

Building Search: A Victim's Eye View



Moving carefully over unstable piles of lumber, this dog methodically searches a storage shed. Agility training pays off in building and disaster search.

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Here I am, cramped into a space hardly big enough for a spider (speaking of spiders) Too cramped to shift position, and there's a board gouging my shoulder. I think about the people dug out of earthquake rubble, alive, after days in tighter places. The difference is, I could crawl back out of here if I had to. This building didn't collapse on top of me. I'm not injured, dehydrated, in shock. I have air and lots of time.

(And when will that dog get here?)

This old building smells of dust and age. A fragment of newspaper reads April 25, 1957. I hope there aren't black widows.

"Ready or not, here we come!" over the radio. It's about time. I turn my radio way down. At the far end of the building I hear the handler telling his dog, "Search," and the soft pad of dog steps making a methodical zigzag down the corridor.

"Hup . . . steady, girl, check it out." A thump and totter, the sound of shifting lumber. "Okay," another thump and she's back on the floor, coming closer.

Now I can hear her snuffling, working hard to catch my scent. The air is dead in here, and it's hot. I imagine my scent rising straight up into the rafters.

"What have you got? Up there?!" The handler's voice is excited now, and I hear a sort of bouncing and hard sniffing. The dog must be on her hind legs, trying to reach a scent that's sliding down the wall a dozen yards away. Buildings do strange things to scent. I imagine the handler on tiptoe, starting into the rafters. His dog's pattering back and forth, fast, trying to figure it out, whining in frustration.

Finally, "Good girl, let's check around some more. Easy." It sounds like she's picking her way over metal and broken glass.

She's close now — climbing on the wood panels on top of me. The snuffling is louder; she whines and scratches at the wood. Thud. She's on the floor, circling and shoving her nose in between the panels. Suddenly her face fills the opening to my hiding place. Two intense eyes try to pull me out. She whines and squeals, but I

don't budge. She scrunches down on her elbows and wriggles in. I can't defend myself against that face wash. "Good girl — go away!" I whisper.

"Did you find her?" The fiercely wagging tail should tell him, even if the squeals didn't. The dog goes into reverse, unplugs the hole, and the handler's headlamp glares in my eyes. I give up and come out.

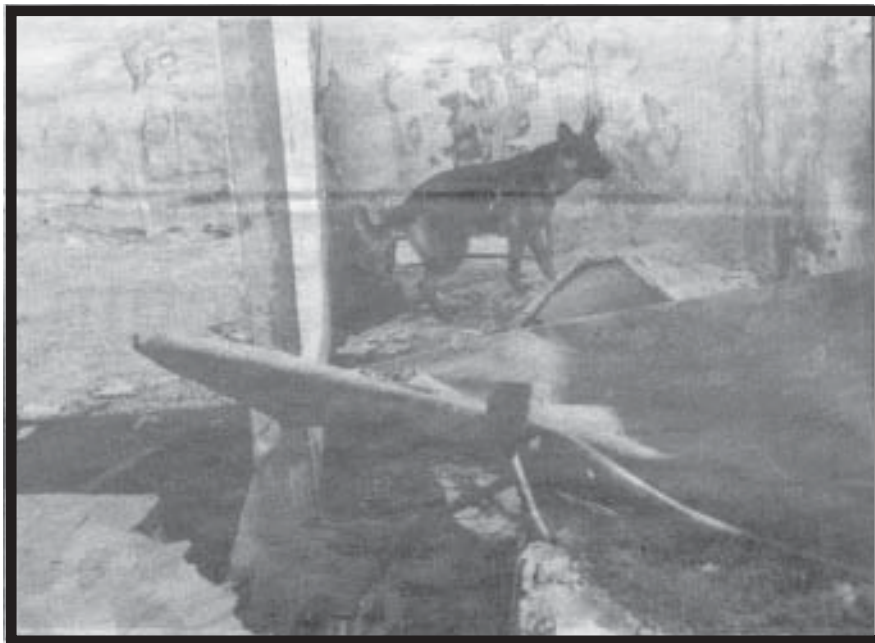
Building search can be one of the most challenging problems for a SAR dog team, and it's something every handler should fit into his training schedule periodically.

Considerable information has appeared in DOG SPORTS over the years about building search from the police service standpoint, and of course many of the same principles hold for SAR. Scent behaves in the same way in a given place, whether it's put out by a robbery suspect or a small child. But there are a few differences, in approach as well as application, in criminal versus SAR building search.

Scent travels in strange ways in confined spaces. Every building — and every hiding place in that building — seems to present its own peculiar scenting situation. Dog and handler have to figure out where the scent could be coming from; it almost never comes straightforwardly from the "victim."

Practice pays. A dog and handler with considerable building search experience will be able to pursue an elusive scent that would stump an inexperienced team. Just as dogs need practice in different kinds of weather and terrain to follow up alerts in tricky open-air conditions, so dogs should work in all kinds of confined spaces: abandoned houses, parking garages with vehicle exhaust, warehouses with paint fumes, office buildings, barns and sheds. The handler's imagination is the limit.

His imagination comes in handy, too, in visualizing air ducts, dead air spaces, open windows and cracks under doors, and all the other intricacies that affect scent movement in buildings.



A SAR dog checks the air currents in what's left of a house, while searching an abandoned homestead.

Practice pays off in knowing how to search a building. A team that's done nothing but open-air searches is likely to move too fast through a building, failing to check the nooks and crannies (and along the walls) where scent is likely to be.

Many SAR handlers like to start out with a hasty search through the building. (We aren't looking for baddies, where a hasty search could be fatal.) The dog may alert on that quick, first time through. If not, dog and handler make a more thorough search. (In an actual disaster with unknown number of victims, the team will have to do a thorough search, regardless; but the hasty could be valuable in turning up injured victims that need immediate help.)

Building search training has other advantages besides teaching dog and handler how to search confined spaces. "Victims" can be concealed in places that are inaccessible to the dog (under piles of junk, in rafters and crawl spaces). So the dog needs to be able to communicate that he's located human scent, even though he can't physically reach the source.

The same principles apply here as in disaster search. Frustration prompts the dog to scratch at debris, walls, doors, or whatever is between him and the victim. It also causes him to whine, squeal or bark. This is a good signal for the handler, who's likely to be working in the dark with a headlamp. He won't be able to see everything his dog is doing, crawling under rubble or behind furniture.

A word of caution: disaster work on rubble involves risk. Don't try it unless you're trained for it. For proper safety precautions, including protective clothing for handler and victim, see the debris search section of Sandy Bryson's "Search Dog Training."

In most practice SAR building searches, the victim places himself and should be able to free himself. But when you hide, remember: a 90-lb. dog can collapse an unstable hiding place on top of you. Choose your spot with safety in mind.

And handlers, don't put your dogs in situations they haven't been taught to negotiate. Dogs need training to cope with broken glass, sharp metal and unstable surfaces. This is where agility work pays off.

Why building search for SAR dogs? For police service dogs, the answer is obvious. But how many people get lost in buildings?

Disaster work is one application. Structures demolished, or partially collapsed, by earthquake, explosion, tornado, or other natural or manmade disasters can trap people inside or under rubble.

SAR dogs are often asked to search trailers, barns, dumps, and underneath houses for the remains of homicide victims.

Teams sometimes encounter fallen-down cabins and abandoned houses where a missing child might have gone to play, or an elderly walkaway sought shelter. One small child reportedly crawled onto a high shelf in an old building and, unable to get down, died there. Foot searchers missed him. A dog trained for building search might have found him in time to save a life.