

There and Back

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Many volunteer SAR dog units include in their mission-ready evaluations something like the following:

“Dog must be willing to enter a vehicle containing four or five other dogs and be transported for 15 minutes. Dogs must not struggle, or show aggression, and should remain quiet.”

This requirement is seldom a problem with dogs that have been training together for a number of months. But it’s an important requirement, too. A recent search in the California Sierra was an example of why SAR dogs need to be adaptable to this sort of thing, just so they can get to and from a search.

A late-night alert found two CARDA handlers with three dogs at 0700 on April 20th at the edge of the airfield at Sacramento’s McClellan AFB. Heading out from home an hour and a half earlier, the dogs were already dancing; the phone call, and then the predawn checking and loading of gear, left no doubt in their minds. This was the real thing.

One of the dogs, a young Shepherd bitch, had only been on two searches since she qualified for callout. This would be her first “flyaway.” She was coming along as backup in case one of the other dogs injured a pad on the rough granite they’d be encountering, or otherwise went out of service.

At McClellan, arriving and departing airmen came up to pet the dogs. Eyeing the snowshoes and hefty packs - winter gear and five days worth of dog food and freeze-dried handler food ~ the question was obvious: “Where’re you headed?”

*Heading toward
the days
transportation
vehicle (with
wings).*

*Photo by the
authors*



“Mount Whitney. Some body’s lost.”

When their plane was an hour overdue, the handlers learned it had turned back to its home base, Moffett Field in Palo Alto, because of mechanical difficulties. The handlers decided to give their dogs one last good run. “Get rid of some of the vinegar.”

Finally, at 0930, a National Guard C-130 transport plane, painted camouflage green, taxied toward them. “Have those handlers bring the flight manifest on board with them. We’ll load through the rear, as quick as we can. We’re late already,” came word from the crew.

Handlers shouldered their packs and followed their leashed dogs onto the runway.

It was a hot-loading: into the rear of the transport, with the deafening noise of engines and stench of exhaust. Thirty feet from the plane, the younger Shepherd hesitated. But the older dogs’ example and her handler’s encouragement soon had her inside.

A mound of packs, snow shovels and ice axes was already secured in the middle of the cargo area. Along the side was a line of men and women of all ages - young college kids and grizzled old-timers, sleepy-eyed but smiling: old friends from Bay Area Mountain Rescue Unit (BAMRU).

The handlers found empty seats, buckled in and settled their dogs. The back end of the plane closed; crewmen made last minute checks, and the tremendous noise increased as the engines revved for takeoff.

As the plane hurtled down the runway, the handlers reassured their canine partners. Once airborne, all three dogs went to sleep. Handlers glanced at their watches; the plane would soon be touching down at Lake Tahoe to pick up four more dogs and handlers from the WOOF search dog unit.

What seemed like a very long time passed. By the brief patches of light moving around the cargo area from the high portholes, handlers could tell the plane must be circling, and circling. Then a crew member came back to report they weren’t going to pick up those dog teams at Tahoe. Two approaches made it clear the weather was too bad to risk a landing. The handlers glanced at each other; what was supposed to be a six dog-team operation was suddenly up to the two of them.

The transport turned south, bearing down the length of the snowy Sierra. Within an hour, dogs, handlers, and the 10 BAMRU searchers were unloading at Bishop, and loading back up into a California Department of Corrections (CDC) bus for the hour’s drive south to Lone Pine, and then west up to Whitney Portal, 7,800 feet elevation. Again, the dogs settled down for the duration.

On arrival at base camp, the new searchers got briefed. A young man, probably suicidal, had cleaned out his apartment in Dallas, TX, two weeks earlier; his car was later found parked at Whitney Portal. Investigation showed that all of his belongings were in the car—except for a backpack and sleeping bag. A hiker with a preference for cross-country travel, and who’d go “anywhere his hands and feet can take him,” would find plenty of opportunity in the backcountry that opened out from the Mt. Whitney trail - if that was where he was headed.

Some 30 searchers from other mountain rescue units had been on scene since the previous day. They’d just discovered some of the missing man’s personal effects at the bottom of a garbage can at the Whitney Portal campground.

While mantrackers cut for sign around the camp, the CARDA dog teams started working from scent articles from his car and from the garbage can. It was a tough assignment. No one knew for sure when the young man left his car, but it had probably been close to two weeks earlier; it had snowed 2 inches since then, and much of the snow that had been on the ground when he left had melted. Not much chance of finding footprints or scent.

Clouds obscured the higher peaks, and the weather prevented a China Lake Naval Weapons

Center helicopter from performing aerial search or inserting SAR teams up into the high country.

No new clues turned up that afternoon and evening. Before daylight next morning, at 0445, the CARDA teams were in the field again, trying to take advantage of nighttime downdrafts off the steep rock faces on both sides of the campground.

At 0545, a familiar voice came over the radio. Four more CARDA teams were headed up the hill from Lone Pine. Three of them had been flown by Civil Air Patrol from northern California to Mojave; there, at 0100, the fourth handler met them in a van for the drive up the east side of the Sierra (in this weather, over-the- mountain flying was out of the question for the light CAP planes).

The new dog teams piled out of cramped space in the van and gathered around for assignment. Soon all six teams were headed up the Mt. Whitney trail. At 8,600- foot elevation, three teams split off to search up the north fork of Lone Pine Creek, while the remaining teams slogged through wet snow up to the saddle near Lone Pine Lake, 9,800 feet.

By the time they got back to base camp, the search was gearing down. In three days of searching, no clues to the missing man's whereabouts had been found outside the campground where he abandoned his car. Backpackers had seen no sign of him, and there was no indication he'd ever gotten past Whirney Portal. Weather prevented a thorough search of the backcountry,

Late that afternoon, April 21, searchers piled their gear and themselves into vans for the drive back down to Lone Pine. In one suburban-type vehicle were 10 humans, six dogs and gear - the dogs sprawled across searchers' laps or cramped into corners on the floor. A Golden Retriever blocked the rear exit, and the driver had a Shepherd chin on each shoulder.

Now came the problem of getting BAMRU and CARDA the rest of the way back home; Inyo County requested transport through the Rescue Coordination Center at Scott AFB., Illinois. This time, there was no C-130 available, and CAP still couldn't fly over the mountains. Two CDC minibuses were requisitioned for a long, late night drive down the backside of the Sierra, to Mojave, and then over Tehachapi Pass to Bakersfield. Again, dogs slept on top of packs, handlers' laps, and under seats, while the handlers also tried to nap. For most of them, the day had started a couple of days ago.

At Bakersfield, the local CAP official had more than he'd bargained for: 15 dirty searchers, six dogs, and about 1,000 lbs. of gear, including awkward skis and snowshoes, bound for four different airports in northern California. The call had gone out to CAP pilots all over the state. Two light planes were already on the ground at Bakersfield and two more were enroute. Others were hoped for.

At about 0030, the first plane took off for Red Bluff, near the top of the state, with two dogs and handlers aboard. Over the next hour and a half, the remaining searchers and gear got sorted into planes.

In a six-seater Cessna bound for McClellan AFB, one dog occupied the smaller two rear seats, one dog and handler filled the next set of seats, with the third dog on the floor. The other handler sat next to the pilot and acted as navigator. Glancing back at his full load, the pilot said, "I hope those dogs are good passengers."

The plane headed north up the Central Valley through the dark. As it touched down at McClellan at 0415, three sets of ears came up. They were almost home.