



## THE PERIPATETIC YANKEE...

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### On a Search

Perhaps it is a major event like the collapse of the World Trade Center or the bombing of the Morrow Building in Oklahoma City in the national media. Or it is finding a lost child featured in a local newspaper. If a canine search and rescue group was involved, our interest is piqued. Maybe we even entertained the notion, albeit briefly, about getting involved. After all, we have trained dogs and care about our fellow humans. To learn what is required of a search team, I met with New England K-9 Search and Rescue, a dedicated, committed group of people and dogs (see sidebar).

### Getting Started

Once one has taken a self-inventory and determined he or she has the resources, commitment, and dedication necessary for search and rescue work, the next thing is finding an experienced K-9 search and rescue organization to join. Air scent search and rescue is most effective when multiple dog/handler teams are deployed at once to clear large areas of land. Find a qualified group with whom to work—before reading books or hiring a trainer or purchasing a dog for search and rescue.

Once one is part of a “team” then comes the challenge of training the dog. This can start when it is as young as three or four months. The first steps are a hide-and-seek game, building on the bond between the dog and its owner. An assistant restrains the dog (or puppy) with his or her arms whispering encouragement to watch while the owner walks away from them; walking into the wind so the pup is getting the scent. At a predetermined distance, the owner drops out of sight and the assistant encourages the dog to find its owner. As the dog catches onto the game, the distance is increased. When the dog thinks finding its owner is the best game in town, the roles are reversed: the handler and dog watch the assistant walk away and drop out of sight. The owner then sends the dog to find the assistant. Play or food reinforcement (or both) for finding is central to the early foundation training. This methodology is not very different from the way some folks start training their dogs for tracking. Another method early method to teach the fun of searching is to have the assistant enter the search area and hide out of sight. The handler and dog then come into the search area. The assistant will pop up, perhaps shout to get the dog’s attention, and immediately drop out of sight again. The dog is encouraged to find the assistant. Placement of the missing person so his or her scent will reach the dog on the air is critical to the air scent dog learning how to find the lost person

with its nose. This lays the foundation and teaches the dog the purpose of the exercise. The foundation training is done in a non-contaminated area without distractions.

When the foundation is set, the next step is to train the dog to return to its handler after locating the object of the search (the “recall”). The dog may use a taught obedience behavior or another method to communicate the fact it had

found the object of the search to its handler. It is up to the team to decide what is best for them. Some of the behaviors used are a jump up on the handler, multiple barks at the handler, or grabbing a specific object handing from the handler’s pack.

The final step may be the hardest to teach to a dog. After the dog has come to its handler and notified him or her that the object of the search has been located, the handler will ask the dog to take him or her to the object of the search (the “refind”).

All training (and search work) is done off leash except when there is danger within the search environment or they are teaching the dogs to detail carefully. For wilderness work, they are off leash 99.9% of the time.

As the dog advances in its nose work, the handler is also training in the necessary ancillary skills (map reading, GPS navigation, personal safety, radio protocol, weather, and strategy), which is also done with his or her mentor from the search and rescue group. In many regards, this is more difficult and time-consuming than training the dog. After all, the dog knows how to use its nose and just has to be channeled to use it for a specific purpose. The new handler will accompany his or her mentor through many search training exercises, observing how the mentor works and being introduced to the equipment and techniques. After that, the mentor will take the new handler and dog on training searches so the handler can practice and hone the skills he or she will need to search efficiently and effectively once qualified to be fielded at real searches.

### Into the Woods

On a warm, sunny day during the January thaw I met with six members of the New England K-9 Search and Rescue group at one of their training sessions. The team members assembled at 7 AM at a MacDonald’s restaurant. There they split into two groups; one of which went to the near-by campus of a technical college and the other went to an area of snowshoe and snowmobile trails. The members of this group were Sue Randall and Kirk (eight-month-old German Shepherd)<sup>1</sup>, Mike Halpin and Sadie (four-year-old Border Collie), and Lucy Newton and Dugan (two-year-old Rottweiler). The plan was for Mike to enter the area and become a “lost person.” Sue and Kirk were to start at a corner of the area to locate Mike. Then Mike was to move to a sugar house and hide in a tank for Lucy and Dugan. While they were conducting that search, Sue was to put Kirk in her truck and prepare to become the object of the search

<sup>1</sup> Kirk is a trainee and not yet certified.

for Mike and Sadie. Once Lucy and Dugan found Mike, Mike would get Sadie and locate Sue.

Sue and I got in our vehicles and drove to the point at which Sue and Kirk were to start their search. We started off snowshoeing across a field and entered the woods. Kirk was off-leash and free to explore and cast about. The search dogs are not trailing—they are air-scenting. They are not given any scent article; rather they are searching for the person who is “out of place.” As we crossed the field, and even after we entered the woods, he would periodically check back to make sure we were still with him (although it should be understood he was never far from us—we could see him the entire time). In the woods, Sue and I stayed on the trails while Kirk worked.



**Sue Randall and Kirk working on voice contact during a wilderness search.**

Voice contact can be important in search work. Many times the object of the search will be calling for help. Once voice contact is established, the dog can use it to find the person. The object of her training session this day was to work on voice contact. Sue would stop, call Kirk to a sit near her, blow her whistle, and call for Mike. Mike would be yelling only if he heard Sue call for him. If there was no response, we resumed the trek (Mike and Sue were also able to be in radio contact so they could communicate at normal voice volume). As we got close to where Mike was hiding for us, Kirk’s body language and posture changed: he was starting to pick up the scent alerting Sue with these changes that someone was in the area. At that point, Sue told Mike (via the radio) to start shouting since she specifically wanted Kirk to work on voice contact. The dog quickly heard Mike and headed directly for him. It was time for

the handler (and observer) to bushwhack, following the dog.

When Sue and Kirk reached Mike, Kirk was given lots of praise, a food reward, and some play time with toys Sue carried. All positive reinforcement.

Mike and I headed off for the sugar house. As we snowshoed to it, Mike pointed out features of the terrain and how the air currents were affected by it. These air currents in turn affect how the scent of a missing person is carried.



**Lucy Newton and Dugan as Dugan works the scent of the “lost” person**

Was my presence going to impede the training? I was told that often there are many people contaminating a search field. The dogs may check out these people, and over the course of training the dogs learn to discriminate between people their handlers can see and/or talk to and the person who is “out of

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place.” When Mike and I reached the sugar house, Mike suggested that I go up and hide near a large snag (dead tree) while he climbed into the tank. We thought that would give me a good vantage point from which to take photographs. Mike called Lucy on the radio to inform her we were in position and to start their search. Before long I heard them on the crest above me. Dugan picked up scent and came in from a different angle than we had anticipated and I was the first person to whom he came. After being allowed say hello (nothing like getting friendly Rottweiler kisses in the woods), he was redirected to the search for Mike. He easily found the tank in which Mike was hiding and ran back to his handler to alert her (the “recall”). Then Lucy asked him to show her to exact point (the “refind”). Again, at the completion of the search, the dog was given lots of praise and play time.

Mike and I then went to his truck to get Sadie. Once we had Sadie, Mike notified Sue via his radio we were on the way. We followed some trails until Sadie through her body language told us she had the scent and she headed directly for Sue. Another person successfully located. We headed back to our respective vehicles.

## Out of the Cold



**Members of New England K9 Scent and Rescue receiving instructions prior to starting the unit training searches.**

Nine days later I dropped in on a monthly unit training day. Eight handlers and their dogs assembled at the New London, NH, fire station. Nancy Lyon explained the program for the day. Five buildings in the town would be used. The three belonging to the highway department contained objects for cadaver search training. A local playhouse used for summer theater and the firehouse itself would be used for live searches (e.g., a missing person). Each of the eight were to work in as many of

the venues as possible before reconvening at the firehouse for a debriefing at 1:30. A table listing where each handler was to start and the order in which he or she was work was distributed and they disbursed for the respective search sites. All searches were blind, i.e., the handlers had no idea of where the targets were or how many there were in each building. All handlers use radios for communication. If a handler thought the dog might have gotten scent of something but did not locate it, the handler was to radio that there was “something of interest” in the building, but not give away any clues as to its location.



**Mark Austin’s Abel locating the object of the search in the wastepaper basket’**

Mark Austin is wicked. Early Saturday morning, he hid a half dozen objects for the cadaver work in two of the highway department buildings. Nancy Lyon was responsible for the cadaver “hides” in the largest building. They picked challenging (but realistic) places: behind a plant in the office reception area, under a book on a table, in a waste basket under the plastic liner, in a locker, on the spring of a highway truck, on a shelf about thirty inches above the floor. In contrast to wilderness searches, these searches were performed primarily with the dogs on lead. The dogs and handlers methodically and painstakingly searched each building. Because the object might be as small as a bone fragment or a blood-stained cloth, the search



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had to be conducted in what is called detailing. Each team had its own approach. Most dogs used the same recall (return to the handler to indicate a find) as they use in other types of search work. Two dogs have entirely separate alerts because of the possibility that they might be used for criminal investigations.



**Siggy alerting Robyn Millan to a possible find of human remains**

The Barn Players theater is one of the oldest summer theater buildings still in use as a theater in New Hampshire. For the purposes of the training exercise Erin Golec (Mark Austin's wife) was a "lost person" somewhere in the building. For building searches, the team has an assistant. Scott Hamilton served as the assistant for each of the searches. Before entering the building, the dog handler would ask of Scott if there were any know hazards (chemical spills, broken glass, rotted boards) that might affect the safety of the dog.



**Nancy Moreau and Gage searching the Barn Players theater.**

Whether the handler has the dog work off leash or on leash depends upon the team. When searching a building, *e.g.*, someone's home, the search team wants to be careful not to disturb anything unnecessarily. It is important to make sure all rooms and areas are searched. It is easy for the handler, because he or she is concentrating on the dog and the search, to become disoriented or miss areas. The playhouse was an excellent venue for the exercise. It was full of small dressing rooms, storage areas, stairways to various parts of the building. Every team did get confused and missed parts of the theater building. A critical duty of the assistant is keeping track of what has been searched and how to retrace steps. With the first search team I accompanied, I realized when I had gotten to the balcony it was not immediately evident how to get back to the stage door on the basement level by which we had entered the building. All of the seats in the theater were covered with sheets to keep them clean during the seasons the building was not being used. Erin was lost under some seats on the balcony.

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**Gage has located Erin under the balcony seats and Nancy is praising the dog**

Some of the dogs shortly after entering the building seemed to want to go up the stairs before the handlers completed the search of the basement. Others were more inclined to search methodically like they did when searching in the highway department buildings. During the the debriefing the handlers commented on these differences, leading to a discussion of whether the dogs and/or handlers were still in detailing mode when they started the live search in the playhouse.



**Abel locating Erin's scent under the sheets**

Back at the firehouse, there were two more people that had to be found. One had squirmed herself away under the eaves off the exercise room. This room was over a small garage area.



**Robin Millan and Siggy searching the engine room of the firehouse**

Robin Millan's Labrador "Siggy" lifted his head and sniffed towards the ceiling, giving a strong indication he had a scent, while he was working in the garage below. Because of the construction, it is very probable that Trudy Davis' scent was coming down into the area from above. The second person (Chris Miller) was in the firetruck area, lying down next to a ladder on the ladder truck. The dogs had to search high to catch his scent. When the dog indicated that there was something of interest up on the truck, the handler climbed up to check it out. The dogs remained on the floor of the firehouse.



**Robin Millan and Siggy successfully locating Chris Miller on the ladder truck**

At 1:30, all the handlers reassembled in the firehouse meeting room for the debriefing. During this time, each one was encouraged to comment on their successes, failures, and difficulties. During the debriefing, they learned where and what Mark and Nancy had placed for the cadaver work. Debriefings are also a part of a search as a result of a call-out. It is from these discussions that they learn their strengths and weakness and develop methodologies to improve the effectiveness of the searches.

## Certification

The New England K-9 Search and Rescue group has rigorous certification standards. Before a team can take the certification tests, the five already certified members of the team must each observe the trainee dog and handler team and give their approval for this team to begin certification testing. When the

## The Highest Level of Commitment Is Required

“My dog has a great nose and would be good at search and rescue.” This is the comment Nancy Lyon, president and operational leader of New England K-9 Search and Rescue, often hears when receiving a telephone call from a person wanting to join the group. “Dogs are noses!” is Nancy’s laughing response. Her point is that a good dog is necessary but is far from sufficient. The proper human member of the team is harder to find and harder to train. Human and dogs are alien species. The two have to learn to communicate and to trust each other. The dog may be using its nose and other senses, but it doesn’t necessarily comprehend what is important to its handler. An owner cannot pick his or her level of participation. “Good enough.” is not an option or in their vocabulary. They are training for the perfect “200” each and every time. The level of commitment—especially of time—is very high.

five handlers reach consensus, the team must then pass four tests. The first test is a night trail search at least one mile long, but not exceeding three miles in length. There will be one victim. The second test is a day area search of 120 to 160 acres for at least three hours with zero to two victims. If a victim is found before the three hours have elapsed, the team will continue searching for the balance of the three hours. The third test is a night area search of sixty to eighty acres with zero to two victims. Once the team has passed these three tests, they are qualified for limited use on real searches. Passing a fourth test is necessary for full certification. This last test is a day search of two areas, each covering forty to sixty acres and zero to two victims in both areas.

## Putting the Training to Work

The members of New England K-9 Search and Rescue specialize in hasty search first response. Upon receiving a call for assistance, they are on the road within fifteen minutes. This call might come anytime day or night in any kind of weather from a hot, humid summer day to a howling nor’easter on winter night. In 2007, the group was called out fifty times.

Training is an on-going activity. The group holds twelve unit training meetings a year and a member is expected to attend at least eighty percent of them. In addition, there will be weekly sessions honing specialty skills.

The amount of time invested by a member in 2007 was 1443 hours or 60 days<sup>2</sup> of which 271 hours were dedicated

<sup>2</sup> Includes travel time.

to weekday searches and 142 hours were dedicated to weekend searches. They spend eight to ten hours each week or 450 hours per year in search training. The monthly unit training and monthly work on specialty skills adds another eighteen hours per month or 216 hours annually.

Living in the Whites, it is easy to think that a majority of the requests for a search operation would be to find lost hikers. In reality, the majority of the trails in northern New England are within a reasonable distance of civilization. The trails are extensively used and well-maintained. Therefore, the majority of search call-outs are not for recreational users. A large number of the requests for searches are to locate cognitively limited persons.

Like many similar organizations, the group has “search and rescue” in its name. Nancy Lyon (president and operational leader) characterizes their job as “locaters.” Their primary mission is to find lost persons. New England K-9 Search and Rescue works with a sister group (Upper Valley Wilderness Response Team) that provides field assistants and medical and evacuation services as required.

## Public Education

An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. Benjamin Franklin had it right whether one is talking about health or outdoor safety. New England K-9 Search and Rescue has an active education program for adults and children.

“Lostproofing” is a presentation for children. In that program, the speaker talks to the children about what steps to

take to avoid getting lost and if they do get lost—how to stay safe. The presentation includes a showing of *Lost but Found Safe and Sound*<sup>™</sup>, a twelve-minute video produced by the Association of National Park Rangers, a woods safety discussion, and a search demonstration with a dog. The children have the opportunity to interact with a search dog.

When addressing a general audience (charitable or business organization or a senior center), the speaker uses a PowerPoint presentation and search stories to explain how the dogs are trained and how they perform during real searches. The speaker is accompanied by his or her dog. On a more technical level, the group offers programs on topics related to search management including map and compass use, GPS technology, search tactics and strategy, and deployment.

## Fan Club



**New England K-9 Search and Rescue fan club and supporter Cheyenne Balsler and her dog Charlie**

While a pre-schooler, Cheyenne Balsler learned about New England K-9 Search and Rescue at one of Nancy Lyon’s talks. Even at her young age, she was impressed with the important work these highly trained and dedicated dogs. She decided to do something to help. With a homemade collection bank, she stood outside the Dunkin Donuts in her hometown soliciting donations from those passing by. She raised a hundred dollars. Now a

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year later and in elementary school, she continues to be a big fan. When asked by her mom what she wanted for her birthday, she said, “No gifts or toys.” She wanted her friends and guests at her birthday party to make a donation to support “her dogs.”

## **Acknowledgment**

Thanks to New England K-9 Search and Rescue, it's members, and its president, Nancy Lyon, for their invaluable assistance and patience with me as I prepared this article. For more information about New England K-9 Search and Rescue (including some information about searches in which they have participated), visit their web site at [www.nek9sar.org](http://www.nek9sar.org).

