
When the SAR dog teams went to Mexico City, a number of life and death decisions had to be made, and made quickly.

SAR "Quake" Dogs

Saving Lives In Mexico City

by Hatch and Judy Graham

The urban SAR workshops at NASAR '85 in Nashville, Tennessee took on a real immediacy as Mexico was struck by a major earthquake on the first morning of the conference, September 19.

The quake, initially rated at 7.8 on the Richter scale but later upgraded to 8.1, struck at 7:19 a.m., as the population of this hemisphere's largest metropolitan area got ready to go to work. Children were already in school. Destruction was scattered but, in places, devastating. To make matters worse, a second major tremor registering 7.5 hit the next night, bringing down more structures, many of them damaged in the first shock. For instance, one 11-story section of a hospi-

tal housing injured survivors of the first quake reportedly was demolished in the second tremor; hundreds of patients, doctors and nurses were trapped in its ruins.

Estimates now suggest over 7,000 people were killed under the rubble in Mexico City and other affected areas.

The SAR dog handlers assembled at Nashville, like others across the country, were convinced their dogs could help locate the trapped victims. Many SAR dog units train to search debris from natural and man-made disasters such as floods, hurricanes, plane crashes and explosions. With the exception of the 1980 search for victims of the Mount St. Helens' eruption, the disasters the U.S. dog teams have searched were generally on a small scale. But handlers keep training in anticipation of a catastrophic earthquake or other major disaster in the U.S.

A number of countries have trained

Hatch and Judy Graham are editors of the SARDOG Alert Newsletter and participated in the Mexico City quake mission.



Dogs were able to detect survivors among the dead victims and rubble, though they usually could not stay to see their "finds."

disaster dog teams — often in tandem with extrication crews — ready to aid other nations in this kind of emergency. Swiss disaster dogs, for instance, have responded to earthquakes in Algeria, Italy, Rumania, Turkey, Yemen and Yugoslavia. The Swiss team, with 12 dogs and handlers and a large extrication crew, immediately mobilized, chartered a Hercules airplane, and arrived in Mexico City on Sept. 20. Newspapers reported that German, French, Italian, Canadian, English, Algerian and Russian-trained Cuban dog teams also joined the Mexico City operation.

Meanwhile, in Nashville, DOGS-East handler Linda Wallace was trying to add U.S. dogs to the list. As a result of her efforts, the State Department's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance put SAR dogs at the conference on standby Friday evening, and at 2330 hours that night requested the teams. A C-141 Air Force StarLifter transport, coming from Pittsburgh with Division of Mine Safety and Office of Surface Mining personnel and specialized seismic and remote television equipment, would pick up four dog handler teams and overhead support members the next morning for the flight to Mexico City.

Excited handlers assembled and, after a quick count of those with dogs who could commit themselves to an extended mission, put together what came to be known as the "advance team" (in hopes of calling in additional dog teams from around the country who were on standby). The advance team consisted of Linda Wallace and "Bourbon," Caroline Hebard of West Jersey Canine SAR and "Aly," and Hatch and Judy Graham of the California Rescue Dog Association with "Pepper" and "Sardy."

They immediately requested a two-person overhead to act as liaison with the U.S. Embassy to deploy the dog teams in the field and handle logistics. After an overhead "talent hunt" at the convention, Shenandoah National Park Assistant Chief Ranger Bill Pierce was selected as team liaison and coordinator. DOGS-East training director Marian Hardy was chosen as field coordinator.

Through the night, a multitude of others worked on logistics, plans, and finance. They drew up lists of needed equipment and located a sporting goods store willing to open up early in the morning to supply freeze-dried food, hard hats and goggles, and a water purifying pump. Also needed were emergency veterinary supplies, surveyor's tape, sturdy gloves, surgical masks, flashlight batteries, jugs of distilled water, 10 days supply of dog food, and other incidentals.



Peggy Emrey sends "Brinna" to an area most rescuers would not venture into.

To help pay for all this, over \$500 was collected that night in the "pig pen" hospitality room from NASAR members eager to support the U.S. team. Others — friends and acquaintances of the advance team members — offered to get their extra dogs, vehicles and baggage back home. The local veterinary association donated first aid supplies for the dogs. And, as the advance team headed for the airport, a crowd of conference participants gathered to wish them luck and many lifesaving finds.

On the other end, at Mexico City's Benito Juarez Airport, the crowd was overwhelming. A line of police officers gripped each other by the wrists, holding back reporters, photographers and onlookers as U.S. Ambassador John Gavin greeted his nation's team. In the confusion, the handlers were grateful for the orange NASAR caps they'd been given as a send-off; it was the only way to keep track of each other.

A quick tour of some of the damaged sections of the city culminated in a meeting with the head of the Federal District Engineers. Later that evening, the U.S. dog handlers briefed engineers and architects of the city's *delegaciones*, or precincts, on the dogs' capabilities. These were the people who were in charge of some of the damaged buildings, or dispatched the dog teams to sites where live victims might be buried. They also accompanied handlers in the field, advising on what buildings — or portions of buildings — could be searched with relative safety. In Mexico City, with aftershocks occurring many times a day, safety was always a relative term.

This was brought home most graphically when the advance team arrived that night at its plush hotel. There were noticeable cracks in the walls and ceilings from the recent and continuing quakes.

Another kind of pressure was also brought home. The hotel was full of reporters from all parts of the world, all bent on interviewing the U.S. team. What could these dogs do? Could they perform? The handlers referred the reporters to the U.S. Embassy and deferred their private questions — and doubts — to the next morning on the rubble. They'd been training for years, but they'd never encountered anything like the earthquake in Mexico City.

After a briefing by embassy officials the next morning, a police escort led the bus carrying the U.S. team through a maze of streets to its first search assignment. It was a hectic ride through Mexico City traffic, swarming with volunteer *rescate* vehicles waving makeshift red flags. With no prior knowledge of what access routes might be blocked, the team sometimes had to circle dozens of blocks to find a route into the building it was assigned to search. Ambulances sped through traffic, carrying recently found survivors to hospitals, and firefighters were putting out the last smoldering fires in some of the destroyed buildings.

The handlers learned that each major site of destruction had someone in

charge — an engineer or architect, a military commander, police officer, bombardier or firefighter — who would direct them to that part of the building where someone believed people were trapped. And at every site, there were dozens — sometimes hundreds — of able-bodied volunteers doing the backbreaking work of removing rubble, ready to risk life and limb to save their trapped companions.

As part of the initial, lifesaving effort, the dog teams' job was to identify where survivors were buried. Several days after the first quake, it usually didn't take a dog's keen nose to tell where there were fatalities. But there might be one or two survivors trapped among the corpses.

The dogs' previous disaster training had been to locate live people buried safely under debris. On actual searches for missing people, the dogs sometimes found their victims dead. Now, the handlers would have to "read" the difference between their dogs' indication of a person whether alive, dead or seriously injured.

And based on what their dogs told them, the handlers found themselves making some very difficult life and death decisions that affected rescuers as well

MORE





Shirley Hammond and "Cinnamon" search an office from tabletops. Photo by Peggy Emrey.

as possible survivors in the ruins.

In one instance, it was believed there might still be someone alive in a clothing factory, but the building was so unstable that it endangered neighboring structures. It had to be demolished. The dogs were called in to see if there was, indeed, a survivor inside. The handlers interpreted their dogs' reaction as "yes" — but the risk to rescuers was extreme. How sure were the handlers that someone was alive in there?

As another example, rescuers at the Juaféz Hospital were bringing out infants, as well as an adult patient and a nurse, alive from one section of the collapsed building. On the other side of the hospital, it was thought there might also be doctors trapped alive. The dogs confirmed there were live people — but any major excavation at this site would risk collapse of the other part of the building where people were being saved. Again the question, how sure were the handlers?

Dogs and handlers worked in teams; one handler directed his dog to search a specified area while a second handler helped observe what the dog was doing. If the dog alerted, the second handler brought his dog in to confirm. In some cases, a third and even fourth dog would be used in the same area, to try to pinpoint where the scent was coming from or to get a consensus on whether the dogs were smelling someone alive or dead.

It was slow, painstaking work as the dogs carefully moved over chunks of concrete, broken glass, slick tile and twisted rebar. They burrowed into openings too small for their handlers and

climbed onto ledges to check airspaces sandwiched between collapsed floors and ceilings. They were lowered into pits the extrication crews were excavating to show in which direction the digging should proceed.

After searching an area and flagging the dogs' alerts, the team would move on to another spot, perhaps on the other side of the city, leaving the extrication crews with the job of reaching the victims in the rubble.

By midday Sunday, the advance team suggested that more dogs were needed. An official request by the Mexican government, through the U.S. Embassy, soon had nine more dog teams and two support members from the California Rescue Dog Association aboard a C-141, headed for Mexico City. These teams were made up of Shirley Hammond and "Cinnamon," Barbara Adcock and "Kiela," Betty Blake and "Berry," Julie Buer and "Barley," Rita Comden and "Ego," Peggy Emrey and "Brinna," Peter Fabrick and "Alex," Bev Peabody and "Bruga," Laura Sutherland and "Mishka," and support members Koll Buer, a geologist, and David Hammond, a structural engineer.

Buer and Hammond brought additional expertise to the U.S. team. And Peter Fabrick's little dog "Alex," an Australian Kelpie, soon became known as "the tunnel rat." Half the size of the German shepherds, golden retrievers, Dobermans, giant Schnauzers and yellow labs on the U.S. team, she could get into tight spaces inaccessible to the other dogs.

The advance team continued to func-

tion as it had before. Three new teams were formed with the additional nine dogs and handlers, each team with a field coordinator. At the U.S. Embassy, Bill Pierce monitored all four teams, which were deployed separately to various parts of the city.

After the last shift of the day, dogs and handlers would return to their hotel and compare notes with the Division of Mines seismic and television crews, which sometimes were assigned to the same buildings the dog teams searched. The seismic location system, which can detect vibrations — including breathing and even heartbeats — in the rubble, helped confirm what the dogs were telling their handlers. So did the remote TV probe, which can record human shapes and movement through hundreds of meters of collapsed building.

Because there was no unified command of the search operation, and the U.S. dog teams had no extrication unit specifically assigned to them, the handlers found it difficult to learn the results of their searches. They bought as many as nine morning and six evening newspapers to try to get news of rescues, condemned buildings, and other feedback from their work.

During its five days of searching, the U.S. Dog team worked on nearly 70 buildings in different parts of the city. The dogs identified over 20 spots where one or more live people were trapped, and in these places, at least 15 people were reported to have been extricated and saved. The dogs also indicated countless dead bodies. As the U.S. team boarded a C-130 September 27 for the flight back home, word came of two more people saved where the dogs had alerted.

The Mexico City earthquake was a tremendous learning experience for handlers and overhead alike. Those who worked there agreed on the need for a permanent national disaster dog team, with support skilled in many fields including foreign languages and assessment of damaged buildings.

CARDA has scheduled a disaster dog seminar April 12-13 in Sparks, Nevada, which will be open to SAR dog handlers nationwide, to share the experience gained at disasters such as the California mudslides of 1982, the volcano eruption in Columbia and the Mexico City earthquake of 1985. (For more information, contact Dr. Murphy at 10505 Cherryridge Rd., Sebastopol, CA 95472; 707/823-4866.)

SAR dog handlers around the country will be working together toward a national disaster dog team that can be ready to respond quickly, wherever it's needed to help save lives. □