Survivors Under the Rubble

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Contributing Editors

Mexico City, September, 1985:

It's dusk, your first evening in the city that yesterday night experienced a second major tremor. The first, day before yesterday, registered 8.1 on the Richter scale. Both quakes caused extensive damage. Apprehensive about entering a building whose entrace sags with the weight of loose floors above it, you stare into the dimness—and see a figure sprawled under a toppled column. When the first shock passes, you realize it's just a store mannequin. Not the kind of victim you come to find.

You look through a break in the wall of an office building and into the next room, misshapen and filled with debris. You notice the wall on the left is covered with yellow tile, and it strikes you as an odd decorative style. Then you notice the white porcelain fixtures protruding from the wall up near the ceiling. It suddenly dawns on you that these are commodes, and the entire room is on its side.

Ever since you stepped off the military transport, you've felt the earth shaking. That's partly imagination and partly true. There have been over 50 tremors since the big quake of September 19th. Now, standing on top of what used to be an eight-story government building—reduced to the level of the three-story structure 'f across the way - there's no doubt. The whole city landscape seems in motion. You're thankful you're on the roof; you won't end up with eight slabs of concrete on top of you.

The miners are identified as the men in the blue coveralls and yellow hardhats, digging a precarious way through tons of cement and twisted rebar to reach a potential survivor. You notice that one of the miners passing buckets of brick and rubble from the tunnel has a piece of tape wrapped around his wrist. Has he injured himself? You look closer and see his name is written on the tape, in case it becomes necessary to identify his body.

And the image that brings together all of the fear and hope, the reason you're here: Elbowing yourself along a tunnel filled with the smell of concrete dust and the all-pervasive odor of corpses, every now and then you catch a glimpse of your dog moving on ahead in the beam of your flash-light. He says this is the way to a survivor.

In the aftermath of the earthquake that reduced part of Mexico City to rubble, collapsed factories and highrises leaning at crazy angles, disaster trained dog teams from a number of countries flew to Mexico to help locate victims. Newspaper accounts estimated at least 50 dogs with their handlers, coming from Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, England, Algeria, and Cuba. And, for the first time, there was a United States dog team drawn from across the country.

The first quake hit just as the annual conference of the National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR) was getting underway in Nashville, TN. Handlers from 15 SAR dog units around the country were in Nashville, some with their dogs and search gear. DOGS-East handler Linda Wallace contacted the State Department's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, advising them of the availability of trained dog teams, and late friday night the call came; the Mexican government was requesting U.S. dogs. An Air force C-141 Starlifter would pick up four dogs and handlers, with two support people, at Nashville next morning.

The "advance team" was chosen from the handlers who had their dogs with them and could commit themselves to an extended mission—up to 10 days. They planned to evaluate the situation and, if appropriate, ask for reinforcements from the estimatcd 20 to 30 other dog/handler teams standing by around the country. The advance team consisted of Linda Wallace and her Yellow Lab, "Bourbon;" Caroline Hebard of West jersey Canine SAR and her German Shepherd, "Aly," and Hatch and Judy Graham of California Rescue Dog Association with their Shepherds, "Pepper" and "Sardy."

Bill Pierce, assistant chief ranger at Shenandoah National Park, was selected as team liaison and coordinator to represent the dog teams to the U.S. embassy and handle logistics like transportation to search sites, meals, and the return flight home. DOGS-East handler Marian Hardy was to assist him as field coordinator.

While the advance team tried to get a little sleep, dozens of other dog handlers and NASAR members worked through the night, drawing up lists of equipment and supplies (10 days worth of dog food, freeze-dried handler food, jugs of distilled water, a water purification pump, flashlight batteries, hardhats, goggles and gloves, surgical masks, emergeni:y veterinary supplies) and taking up a collection to help pay for them.

By Saturday afternoon, September 21st, the U.S. advance team was in Mexico City, surveying the damage from the quakes and the kinds of situations the dogs (and handlers) would be facing. That evening they met with city engineers and architects to discuss the dogs' capabilities, and the next morning they set to work in earnest.

Three days after the first quake, the city was still looking for survivors. The handlers soon realized their primary job was to identify where there were live victims trapped in the rubble. Most of the buildings they searched contained dead bodies, but these were much lower priority. In some cases, live people might be trapped among the corpses.

Two dogs wait out front while "Beri," a Giant Schnauzer, owned by Betty Blake, begins his search.

In their disaster training, the dogs were accustomed to finding live people buried (safely) under rubble. In real search situations, some of them had located victims who were dead. Now the handlers had to read the subtle differences in their dogs' alerts on live, dead, and injured people. Not only the lives of buried victims, but also of rescuers, could be at stake, since many of the damaged and partially collapsed buildings were extremely unstable. The slightest movement in the wrong place, trying to free a trapped person, might bring the building down.

The advance team worked in pairs, with one handler directing his dog to search an area while a second handler helped observe the dog's behavior. If the first dog alerted, the second dog was brought in to confirm. In some cases, a third or even fourth dog was used at the same spot, to try to pinpoint where the scent was coming from or to get a consensus on whether the scent was from a live or a dead person. After the area was searched, handlers flagged the spots where their dogs alerted, then moved on to another site, which might be on the other side of the city. Many times they never learned what the extrication crews found under rubble at the spots where they marked their dogs' alerts.

Preparing to search this crumbled building. Dogs are Cinnamon, Beri, and Brinna.

By the end of the first morning of searching, the advance team suggested calling for reinforcements. Again on request of the Mexican government through the U.S. embassy; nine more dog/handler teams and two support members of California Rescue Dog Association were flown to Mexico City. The backup tcams were Shirley Hammond and her Doberman "Cinnamon;" Betty Blake and her Giant Schnauzer "Beri;" Peter Pabrick and his Australian Kelpie "Alex;" Rita Comden and Julie Buer with their Golden Retrievers "Ego" and "Barley;" and Barbara Adcock, Peggy Emrey, Bev Peabody and Laura Sutherland with their German Shepherds "Kiela," "Brinna," "Bruga" and "Mishka." Koll Buer, a geologist, and David Hammond, a structural engineer, acted as field coordinators for the fresh teams.

The Kelpie, incidentally, soon came to be known as "the tunnel rat," in demand throughout the city. Half the size of the other dogs on the team, she could wriggle into many a tight space where the others couldn't fit.

The handlers discovered that their dogs showed a wide range of behavior for indicating live as opposed to dead victims. For instance, one dog would dig and paw when she caught scent of an injured peson, and return to her handler with an animated but worried expression. Working the same site, a second dog would grab his handler's glove or flashlight. A third dog would dig, then reward herself with a bag of hospital gauze—the closest thing to a stick she could find.

Dead bodies also drew distinctive reactions. On the advance team, three of the dogs showed a strong avoidance behavior when they smelled corpses; one had such an expressive look of distaste on his face that it was plain as English. The fourth dog, on the other hand, reacted to dead bodies with intense sniffing, trying to locate the source of a scent which might be the length of a building away.

Berry searches an office building. Half the structurer had collapsed.   Betty Blake photos.

The handlers also learned that the dogs could become so overloaded with the smell of death that they occasionally shut off completely and needed a period of rest before working again. A good remedy was to set up a "live find" by sending an interpreter or engineer into a safe hiding place and letting the dogs find him. One evening the team traveled to the hills outside the city, and the dogs romped in the grass like puppies, glad to be away from the smell of cement dust and corpses. The stress of finding so many dead people was obvious in other ways, too.

Some of the dogs went off their feed for the duration of the search, some became ravenous. They snuggled against their handlers in the hotel room, and their faces looked perpetually drawn.

But the dogs kept working. On their handlers' direction, they climbed ladders to search the small airspaces between sandwiched ceilings and floors. From a landing, the handlers could send them the length of a corridor and into the rooms on each side, checking for scent. The dogs carefully made their way over piles of broken concrete, glass and tiles and through tangles of rebar; up slick inclined sheets of metal and polished marble. Peter Fabrick and Alex were lifted by crane in a basket to search upper stories of a building that couldn't be reached in any other way. All of the agility training and practice at building and rubble search paid off. None of the dogs or handlers were injured during the five days of searching.

One of the greatest stresses for the handlers was the difficulty—often impossibility—of finding out the results of their work. They flagged where the dogs alerted, drew diagrams for the resident engineer, and then moved on to search somewhere else. Newspaper accounts were sketchy, at best, and there was no unified command of the entire recovery operation to report on rescues.

Nevertheless, the U.S. team knows that it saved lives. It worked on nearly 60 buildings, identifying about a dozen places where the dogs indicated one or more live persons were trapped. In these places, at least six people were reported to have been extricated and saved. The dogs also indicated countless dead bodies. As the team boarded the plane for the flight back home, word came of two more saves.

U.S. Ambassador John Gavin told the team "Your efforts have done more in a few days to cement Mexican-American relations than years of diplomacy." Wherever they went, searching the rubble of collapsed buildings in many sections of the city, they acted as goodwill ambassadors. People stopped to shake the handlers' hands and pet the dogs, tearfully thanking them for coming to help. The last day, as the team headed home, a policeman waved and shouted, "I love you all."

Dog Sports ~**December, 1985**