

Maybe They Should be Buried for a Dog

By— Judy Graham
Contributing Editor

“What’ll you give for a warm dog in your tent tonight?” quipped a handler to a nondog SAR-type as we all set out into the snow.

This was the first Winter SAR Operations course presented by the California State Office of Emergency Services (OES), and not all of the 30 or so participants—sheriffs’ search and rescue coordinators and a couple of Forest Service and National Park rangers, with a scattering of volunteers—were sure they’d make it through the night.

Leaving the warmth of Mammoth Mountain Inn for a night out in the snow, with only the comforts we could carry on our backs, we were bound for Minarets Vista. It’s a cold windy ridge with spectacular views in all directions, but no amenities.

It wasn’t a long trek, but for those who’d never been on skis or snowshoes before, and whose SAR duty was generally at the command post, this could be a major challenge.

“We want to familiarize the search coordinators with what their folks out in the field are up against,” explained Larry Buffaloe, deputy chief and search and rescue coordinator of the Law Enforcement Division of California OES.

Besides classroom sessions (hypothermia, “the silent killer;” insulation and winter-wear; air and ground SAR operations with fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, snowmobiles, snowcats and sleds; avalanche hazards and rescue) the Mammoth course provided a four-mile “conditioning hike” at 9,000 feet elevation, an afternoon of snowshoe and cross-country ski instruc-

tion, and practice in techniques of probing for victims buried in an avalanche.

Instructors included Yosemite National Park back country nordic ski ranger and WOOF search dog handler Marilyn Muse; U.S. Forest Service resource officer and CARDA dog handler Hatch Graham; Ernesto Aviles, developer of the APPLINC “saving breath” rewarming system for hy-



“Pepper” begins digging down to her practice avalanche victim as handler Hatch Graham urges her on. Photo supplied by author.

pothemia victims; Lyle Hammer of the U.S. Weather Service; Deputy Brad Smith of the Humboldt County Sheriffs Department; Civil Air Patrol Commander Ian Ostrat, and helicopter personnel from Lemoore and Fallon Naval Air Stations.

The Winter SAR Operations course is the newest addition to California OES’s SAR curriculum. For the past four years OES has been bringing its Direction and Control of the Search Function course to sheriffs SAR coordinators throughout the state, with good results. Over those four years, SAR teams have found they spend less time per search with more lives saved.

Like the Direction and Control course, Winter SAR Ops recognizes the value of search dogs, allotting four hours to the SAR dog segment.

CARDA handler Hatch Graham spent about 45 minutes of the four hours in the classroom. He gave a slide show overview of dogs’ scenting ability and their talents for finding lost people in a wide variety of

situations (shots of a handler in the Southeast Alaska rainforest; dog hidden somewhere under the devil’s club, but still searching; a tidal river with someone drowned in the muddy murk and a dog sniffing for him from the prow of a johnboat; the Mexico City earthquake, and SAR dogs searching the rubble for survivors). Then he moved into avalanche search, as an introduction to what the class would see in the field later that day. Two major points: A trained search dog is one of the fastest ways to locate someone trapped under snow, and avalanche training is a

potentially hazardous activity that must be conducted under the strictest safety precautions. He outlined the procedures in the classroom, and reiterated them in the field. They include:

- Excavating a reasonably comfortable, collapse-proof hole in which to bury the “victim,” with enough trapped air so he can survive the duration of the problem, and room to move his head and neck and arms and expand his chest so he can breathe more or less normally (Many volunteer “victims” discover that the ability to expand the chest is affected not only by physical space but also by mental considerations.

It's hard to breathe normally when you feel like you've just been shut in a box with a king size mattress on your back).

- Carefully triangulating the location of the victim's head with markers placed on the surface of the snow. To prevent the searching dog or handler from keying on these markers (and to simulate the scent—and visual—confusion of a real avalanche), a multitude of packs, ski poles, snowshoes, shovels and other loose gear is distributed over the slope. One person has to keep religiously in mind which are the “real” markers that triangulate on Spot X.

- Constant radio conversation with the buried “victim,” to assure that he's reasonably comfortable, isn't in dire straits or, more likely, discovering a latent claustrophobia that never appeared before in his life (“One of our handlers is a big, husky guy, but he won't go in a hole for nothin'. We tell him ‘Fine, that's great, you can just dig holes for us.’” No stigma).

- A minimum number of shovelers standing by, in case the “victim” needs to be dug up in a hurry. Combined with the requisite radio safety-person talking with the victim, and extraneous people standing or moving around to simulate a real search, this makes avalanche training and testing very labor-intensive (It takes a lot of people a lot of work). A problem that takes a dozen people set up and run may take a good avalanche dog only seconds or minutes to solve.

Hatch ended his lecture by assuring the class that no one would lose face if he chose not to be buried, but trusted there would be enough volunteers. In any case, he said, a turn at being “victim” is a great way to learn respect for avalanches, and make a person more wary of ever getting caught in one. “It's amazing how only a couple of inches of snow packed on top of you makes you completely helpless. You can't move, you can't get yourself out. I'll tell you, I've been in practice holes, and it's scary. You're totally dependent on these other guys to get you out.”

(From the back of the room someone cracked, “Would *you* trust these bozos?”)

Question unanswered, the class moved outdoors. This was the grand finale of the

week: The ski or snowshoe trek up to Minarets Vista, and spending one night there with the gear in one's backpack. Remember, before this week, some of the people in the class had never been on skis or snowshoes in their lives.

The ski-in was mostly uneventful.” A Marine from Pickle Meadows distinguished himself by catching a skijor-tow behind a snow cat. One of the dog handlers hitched up his search partner in place of mechanized equipment, for a short but exciting ride. Some of the other ski trekkers, with only their own two legs, thought these practices unfair. But all, eventually, arrived at the camping place.

It was worth the effort. To the west, the Minarets standing watch over the Sierra; to the east and far below, snowfree Owens Valley. But our attention quickly shifted from the fantastic view to the job of setting up camp.

Some were trying out (trying to figure out) new tents, purchased for the occasion. Others were surveying the ridge for its least-windswept pockets. Several were speaking wistfully of beer.

Once the settling-in was over, the class shifted back to search dogs. A snow cat had tracked over a large area to simulate an avalanche path, and shovelers had dug about a dozen holes. Reviewing the safety precautions, two handlers supervised the burial of one “victim” at a depth of 4 to 5 feet, and then a second “victim” at about 3 feet. Radio safety officers and shovelers were appointed, and other observers moved over the “avalanche path.”

On a signal to the dog team waiting out of sight,—Jamie Maddox and his Newfoundland mix “Sam”—Jamie gave the search command and headed full-speed onto the slope demonstrating that canines are, indeed, one of the fastest ways to locate people under snow, the little black dog found both “victims” within 3 minutes.

These victims were carefully extricated, and the process began with two more volunteers hiding for a second team, me and my 9-year-old German Shepherd “Sardy.” This problem proved to be a good example of safety-first in avalanche work. Sardy alerted on her first victim and started

digging down toward him. Calling for shovelers here, I directed Sardy away from this spot to search for more victims. As she progressed across the slope, one of the deputies acting as a radio safety officer suddenly yelled “Dig him up! He's not talking.” He'd lost radio contact with the second victim just seconds earlier. Within just a few more seconds our “victim” was extricated—safe and cheerful, but with a dead radio. Search problem aborted. Fresh batteries were installed in the radio.

Next on the slope were Rita Comden with her Golden Retriever “Ego,” who acknowledged the spots where previous “victims” had been buried but quickly moved on to find the two who were now under snow. “For the last problem of the day, Hatch and his German Shepherd “Pepper” raced with a ski patrolman using an electronic avalanche beacon to find a beacon-equipped victim. It was a photofinish on the first victim. Then Pepper went on to find the second.

As the dog handlers emphasized to participants in the Winter SAR Ops Course, time is critical in avalanche rescue. If a victim survives an avalanche itself, his chances of being alive after half an hour of burial are reduced by half, and the odds keep dropping fast. Even though dogs may be one of the quickest ways to locate people under snow, they aren't the only way. “Don't put all your eggs in one basket,” Hatch cautioned. “Call out the dogs, yes, but get that probe line working and keep 'em working when the dogs get there. Use Pieps or Skadis (electronic avalanche beacons), use everything you've got. The dogs are just one tool—one of the best, but not the only one.”

With all the warnings about the potential hazards of avalanche training, were there enough volunteers to be buried at Minarets Vista? After the scheduled avalanche dog field session, there were still enough hangers-on to give my younger Shepherd, “Roxy,” a single-victim search. And early next morning before classes resumed, Marilyn Muse and her Shepherd “Sage” found and dug up another volunteer in about a minute.

Willing as they were to be buried, many of the deputies found it a sobering experience; in fact, a once-in-a-lifetime opportu-

nity they didn't really care to repeat.

Less than two weeks after Winter SAR Ops, national news was reporting the death of four skiers in a massive avalanche outside the Breckenridge Ski Area. In fact, this has been one of the worst winters in years in the Rocky Mountains, according to United Press International, with 11 avalanche deaths already by early March. Avalanche experts were attributing the fatalities to a "combination of a widespread unstable snowpack and the ignorance or outright disregard by skiers of the dangers."

The four skiers who lost their lives in the Breckenridge avalanche reportedly had crossed under a rope and past signs warning "The back country skiing beyond this rope is extremely dangerous ... avalanches are unpredictable and can occur at any time." The lure of fresh powder apparently was just too great. A friend of two of the men killed at Breckenridge was later quoted by the Associated Press as saying, "It's more exhilarating to ski out of bounds," and commented that his friends' deaths won't stop him from skiing out-of-bounds areas.

Maybe he should volunteer to be buried once for an avalanche dog. It might give him a different perspective.



Golden Retriever "Ego" smiles as one of his practice avalanche victims thanks him for finding him so quickly.