

# Help From Your SAR Dog Unit

*by Hatch and Judy Graham*

A small child wanders from his backyard in a rural part of the county. In front of his home is a busy road; behind, a high wooded hill with berry thickets, honeysuckle and creeper—and more woods beyond. It's almost dark, and the night is going to be chilly.

Realizing the urgency, the sheriff runs down his list of familiar resources. The local volunteer rescue squad is his first call; its members can patrol roads, knock at doors, and line-search through the woods. Next, he decides to call for dogs. A small child, frightened and hiding in the brush, could be sniffed out by a search dog while the human searchers might walk right on past in the dark.

The nearest volunteer SAR dog unit is several hundred miles away, but a phone call to the state office of emergency services gets things moving. The dog teams are alerted and the Rescue Coordination Center at Scott AFB arranges for air

transport through the nearest Civil Air Patrol unit, which provides air transport for the dog teams. When the teams arrive a few hours later, what can the sheriff expect of them?

Assuming that the dog unit tests against a minimum set of standards to assure the search proficiency of its dog/handler teams (see *Response!*, Winter 1984), there are still some variables. These variables depend partly on the composition of the particular dog unit and partly on what the particular sheriff (or other SAR-responsible official) wants and needs.

In counties with a highly organized SAR structure, where lost person searches are frequent and the search overhead is well versed in search management, the dog teams provide one more trained resource: clue-conscious handlers teamed up with super noses. The agency can assign them as he would any other skilled search crew, to run hasty searches along trails, ridges or drainages; to check out local hazards and attractions, or to grid through segments of the search area. The agency can expect the dog teams to follow instructions, carry out their assignments (or explain why they couldn't), and provide

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*SAR dogs and handlers are debriefed by the operations chief during a search and rescue event. Photo credit: Judy Graham.*



the kind of feedback at debriefings that will help move the search forward.

After completing his assignment, the handler should be able to draw in trails that don't show on the map; note confusing trail junctions, logging roads that are overgrown, or terrain features that might draw or channel the missing person. He should make sure any clues he or his dog found are properly logged in; these include "alerts" that his dog wasn't able to follow to their source. The handler should be able to report his probability of detection (PoD) based on the thoroughness of his search, the difficulty of terrain and vegetation, weather conditions, and subjective estimates of how well he felt he and his dog were working. The plans chief can plug this figure back into his calculations, along with the input from the rest of his searchers.

But what if the county hasn't had a missing person in the past five years and the sheriff feels a little rusty in his search management . . . or with an understaffed department, he can't assign a deputy full time to run the search . . . or he'd simply like some help? In some counties, the sheriff may well find that a volunteer SAR unit, which responds statewide or regionally and may handle up to several dozen searches a year, is more experienced at search strategy and tactics than anyone in his immediate area. This is true not only of SAR dog units, but also of mountain rescue and other highly trained SAR groups.

Depending on the agency's needs, these units may provide a good deal more than expertise in the field. For instance, the sheriff may look to them for advice. ("What else do you need to know about this little kid?"; "How far do youngsters normally travel?"; or "Where do you think you should start searching?") New units that have just become operational may not have the experience to offer much advice but, at a minimum, they should recognize their limitations and know when and where to look for backup.

As an integral part of the search community, a SAR dog unit can provide resource data to supplement the agency's preplan. For instance, if it looks like the three dog teams the unit was able to send won't be enough, the handlers should be able to suggest that the sheriff call in additional teams from another group. A missing person search is no place for unit rivalries. The handlers should also be familiar with other search resources in the area; if there's a need for trained mantrackers, foot searchers, rock climbers or the like, the dog handlers should know how the sheriff can contact them. If there's a need for search overhead, the handlers may be able to recom-

mend a mountain rescue unit in the area that can furnish search management expertise.

SAR dog handlers are happiest out in the field working their dogs. But, like other searchers, they gain a good deal of insight over the years into lost person behavior. Many handlers carry this further and study search strategy and tactics. The search manager may find they can make a valuable contribution to a Mattson consensus. (*Covered in the Managing the Search Function course, the Mattson consensus is a method whereby experienced searchers determine probability of areas for searching—ed.*) And, because they've spent a lot of time in the woods, they're generally good at parceling out the search area into segments that are manageable for teams in the field. Dog handlers have found themselves spending the night drawing the next day's search assignments on the map—and then going out at first light to search one of them.

## Units should know their limitations.

Depending on the way it's constituted, a SAR dog unit may provide other services as well: non-dog handlers (or handlers whose dogs are out of commission) who are skilled in land navigation, first aid, radio communications and all the other things a competent searcher should know—with or without a dog. These "extras" can accompany dog teams as another set of eyes, or they can help out as a SAR dog agency representative or liaison in base camp, radio relay in the field, or a number of other jobs.

Many dog units furnish a complete support unit: base operators (as documentation unit members) who monitor the dog teams' radio frequency, keep a log of their communications, maintain a map of the areas searched, and keep track of their progress in the field. Their maps and logs can supplement the agency's documentation of the mission. The base operators (as resource use specialists) can advise the agency on the dog teams' capabilities, debrief the handlers as they come out of the field, and report back to the plans chief on their search progress. As service branch assistants, they can also oversee meals and lodging (if available) for the dog teams and others, arrange for transport to and from search assignments and back home

when the mission is over, and handle other matters of dog team logistics.

The recent search for four-year-old Eli Fordham, missing in rugged Nevada County in the California Sierra (see *Response!* Fall 1984) was a good example of the range of services a SAR dog unit can sometimes provide.

On arrival, the initial dog teams performed hasty searches through the night. The next morning, as a large-scale search got under way, one dog handler (a NASAR "Managing the Search Function" instructor) served as plans chief, briefing personnel and making search assignments. Another handler, without a dog, was assigned as operations chief for the mission. He coordinated radio communications on two frequencies, kept radio logs and maps, debriefed teams coming out of the field, and made second-shift assignments. One dog handler, a highly skilled mantracker, spent an hour identifying—by process of elimination in a campground with many other children—the missing boy's track. Meanwhile, the remaining air-scenting dog teams began methodically covering sectors of the search area while a mantrailing bloodhound worked from the PLS (point last seen).

The dog teams were only part of that search effort. There was a mounted posse, helicopter, patrol boat, and grid searchers. The local camp staff served as the logistics branch, arranging for searchers' food and transport. The Incident Commander (a "Managing the Search Function" graduate) oversaw the whole operation, making sure the right resources were called and putting reinforcements on standby, to see the search through to its conclusion. Thanks to a good organization, teamwork among different resources, and 75 clue-conscious searchers, the little boy was found, alive, 22 hours after the initial report.

In summary, what can a SAR dog unit provide? At the very least, competent search teams: trained dogs and handlers equipped for the conditions they're likely to encounter and capable of working together within the search structure. In some cases, a base camp support unit in logistics, additional field support in operations, or—if the agency desires—personnel trained in search management: incident command or planning.

Sheriff's departments and other SAR-responsible agencies would do well to meet with the closest volunteer SAR units to learn about the groups' capabilities, limitations, and to form a good working relationship before that small child becomes missing. It's part of good preplanning. □