

The Handler's Role In Search & Rescue Part 3



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

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You are focused on the goal

You have committed yourself and your dog to the goal of becoming a Search and Rescue Dog Team. Looking back, it may seem like a forever ago that you started this journey, or sometimes it may seem like only yesterday. At any rate, you have had your trials and tribulations, taken a closer look at yourself and your dog, and perhaps even questioned yourself as to why you are doing all of this. You

have logged thousands of miles, worn out a pair of boots or two, and you have often been hot, wet or cold. You have more than likely gotten poison oak (more times than you would like to count), been bug food, dirty, and perhaps even skunk sprayed! At times, you did not feel like you wanted to keep going; but, you did. Everything in your apprentice package is in order, and you and your dog are looking good as a team. At this point, you are looking at the new team members with their new dogs and remembering when you were in their shoes. Your team is tasking you with helping new members, and you may even be gaining experience running "Base Camp". You smile to yourself because you know you have come a long ways and you are about at reach out and grab that Mission Ready Patch.

Getting that Mission Ready Patch is a big deal. When you started you wore a brown patch that said "Team in Training", but once you pass your final test you will receive a white patch that says "Mission Ready". Looking at those white patches can be a real motivator. That patch says you have completed the journey and are good to go! It can be a bit of a status symbol, almost like having titled a dog to Schutzhund 3, but at the same time you know that it is still a big jump to becoming a National Competitor. Soon you will be patched and then you and your dog can get on with the mission of saving lives.

As I have mentioned previously, standards differ from organization to organization. The only real consistency is that there will be some kind of test to certify that you are trained and ready to represent the organization for which you work. In CARDA there is a series of either sign offs, or actual tests you will need to take while advancing through your apprentice package. Testing standards while somewhat similar are different for an Area dog as opposed to a Trailing Dog due to the different ways the dogs are used on search missions. It is important that you keep a good pace because if you take too long to complete your journey, not only will you catch flak from you team members and sponsors; but also most of your sign

offs are only good for two years. If you take longer than two years you will need to redo all of your dog sign offs, retake any tests and make current your First responder and CPR certifications. This can be frustrating, and make you feel as if you are chasing the clock in order to try and keep everything in order.

You must complete three big tests: a 40-Acre evaluation, a Cadaver 2 evaluation, and the big one, your Mission Ready Test. You can take the 40-acre and the C2 tests in any order you want, but not until all of your handler and dog skills are signed off. You cannot take your Mission Ready test until you have completed your observation hours, C2 and 40 acre.

As you start thinking about testing, it is important to think about your strategy. Many times when we train we are thinking about the bigger picture. What are the skill sets and scenarios we need to be training for in order to address real life deployments. On the other hand as you get closer to testing you must also start thinking about training for the tests. It is an important strategy because if you are unable to pass the tests, then you will not be going out there searching. Having good training to help you pass the tests is usually something to think about. Once you pass the tests, then you can hunker down again and start thinking about real world deployments.



Your Dog is Looking Good

When you are ready for testing, you will ask your sponsors, and if they feel that the time is right they will set up a test for you. During testing you must work in an area in which you have not trained before and with evaluators that you have not trained with.

40-Acre Evaluation

The objective of this test is to search a 40-acre (1/4 mile by 1/4 mile) area and locate one subject in a maximum of two hours. Your dog may track,

trail or air scent. Unlike most competitions, this is not about style, but rather that you get it done! Remember there are no points in Search and Rescue it's all about living or dying. The subject is placed at least thirty minutes prior to testing (the longer your subject is in place the easier it can be to find them, as the scent will have more time to be transported away giving an advantage to the dog team). Your subject will be concealed and bright colors are not acceptable. The handler should be unable to see the subject from a distance of 20 feet away in order to ensure that the dog handler cannot see and visually make his way to the subject. 40-Acre evaluations are not allowed if there is snow on the ground, or if there is mud and dew that would allow easily visible tracks leading up to the subject.

Your evaluators, (there will always be a primary evaluator and a



You will experience nature up close

secondary evaluator), will first give you a scenario. Your job will be to conduct an interview with the evaluators to gain pertinent information, to develop a search plan based on your interview, terrain, time of day and weather conditions. Once you formulate a plan you will advise the evaluators of

your search plan. The handler must notify Search Base of progress in the field, of any plan changes and any clues or evidence found. The clock will not start working against you until you deploy your dog so make sure that you take the time to properly prepare. Be aware that your evaluators may try to rush you and push you faster than you want to go. Try not to fall into the "there is someone lost out there, lets get going" trap. This is your test so make sure you keep your rhythm.

Once in the field the dog and handler team must demonstrate the ability to negotiate the terrain, and show a level of stamina conducive to successful searching. You will be expected to use the radio to communicate with Search Base effectively. In order to pass the test your dog must locate the subject and perform an alert sequence. Once you have acquired the subject your job is to assess the subject's medical condition and be able to report back to Search Base the subject's location.

As a team you will be evaluated on essential search skills and ultimately how you perform in the field. This includes clue recognition, dog and handler stamina, your search plan and implementation, map and compass skills, radio communication, and interviewing skills, being able to adjust your plan based on wind and terrain conditions, coverage of the search area, ability to interpret your dogs alerts and interest, your ability to direct and control your dog, and your awareness to your dog's need for breaks and water. Weakness in any area is grounds for failure.

You have much to do on a 40-acre evaluation and much that can go wrong. The good news is that if you have done your homework you have a good chance of passing it. Sometimes though it just isn't meant to be. Usually the biggest factor is time of day and weather conditions. When planning for tests I always aim for early spring or fall. Summer can make for poor testing conditions. So try to help yourself by testing at the right time of the year. Sometimes though you just have to take what you can get.

Cadaver 2 evaluation

Not long ago search dogs within our organization only had to show cadaver recognition. It really was not a big deal. You and your dog would be taken out to a field where there was a cadaver source. If your dog showed interest and you recognized it then you were a pass. Today things are different. Due to so many search missions turning into recovery missions CARDA determined that an Area dog must not only recognize cadaver, but also must also perform an alert sequence. If your dog fails to perform this function it is considered non-deployable and will be pulled from the call out list. It has become a high standard, but one I believe is first

and foremost a betterment to our organization, and to the communities we serve. From Search and Rescue to Schutzhund I do not think that the lowering of the standard is ever in our best interests. The good thing about Search and Rescue is that it is not about making it good for the many, but instead about fielding the most capable teams.

Your Cadaver 2 (C2) test is very similar to a 40-acre evaluation. The main differences are that the test covers 20 acres as opposed to 40 acres, and that you have one hour as opposed to two hours to complete the test. Your job is to find one live subject and recover one cadaver source instead of just one live subject in the 40-acre evaluation. You will be put through the same process of initial interview, map and compass, stamina, alert, refinds, and so on. The only real differences are adding the cadaver recovery aspect, and less time and area to cover.



As a team you will be tested

Observation Hours

You have now completed your 40-acre and your C2. Your only remaining task is to knock out some observation hours. In order to complete the process you will need to fulfill the requirement of 13 observation hours gained on a minimum of two searches with a dog team that is certified in your chosen discipline. I recommend that you begin accumulating observation hours as soon as your handler and dog skills are completed because sometimes (depending on the time of year) you will find yourself waiting for searches to fulfill your quota of observation hours. It is best to get started as soon as possible, so when the seasons start turning in your favor you are on deck and ready to test.

When considering your observation hours it is important to have already decided with whom you want to search with. This is where your Karma will come back to you. If you have been a good team member and worked hard; Mission Ready (MR) handlers will be more than willing to let you tag along. If not, it is time to take a good look at yourself and try to convince a handler that you are worth a second look. Mission Ready handlers are not required to take you with them but instead it is by invite only. The more handlers that agree to allow you to search with them the better because you're on a time hack to complete observation

hours, and not every handler deploys on every mission. Having several handlers willing to let you follow along is always a good thing.

It seems that you wait and wait and then when you are least expecting it and almost always in the wee hours of the morning, that pager starts buzzing. You jump out of bed and run around and then realize, "Hey, someone's lost!" "It's time, it's time", you



You will search in all environments

think to yourself as you call the dispatcher to get more information. The dispatcher will give you the location of Search



You will develop a search plan based on the area

Base, and minor details such as the general age and gender of the subject. Then it's time to grab your search pack and rush out of the house in the dead of night. For me the hardest part was watching my dog bounce off the walls thinking she was going too.

Unfortunately, at this point of the game uncertified dogs are not allowed to deploy so they must sit this one out!

The first time you arrive at a Search Base it is a magical moment. You see the glow of lights, generators humming, and a small army of both paid and unpaid professionals. You can feel the energy in the air as all around you, like ants to sugar; people are doing a hundred essential tasks. Depending on the size of the search you will find everything from ground pounders, and searchers mounted on horseback, to chaplains and medical personnel. Along with these you will also see law enforcement, media and there is the sound of excited search dogs. Your head is spinning as you look up and see the distressed face of someone belonging to the lost person. At this point it hits you that this is for real. Someone out there is in real trouble and people are counting on you to help bring their loved one home.

You will sit in on a briefing, which is much like the interview you conducted during your tests. At this time you will be told whatever details Search Base knows; everything from the subject's medical condition to potential hazards in the field. Understanding the details is vital, so everyone has notebooks out, and it takes on the feel of a college lecture. Next your team will be formed and assigned a search area. You will be given a call sign for radio use and briefed on radio protocols specific to this search. You will review the map and plug in the data into your GPS. Then it is time to assign jobs to your team, who's working the compass, the GPS, who is flanking (working the edges of the search formation). It is all about who is strongest in each area. You want the best person for each job doing their part. Then it is time to recheck your gear, water the dog, check the map and wait. The adrenaline is pumping and after what seems like forever, your team leader (usually the dog handler) says, "It's time!"

I will always remember standing on that improvised tarmac in the early morning. I was feeling good and then like a giant rumbling mosquito the helicopter appeared in the early morning sky to carry us away. I smiled and thought here we go, and then I heard over my radio, "Subject located, alive and well!" People cheered, the family of the subject cried, and just like that it was over.

Search and Rescue is often like that. I earned one observation hour (for the briefing). In order to get that hour I had been up all night, drove well over 150 miles (one way) and missed half a day's work. The good news was that the subject was found alive and well, the bad news is that I did not get into the field. I figured that at least I got my one hour and one search deployment. I would still need one more search and twelve more hours in order to be ready to test. I remember driving home thinking to myself that this was going

to take a lot of legwork to get these observation hours. Little did I know, I would not be waiting long.

Less than a week later it's the same story again. The pager goes off because someone is lost. The search area is to my south, in the Sierras about 200 miles away. We have a missing hiker with a serious medical condition who is way overdue. This time it would be different. We spent over 12 hours in very rough terrain at high elevation combing the wilderness. Search teams spent the better part of two weeks out there looking, searching, and asking questions. The end result was that the subject was never found. He is still missing to this day. Some times I look out across the massive valley we call home and see the Sierras in the distance. I scratch my head and wonder, "Where are you?" It is troubling to know he is still out there some where. Sometimes Search and Rescue can be like that.

Every county has their missing. The search teams have deployed but came up empty. Sometimes there is a happy ending. Once we had a subject who after three days of searching it was discovered that he took a bus out of state. There are times when a child is found at a friend's house or just hiding in a garage. These are the happy endings; it's the unknown that can weigh on you. Sometimes it can be hard to let go, and many search teams spend their weekends and down time searching the wilderness for the lost people. They are still out there somewhere waiting to be found, Search and Rescue can be like that.

You have now finished your 40-acre and C2 tests. You have tackled and completed your observation hours. Your handler and dog sign offs are complete and your First Responder and CPR are current. Now you must keep training, keep taking classes, and still be responding to searches as a walk-along to gain valuable experience. Unfortunately you're not going to get to deploy your dog until you get that Mission Ready test behind you.

The next step is to tell your sponsors you have finished with all of the prerequisites and to turn in your paperwork for verification. You are now ready to take your MR test! When your sponsors feel you are ready they will start the process to get you tested. All you need to do now is to pass one more test. You have done the training, your dog is looking good, you are feeling good and you have gained valuable real world experience by going on searches with experienced dog handlers. Suddenly it all makes sense, just like learning to tie your shoes. You think you have a handle on

things, but now it is "put up or shut up time". One day you get that phone call informing you of your Mission Ready test date. All you will know is that you have a testing date and a very general location such as Northern California, Southern California or the Coast. They will be vague at best. 24 hours prior to the test you will be given a meeting location, but this is not necessarily the testing location. It is the gateway where your final rite of passage will begin! Are you ready? I hope so because now it is time!



It is Time - are you ready?

do. It's been a long journey to get here "Grasshopper", and soon it will be your time on the firing line!