also need two night sign offs. This involves a twenty-minute search problem under two different evaluators to show that you and your dog can work efficiently at night. These tests must be taken at least one week apart. It is funny because a 20 minute test at first does not seem like much, but when you are there it is easy to make too much of it. Kind of like your first BH, or CD (remember to breath!). By this point of the game, your dog should be ready to show this very basic level of work. Your dog should have good scent recognition (understands the target it is looking for), a good alert and refind and you should be able to work your dog for at least an hour problem.

You will also have a pack sign off to show that you have all of the required equipment in your search pack (a mandatory equipment list will be in your apprentice package). Again, do your research, and find out what equipment will work for the long haul. It is easy to go out and buy a bunch of equipment only to find out later that it is not what you need, or it does not perform to the standard that you expect of it down the road. It is always better to spend a little more on the front side then to replace it later.

Now you are getting close to achieving your goal. Your logbook is full of trainings, your dog is advancing and, the end is in sight. You are more than likely tired because you have been pushing hard and your brain is in over load. The good news is that your handler skills and dog sign offs are complete and you have knocked out your six monthly trainings. Your team and sponsors are happy and you are maturing into the kind of first responder that I would want looking for my loved one. Your next step is to turn in all of your paperwork to the board for approval and verification and to get that almighty pager.



*You are tired because you have been pushing hard,*

You are feeling like your ready to search; but, there is still more to do. You will need to complete observation hours and do your testing. You are close "Grasshopper", not much further now, but you still have the final showdown. You will need to prove that you have what it takes and that you and your dog as a team can get the job done to a standard acceptable to the organization of which you are a member. "Here we go, here we go!"



*But you're going to get the mission done!*

In the final installment of this series, we will cover the final showdown to "Mission Ready" status and being the one to respond to that "Search Call Out" when tragedy strikes.