

Training & the Real Thing

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The call came on Saturday evening, June 10, 1978. A 61-year-old patient was missing from Catawba State Hospital in Roanoke County. Virginia Search and Rescue Dog handlers hurriedly loaded dogs and gear to convoy across the state.

Arriving at Salem just before midnight, they were met by the Roanoke County Director of Emergency Services who escorted them across the first folds of the Blue Ridge to Catawba. After a quick briefing on the situation and plans for the next day, he suggested they get a couple of hours sleep before the search resumed at 0700.

Those handlers didn't sleep much. Their new unit's reputation—and a woman's life—depended on what they did in the morning. And for all the training they'd been through, and all the testing, this would be different. This was the real world.

It had been almost a year since Marilyn Greene of Adirondack Rescue Dog Association had come down from New York State to give an introductory seminar on forming a SAR dog unit. Since then, dogs and handlers had been training intensively. Marilyn had come back eight months later, in April, to check on the unit's progress. As a result of that weeklong evaluation, four dog/handler teams were declared ready for searches.

They'd worked hard to get there. Handlers trained their dogs almost daily, and got together as a unit every weekend - rain or shine, 90 percent humidity or ice storm. Once they had to detour through an extra county because a bridge to the training site was underwater; when one handler didn't show up that drenching day, the others worried that he must be sick or have car trouble. Excuses were rare. Everyone had one thing in mind—get trained up and ready to go.

They didn't all make it. In January, 10 teams had been in training. Three months later one team dropped out. The April evaluation washed out another team, and one handler retired her dog and started a new one.

That was in April. Since then, there had been a few callouts, and long drives through the night, only to be turned around by radio enroute when the missing person was found. Handlers wondered if they'd ever really get to a search. And, in the back of their minds, they wondered how they'd do if they ever got there.

Now, this Sunday morning, they were finally there. Since Friday midafternoon, a patient—described as hostile and possibly combative, and weighing 250 lbs—had been missing. A compulsive flower-picker, she was last seen gathering flowers near the entrance to the hospital.

The search for her began as soon as she was discovered missing and continued through that first night. The next day aircraft scanned all the open areas around the hospital, and foot searchers combed the places where the missing woman picked flowers every day. The only clues they found were some crepe-sole tracks headed east toward the main highway; no one could tell if the tracks were valid. Surrounded by rolling green lawns and with the backdrop of 3,000-foot North Mountain behind it, Catawba State Hospital is a picture-pretty spot. Handlers soon learned it was

anything but easy searching.

Early Sunday morning, dogs and handlers began hasty-searching along roads, trails and firebreaks. Almost immediately the dogs began giving alerts but couldn't follow through. Handlers blamed the shifting and variable winds and broken terrain, as their assignments took them around and over knolls and into dense green hollows.

By afternoon VSRDA's operations leader had divided the primary search area into sectors, assigning one to each dog team. The dogs continued to alert, particularly in the hollows. Still they couldn't follow the scent to its source.



VSRDA dogs and handlers, with hospital staff, get ready to head into the field.

Photo submitted by the authors.

The next day, Monday, the teams worked farther east along the base of the mountain, expanding the search area. At the same time, they continued to recheck alert areas, using different dogs at different times of day. The alerts were scattered over a wide area in hollows to the east of the hospital, with isolated alerts on the slope above (and north of) the institution. The handlers were worried. In training, their dogs usually located the "victims" in short order; if they were having trouble pursuing an alert, the handlers knew how to work around until they could solve the problem. But nothing the handlers it did seemed to be solving this problem.

As they'd learned in training, they reported every alert, with the wind direction and other pertinent information. The alerts were all logged on the base map. Between shifts, handlers studied that map, trying to discover a pattern.

Monday afternoon a severe thunderstorm hit that part of the Blue Ridge. As the storm cell passed over, dogs..in widely scattered locations suddenly began alerting strongly. After the storm passed, as other teams tried to recheck the alerts, the dogs showed no interest.

By Monday night the handlers knew they were running out of time. The missing woman—if she was in the area—had been out for over three days. While the weather had been generally

warm, it had rained twice, and Monday night temperatures, following the thunderstorm, dropped into the 50s. An earlier start was planned for Tuesday morning.

Before daylight dogs and handlers were re-searching the hollows east of the hospital, where the dogs had given so many alerts over the past two days. With the slopes still in shadow and air moving down, one dog alerted and began a long, hard run straight up the mountain. He lost the scent in a deep ravine.

Handlers regrouped on the side of the slope, higher than they'd searched before. They lined up and headed west, working parallel sweeps across the face of the mountain. At about 1030 one of the dogs turned and worked a short distance downhill; her handler followed and found the missing woman; facedown on the ground.

She didn't move. Radioing for help, the handler examined her—and discovered she was breathing, faintly.

Other handlers hurried to the spot, and hospital staff, with members of the county fire and sheriff's departments, climbed the steep hill to evacuate the unconscious woman.

In retrospect, handlers had a lot of questions:

Overweight as she was, how had the missing woman gotten so high on the mountain?

Why had the dogs consistently alerted in the hollows, when she wasn't there? And how did her scent get everywhere the dogs found it? Why couldn't they follow it to its source? What was happening during the thunderstorm?

When the dogs finally found the missing woman, why was she so unexpectedly alive?

And most important, how might they have found her sooner?

As the handlers started to come up with some answers, they realized that the search at Catawba was some of the best training they'd ever had.

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