
*This method of canine transport can increase the usefulness
of your SAR dog team.*

Slings Your Dog

How to Get Your Search Dog Safely Airborne

by Hatch Graham

Hheavy winter storms raged through northern California in January 1980, and every rivulet poured water into the canyons. A mother loaded her two children in

With 21 years of emergency response management on large forest fires to his credit, Hatch Graham branched out into search and rescue by helping to form Dogs Organized for Ground Search (DOGS) in Alaska in October 1975. In the past eight years, Hatch and his wife Judy have been active dog handlers in ARDA's Virginia unit (VSRDA), DOGS-East (Maryland/Virginia), WOOF (California) and California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA). Hatch is currently vice-president of CARDA and Judy is editor of CARDA's newsletter, Pathfinder and of NASAR's SAR Dog ALERT. Members of NASAR's SAR Dog Committee, Training Committee and Publications Committee, Hatch and Judy still managed to get this article written between searches.

the family pickup and made a run for groceries, fording the already rising creek on the way to town. On the return trip an hour later, the swollen torrent flipped the truck on its side. The mother dragged herself and her children from the overturned truck, but the little girl was swept away. Afterward, the boy seemed to remember his sister helping him ashore.

Butte County Sheriff's Department called the California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA) to help comb the riverbanks in hopes the little girl had made it out in the confusion. A huge military tank retriever ferried some of the dogs and handlers across the now roaring river to search the opposite bank. After several hours of searching in the rain — and the continued rising of the creek to flood-stage — even the tank retriever couldn't cross. Mountain rescue crews rigged a tyrolean traverse to extricate handlers and dogs, but no one had experience in devising rigging for the



After clearing the skid, the handler "rides" the dog down. Note the safety belay line as well as the rappel rope. Credit: Official Navy photos by PHI Ron Mathews.



Original model of the Navy harness. Leg holes are now smaller and a Velcro fastener is provided across the chest; suspension points are slightly shorter. The harness has the advantage of two D-rings with one point of lift.

dogs. A sheriff's deputy drove to town and returned with a plastic airline dog crate. It was attached to the traverse with webbing and carabiners and steadied by the dog handlers riding across in a bosun's chair.

The handlers had plenty of second thoughts during and after this adventure. Had the crate slipped loose, it meant certain death for their trapped partner. A better system was obviously needed. Ken Navarre, a CARDA handler and mountain climber, began work on a dog sling harness.

Meanwhile on the other side of the Sierra, ADCS Bill "Red Dogg" Moss, Senior Chief at Fallon Naval Air Station in Nevada, was pondering ways of searching for lost victims of air crashes in the rugged mountains of the region, when he came in contact with Wilderness Finders (WOOF) and its experienced dog teams. The idea of inserting dog teams into the backcountry by helicopter was a natural. But how to lower the dog and handler and, conversely, how to hoist them out of the rough terrain presented a tactical problem. The standard body nets — much like a fish net that can be wrapped around a person — seemed too confining for a dog and too difficult to safely apply.

Sitting around a table in the Cutthroat Saloon in Markleeville, WOOF Manager Sandy Bryson, Alpine County Undersheriff Larry Kuhl, and Moss talked about a dog sling har-

ness. Kuhl sketched a design on a napkin, and the next day Moss passed it on to Bill Case, his rigger at Fallon. Using packcloth-type nylon, webbing, Velcro fasteners and D-rings, Case put together a prototype which is still probably the best design anyone has come up with.

Over the past three years, crews at Fallon have trained and practiced with dog teams from WOOF and occasionally CARDA using the sling. Moss stresses that, before attempting to rappel from a helicopter with a dog, it's essential for personnel to complete the standard USN rappelling training course or an equivalent and to observe strict safety rules.

Obviously, these techniques described below are emergency measures and should only be used when adequate landing zones for helicopters or safe trails around cliffs are not available.

AD1 James "Mike" Robinson describes the technique this way: The rope with the rappelling device and a belay line are hooked into the handler's belt and harness. The handler climbs out onto the skid, facing the doorway. In the meantime, the dog has been strapped into his harness. He is then faced away from the door and clipped into the rappelling device. The dog is pushed out tail-first and hangs between the handler's legs.

At this point, the only problem is the potential for the dog to go for-

ward between the skid and the cabin while the handler goes backwards into the blue. This is why Moss stresses that the handler try to go off as soon as the dog is free and clamped between his legs. "Once gravity takes over, the dog hangs quietly," he says.

The dog is usually not hooked in too early because of the possibility of him crossing over the belay line with the rappel line and getting them fouled. The belay line is a second, safety line hooked into the handler's belt and played out by a crewman in the ship as handler and dog descend.*

Moss has found that dogs are pretty nonchalant (or ignorant) the first time out. After that, they generally prefer to stay with the ship. Some experienced dogs will hide under the seats or try to evade the crewman. Others wrap their legs around the crewman's legs. The crewman usually has to help get the dog's front paws off the deck. (Moss says he has two sets of four parallel scratches in the deck of his helicopter to prove it.)

Moss's experience with the dogs' behavior on leaving the helicopter jibes with my experience rappelling down rock cliffs. Anytime the dog's feet hit anything solid, he scrambles to get his footing.

Robinson says the scariest instance he can remember is when one dog, a veteran of several rappels, headed for the door before his harness was clipped in. This is one reason why both Moss and Robinson stress putting the dog out tail-first. Another reason is that, going head-first, the dog would be inclined to jump into his handler's arms, possibly going over the handler's shoulder or flipping him over backwards. It might make a good cartoon sequence, but it's not anything we want to experience.

All in all, though, crewmen find the dogs well-behaved and even "docile." In this particularly stressful situation, training pays off. Moss was especially impressed with WOOF handler Dick Martin's dog Rett, who reads American sign language and will do a standstay on Martin's signal while he climbs out on the skids.

While stressing safety, Moss also suggests the ground crew avoid standing under the ship during a rappel. This rule was developed after a golden

**Use of a redundant backup system such as this can prevent serious accidents such as occurred to a California Highway Patrol officer in July 1983. His "line slacked" after a static line pickup, became unhooked, and the officer fell 60 feet, suffering a skull fracture and other injuries. He had no backup system.*

retriever was given the "Flying Feces" award for his performance during an exciting descent. The handler claims he clamped his legs too tight around his partner as they were going down.

As I reported in NASAR's SAR Dog ALERT (March 1983), rappelling down a cliff requires a little different technique. It won't do to have the dog between your legs and in contact with the rock face. We rig the rappel device two to two-and-a-half feet above the handler's waist with a piece of tubular nylon webbing, and clip the dog sling in at that point also. The dog is suspended about chest/waist-high, allowing the handler to control the dog's movement with one arm while rappelling with the other. The problem comes on lower-angle slopes where the dog swings away from the handler and may touch the rock. A short tie from the dog to a chest harness might keep him closer and avoid this, although the handler would have to carry the weight and push back with his legs and torso to keep the dog up and out. The dogs don't fight the system under gravity, but they'll scramble when their feet

touch rock.

A case worth repeating is Don Huber's experience as reported in *Woofnews* (July 1980 and August 1982). Huber was led by the partner of a missing goldminer some 3,000 feet down into the rugged American River Canyon. It grew late in the day and there was no safe place to spend the night. Huber and his companion climbed up over 1,000 feet looking for a place where the helicopter could put a skid down, with no luck, so the crew lowered a rope and harness. They hoisted Huber's guide out first, then dropped the line, harness and sling for Huber and his dog Smokey. Huber quickly put the sling on Smokey and clipped in. As they started up, Huber realized in his haste he had put the sling on backwards and Smokey was hanging with his tail higher than his head. By radio, Huber got the helicopter to lower him down again so he could reverse the sling. (It's now marked "front" and "rear.") Then, as the two were being hoisted up, the winch line fouled, and dog and handler rode several miles up the canyon suspended 30 feet below the

chopper while the crew struggled to make things right. Finally aboard, they were flown out of the canyon. Huber says it was quite an experience; he went home and slept for 24 hours straight.

While seldom used on actual searches so far, the potential for sling-search dogs for rappelling, hoisting and rope transport is promising. Teams can be placed into remote places faster, they can be quickly moved to follow up on clues, they can traverse terrain that might otherwise require difficult and time-consuming detours, and they can be extricated from difficult locations. Training, before the fact, is essential. During a search is no time to try these techniques for the first time. Dogs, handlers and helicopter crews should get together ahead of time, train together, and work out the problems. These are good tactics; let's use them right. □

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