

## SAR Dogs at the ‘Death Ranch’

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A full-page article in Newsweek called it “The Wilseyville Horror.”

Much of the TV coverage showed searchers on hands and knees, painstakingly gathering small fragments of bone scattered over the ground. They were collecting the remains of a still unknown number of people—early estimates suggested as many as 25—apparently kidnapped, tortured and killed at a backwoods cabin site in Calaveras County, California. .

The search crews were on their knees at that particular place because search and rescue dogs had pinpointed the spot. In the June 15th Sacramento Bee, under a picture of California Conservation Crew volunteers gathering bone fragments, was the report, “Search dogs sniffed out the newest disposal site Thursday afternoon.”

On four days between June 4th and June 13th, California Rescue Dog Association teams searched around a cabin where suspected killer Leonard Lake had been living outside Wilseyville. Ironically, one of the people who may have fallen victim there had been the subject of a CARDA search over a year earlier, but about seven miles away: a Sunnyvale man whose car was found abandoned on a remote road in the Calaveras foothills.

The case first came to light after ex-Marine Charles Ng was apprehended June 2nd in South San Francisco for shoplifting. Ng disappeared before police arrived, but his friend Lake was arrested when a semi-automatic pistol with silencer and ammunition and other evidence were reportedly found in the trunk of the car he was driving—a car belonging to a missing San Francisco man. At police headquarters authorities say Lake swallowed a cyanide pill and collapsed; he died four days later. Ng remained at large and was added to the FBI’s ten-most-wanted list. He was finally captured in Canada.

At the Calaveras County “death ranch” where Lake had lived, officials discovered what they think may have been a torture chamber, complete with a one-way mirror, and videotapes of presumed victims. The Sacramento Bee reported that the search dogs indicated a dumping ground where searchers found stained clothing and other evidence, in addition to more bones.

By late June at least six bodies had been recovered, and some 45 lbs of bone, bone chips, and teeth. And as the search around the cabin continued, the state attorney general was calling the case “potentially one of the worst mass murders in California history.” ,

Volunteer CARDA teams participating in the search were Rita Comden with her Golden Retriever, “Ego,” and her German Shepherd, “Mason;” Shirley Hammond with her Doberman, “Cinnamon;” and Peggy Emrey with her Shepherd, “Brinna.” The dogs located numerous charred bits of bone, indicating to authorities where the recovery effort should be concentrated.

Rita Comden, who was on scene all four days, said her dogs had no previous experience at this type of body work; their training has been primarily search for lost persons in “wilderness” situations, people buried in avalanches or submerged underwater. For the Wilseyville case, she used a “search” command, the same one she uses to key the dogs for avalanche, water, and article search.

The Doberman, Cinnamon, has worked homicide sites in the past, but Shirley admits that she,

like the other handlers, was doing “on-the-spot training” at Wilseyville. We don’t have human parts to train with. And it’s hard to understand how bones that are charred like the ones the dogs were finding could have any human scent left. It’s nothing but carbon. But nevertheless all the dogs were finding them.. And so we emphasized what they had done and rewarded them for it.”

Rita described one of her dog’s finds: “Ego found a site that I would’ve walked right right by. The bones were all covered with mountain misery and real hard to see unless you got down practically on your hands and knees.” (Mountain misery, also known as bear clover, is a foul-smelling ground cover, up to about a foot and a half high, that leaves a sticky residue on people and animals passing through. It’s common in the Sierra ponderosa pine belt, and Calaveras County is no exception.)

In other respects, too, search conditions were anything but ideal. Shirley set out a thermometer at ground level, and it registered 120° degrees. “So you know what the dogs were sticking their noses down into.” Handlers gave their dogs frequent rest periods, hosing them down to help them cool off.

Shirley explained that the initial strategy was to have the dogs do hasty searches of the area. Handlers were to flag places where the dogs showed interest, and the teams would then perform a fine search. But, as it turned out, there wasn’t time for the follow-up fine search at Wilseyville.

Intuition played its part in where the dog teams searched. Peggy Emrey said “it was pure hunch that took me to one area—a whole area I wouldn’t have found otherwise.”

Handlers discovered that their dogs’ alerts were generally from a fairly short distance away, and not at all what they had expected. “Peggy’s dog Brinna was kind of poking around and looking down in the mountain misery, and then she’d look up at Peggy,” Shirley said. “It was very unanimated, except that she kept looking back to Peggy each time. So every time we saw the dogs poke their nose down, we would go to that area and start parting the mountain misery. And that’s where we found the charcoal.”

Rita agreed that her dog’s reaction to the first find, a piece of charred material was “strange.” “Ego walks up with this funny look on his face. He gingerly walks up. And he has something in his mouth. I say ‘what do you have?’ and he goes ‘bah!’ and spits it out. It was something he didn’t really want.”

She feels the search was stressful for the dog. “When Ego is under pressure, he drools. I had never seen him do this on a search before, but he did it there.”

Of her own reaction to “the Wilseyville horror,” Rita says “I’ve had some sleepless nights. What really got to me was seeing pictures of the supposed victims in the paper. Up until then, it hadn’t been that bad.”

“But the dogs were really instrumental in this search,” she concludes. “One of the law enforcement officials on the scene came up and said ‘I’m impressed. I’m really impressed.’ I felt like saying, ‘So am I.’ My dogs have never had to go into anything like this before. We don’t give them enough credit.”