

Here's the Real Poop

By—Hatch Graham
Contributing Editor

I first noticed the phenomenon on my first search with the Virginia Search and Rescue Dog Assn. at Catawba State Hospital in Roanoke County. We were searching for a patient with impaired mental abilities on the grounds of the hospital. My partner “Major” was ranging ahead of me on a grassy area with large oak trees. Suddenly, his head and ears went up in a classic alert and he cut sharply to our left and headed upwind with a purpose. Figuratively holding my breath I followed for, if I read him right, he was definitely alerting on human scent. Could we have located our quarry so soon? Major stopped at the base of a large oak and sniffed. As I ran up, I saw the unmistakable brown stained paper and pile of fecal matter. The best thing about this incident was that I didn't scold Major for disappointing me, after all I'd trained him to single out human scent and take me to it.

He kept trying for three days in that search and with his help, we found Lydia unconscious but alive after 84 hours on a steep hillside above the hospital. Many things stand out in my mind about that search, but I always remember my excitement when Major alerted on the crap.

Be ready

When I first outlined the idea for this story to Editor Mike McKown, he was entranced by the subject. He's been bugging me for months to do the fecal matter

story. Mike had another name for it but I still haven't come to grips with putting the old Anglo-Saxon four-letter word into print. My friend (sic) will tell you I use it as an epithet regularly and emphasize my belief in the honesty of certain politicians



Alert on human feces in atrium of partially collapsed building in Mexico City in 1985. Photos by Judy Graham

and others by preceding it with the varietal “bull.” But I'm still a little squeamish about it here.

The point to be made for the readers of DSM is that if you train your dog to alert on humans, be prepared to find anything that smells human—even when the smell is highly concentrated and somewhat offensive.

When the U.S. sent dogs to the Mexico City earthquake in 1985, several of us noticed the dogs alerting on fecal matter around the edge of the rubble. Don't forget the plumbing and water systems were out and workers on the collapsed buildings did what they had to do.

No sir, they didn't bring in porta-potties.

CARDA was called to the Bayview Industrial Park fire in San Francisco in 1986. Firemen had located most of the bodies but wanted to check again before they began bulldozing the charred building. Our dogs all had a chance to be scented on a location where a badly damaged, cremated body had just been removed and all of the dogs gave their individual but distinctive alert for a cadaver. Then we proceeded to search the rest of the city-block-sized funeral pyre. One dog alerted and scratched in the ashes. Another dog was brought in and also alerted and dug. The firemen came with shovels and dug down a foot and a half to a broken sewer main. Another dog gave a pronounced alert and followed the scent into the front end of the structure that was still standing. A thorough check of the site produced—plumbing.

Sewer vents

In two separate locations in the San Francisco's Marina District after the Lorna Prieta earthquake last October, the dogs isolated the sewer vent stacks. Following earthquake protocol, each dog's alert is checked by other dogs. We had multiple alerts on the vent stacks in two different buildings. Knowing that dogs alert on sewers, broken pipes and vent stacks in damaged buildings is valuable knowledge for search teams in disaster situations. CARDA includes fecal matter occasionally as a distraction in training for disaster. Some handlers believe they

can distinguish between their dog's alerts on a human and his waste. Certainly, many of us believe we can tell between live and dead with some dogs and reading the dog can improve with practice.

How many times, while walking across the street, have you had your dog stop to sniff the manhole (or maintenance hole, as they are now called in Sacramento)? Keep in mind, you searchers, you developed your dog's interest in that smell.

For years, the snow avalanche people have advised the searchers on the probe lines to please urinate away from the avalanche site to give the avalanche dogs a break.

For submerged dummies

A few years back, El Dorado County was hosting a multi-county SAR exercise (SAREX). Members of the dive recovery team were going to sink a dummy in a lake and called me up to ask if that would work okay for the dogs. I told them that a dummy is really not too cool for the dogs since it doesn't really have enough scent. Even dressed in someone's old clothes, it presents a scent picture we'd really rather not train on because we don't want the dogs alerting on every tennis shoe lost along a lake or stream. They were perplexed because the water was deep and cold and they didn't want to leave a diver down a long time while the dogs took their turns. I suggested they urinate on the dummy just before submerging it. It worked for most of the dogs.

CARDA's John Koerner and Shirley Hammond report that while working the train wreck in San Bernardino, they got strong alerts in one location in the Trona "ash." They were puzzled because it seemed an unlikely place, but a worker solved their quandary by confessing that several of them had used the area as a urinal. The ash didn't pick up the yellow like snow does.

I don't think our observations are unique nor original. More likely, dog handlers just don't talk about it much. If we've helped anyone save a little time or avoid a mistake, it'll be worth all the shit Mike's given me about getting it on paper.



A dog is digging in the ashes over a break in the sewer main at the San Francisco Bayview Industrial Park fire in 1986.



Several dogs alerted over the sewer vent stacks broken off under the collapsed walls of the earthquake and fire damaged buildings in San Francisco's Marina District in 1989.