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Doggie Search and Rescue Group Saves Lives By Martha Slater



Jocelyn Stohl and her German shepherd, Justice, work with trainer Nancy Lyon, practicing specialized search and rescue techniques. As positive reinforcement, once Justice has found Nancy hiding near a fallen tree, he is rewarded with a bottle of beef-flavored baby food. (Herald / Tim Calabro)

For three seasons of the year, four to six volunteer dog-and-handler teams from New England K-9 Search and Rescue (NEK-9SAR) meet weekly in the Randolph area to train in the woods of Three Stallion Inn. During the winter, when the snow is deep, they train around the campus of Vermont Technical College in Randolph Center.

"We have been training in Randolph for nearly 10 years," says NEK-9SAR president, Nancy Lyon. "We actively participated in the Brooke Bennett search, as well as other searches in Norwich, Braintree, South Strafford, Northfield, Bradford, Rochester, Brookfield, Barre, Montpelier, etc."

Lyon notes that, "A child walks away from a picnic and disappears, an elderly person with Alzheimer's wanders from their home, a hunter doesn't return to his truck at the end of the day, or a fisherman's boat is found empty. Missing-person incidents are all too common in New England. When they occur, state law enforcement agencies (Fish & Game in New Hampshire; State Police in Vermont) are mobilized to find the missing."

For 28 years, these state agencies have relied on the skilled resources and assistance of the all-volunteer dog/handler teams of New England K-9 Search and Rescue to help them save lives and bring closure to families of the deceased.

Founded in 1981, New England K-9 Search & Rescue is an all-volunteer wilderness K-9 search and rescue organization. Fifteen team members with 10-highly trained and experienced search dog handlers strategically located throughout New Hampshire and Vermont are on call 24-hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, ready for immediate response. All NEK-9SAR members volunteer their time for searches and extensive continuing training and certification, and all pay their own expenses. Over the past 28 years, NEK-9SAR has participated in over 300 searches. In 2008 alone, they took part in nearly 45 searches in both New Hampshire and Vermont.

Lyon notes that, "When most people think of 'search dogs,' the images that comes to mind are tracking dogs that follow a trail left by a missing person. Tracking dogs (usually police K-9's or bloodhounds) are used extensively by law-enforcement agencies, but NEK-9SAR's K-9's are specially trained air scent dogs that don't need to locate a trail to find a missing person. Instead, they rely on human scent carried on the wind. This allows them and their handlers to cover extremely large areas much more quickly than tracking dogs or human search teams."

In any search, time is important. The organization specializes in hasty response—its teams are on the road within 15 minutes of call-out. Even if the missing person isn't injured, hypothermia is often a life-threatening possibility, even during warm weather. NEK-9SARs' dogs, through rigorous and continuous training, can locate the "out of place" person (alive or dead) even if the search area has been "contaminated" by other people. Dogs are also certified in cadaver search, avalanche recovery and can assist in locating drowned victims under water from boats or shoreline.

In addition to wilderness lost-person searches, the teams train for local disaster response for live and dead victims, whether it is a dam collapse where they search debris, a snow-collapsed shopping center, or a serious flood.

In addition to dog/handler teams, the organization provides its own radio communications and

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computer support, mapping software, printed maps, and GPS technology. Each dog, handler, field assistant team (two humans and one dog) will efficiently and effectively search a minimum of 60-120 acres in their first shift of three to four hours. These teams are all managed under an "operational leader" through their own communications base, linked directly to search management, and under their overall command. All personnel are also trained in crime scene preservation.

Braintree Connection

One local trainee member of NEK-9 SAR is Jocelyn Stohl of Braintree, who joined NEK-9SAR in July 2008, following her retirement from the Vermont State Police.

"I was involved in Search and Rescue with the state police for 20 years, ending the last five as the team leader," Stohl explained. "The Vermont State Police use this team as a specialized resource for SAR incidents and, as a commander, I summoned them to many searches."

Stohl noted that, "In my experience, K-9's bring a valuable asset to these incidents and I could never imagine doing a search for a lost or missing person without them. For the state, we have been fortunate to have a civilian K-9 air-scenting team with very high standards. Each volunteer member is extremely dedicated and works hard at maintaining a high skill set level."

Following her retirement, Stohl said she decided to stay involved with SAR because, "I have always admired the K-9's and their handlers for what they did. I came to NEK-9SAR with the skills of an SAR worker, but had no prior training working a K-9. Learning to communicate with a K-9 is an amazing ability and exciting if you can learn to do it."

Becoming a K-9 handler is a challenge and requires a large commitment to learn, train and reach certification.

"I hope I make it because I began with a puppy," Stohl said. "The time to reach eligibility to certify is when we are both ready, and that's about 18 months—it's sometimes shorter, but that's the most realistic."

The process began with the selection of a K-9 puppy. Lyon and Dee Ganley, who are highly trained and experienced in what is needed in a dog to do this work, began the process of finding a suitable partner for Stohl, and took her to see German Shepherd puppies they thought would be ideal candidates. With their guidance, she selected a male and named him Justice. At just under a year old, "some say he's a natural at it and he wants to work," she said.

Justice is the Stohls' full-time pet and companion, and she says he's become "a part of the family." Her rapport with the dog is obvious.

During training and on a search, Stohl wears a vest with equipment ranging from sophisticated (GPS, two-way radio, etc.) to simple (a plastic whistle). Justice wears a bright orange vest of his own, equipped with a bright green light stick to help him be seen by his handler.

Stohl notes that dogs have night vision that is almost as good as that of cats, adding that "These dogs don't work on searching for anyone with a specific scent, they look for anyone who is out of place."

Lyon is Stohl's trainer and mentor. At a recent demo for the Herald, Lyon and Herald photographer Tim Calabro were the "lost" people who were to be "found" by Justice, in their hiding place in the tree line across a field.

Eager to go to work, Justice whined anxiously and at Stohl's command, "Zoick!" (an Amish term, meaning "to search") he criss-crossed the field, "gridding," as he looked for his quarry.

Once Justice spotted the two people in the trees, he went up to them and sniffed them, then made a beeline for Stohl to let her know he'd found something. She went with him to see what he'd found, and later, rewarded him for his good work by tossing a frisbee for him to play with.

For More Information

In addition to its primary role as a search and rescue organization, New England K-9 Search & Rescue has made a strong commitment to educating children and adults about outdoor safety. It reaches over 1500 school children yearly with presentations, search demonstrations with the dogs, and take home "Lost Proofing" literature. These programs are provided free of charge by the members.

More information can be found online at www.neK-9sar.org, by calling 603-526-6754 or via email at info@neK-9sar.org. The web site also has a place to click and view "Scent To Serve," a documentary video on the dogs and handlers of New England K-9 Search & Rescue.

