

SAR Dogs Otago Inc.

This section describes the structure, training and deployment of Search Dogs in the Dunedin region of New Zealand.

SAR Dogs Otago is an organisation dedicated to training dogs for use in Search and Rescue operations. All members are volunteers and the group is a registered Incorporated Society.

Background

The Swiss Alpine Club were the first organisation to specifically train dogs to locate the scent of humans to assist in finding missing persons - specifically persons buried by avalanches. These pioneering efforts have been adapted and built upon by organisations around the world to train dogs to locate missing persons in a wide variety of conditions. Frequently a very versatile approach is required to meet the varying demands of different terrain and conditions.



The use of dogs in Search and Rescue in New Zealand is a relatively recent development. Search Dogs were virtually unknown in New Zealand up until 1988. Consequently, their use and training and organisational structure are all evolving. There are a number of groups around New Zealand training dogs for Search and Rescue work, training for snow/avalanche, wilderness and disaster situations.

Why Search Dogs

Using scent to find people enables large areas to be covered quickly in all conditions, irrespective of the condition of the victim or his ability to respond to sounds, in all light conditions, with a relatively high probability of detection.

The olfactory organ of the dog has a much greater internal surface area than the human counterpart. This leads to a dog having a sense of smell which is literally millions of times better than that of a human. Additionally, they can sense a lot more about smell than humans can, and dogs' perceptions from what they smell has been likened to humans perceptions of seeing in colour. Dogs can determine direction of source, and age of scent and a variety of other subtle factors about a scent which we as humans with our relatively poor sense of smell do not even consider. This makes them an ideal tool to assist in humans in a variety of tasks. Finding lost and missing persons using human scent is one such task



There are two main techniques used by Search Dogs to find people. Both techniques involve the dog finding human scent, but the scent is transported differently.

Trailing dogs follow residual human scent left on the

ground from a person passing over the area. This scent is the result of skin particles etc. falling from the person. The dog "scents" an article belonging to the person, and remembers the smell. The dog then follows the same scent on the ground. Different scents from other humans who have passed over the area are ignored - the dog "scent discriminates". This technique is ideal where there is a 'last known location' for the person, such as the car they left from.

(**Tracking dogs**, by comparison, detect the track where a person has walked by the change in scent on the ground, such as the scent released when a blade of grass is broken by the foot, as well as scent left by the foot. The most recent track is usually the one followed. Tracking dogs are ideal for following recent tracks very quickly, and this technique is commonly used by police dogs to follow suspects from the scene of a crime.)

Air Scenting Dogs operate on scent which is transported in the air, rather than static on the ground. A human gives off scent continuously, and when stationary, the scent from the person rises in a plume and is then carried by any breeze. Air scenting dogs are trained to search until they come across small traces of human scent carried on the wind, and then follow the scent to the person. The dog then communicates to the handler the location of the person, either by barking at the person until the handler gets there, or by repeatedly returning to the handler and barking and returning to the casualty, thus leading the handler to the victim. The extraordinary sense of smell gives the dog the ability to determine the direction the scent is coming from and pinpoint the source. This technique is ideal if there is not a 'last known location' and large areas need to be searched quickly.

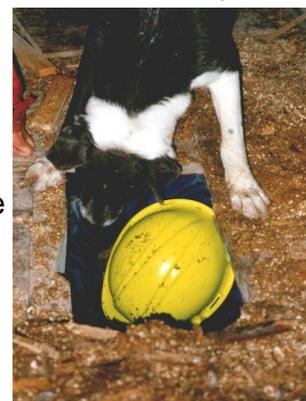


Training



Searches in New Zealand can be held over a wide variety of terrain. This requires that the dogs be versatile enough to cope with thick bush, open tussock and snow/avalanche. Disaster situations put further requirements on the dog/handler team.

Although the basic search method used by the dog (i.e. location of human scent and indication of the source of the scent to the handler) is the same for all situations, specific training is carried out for different situations; each situation (snow, wilderness, disaster) has it's own skill requirements additional to the common search skills. In open country, the dog should be working considerable distances from the handler, hunting for the casualty. The dog however must be under control of the handler. In thick bush, the dog must work under closer control of the handler - there is clearly a requirement that the handler knows what area the dog has searched.



New SAR Dogs Otago train regularly in disaster and wilderness

situations. Structured training is organised at least twice a week. Weekend training provides the opportunity for the group to concentrate on the dogs and build as a team. In addition to the structured training, the individual handler must be prepared to spend considerable time training in private.

In addition to the requirement for the dog to be able to perform, the handler must have certain skills, including first aid, bushcraft, mountaineering, search techniques etc.. Where a handler is lacking any required skills, SAR Dogs Otago attempts to provide the opportunity for the handler to 'upskill'; either by attending external courses or transfer of skills internally within the group.

Deployment



Search and Rescue in New Zealand is the responsibility of the Police who have small, specialised SAR Sections. More and more frequently, the Police are calling in volunteers to assist in SAR operations, especially as the skill level of the volunteers increases. Volunteers are drawn from a variety of sources including Tramping Clubs, hunters, and Red Cross Emergency Relief Team. Search Dogs are one of the volunteer resources available to the Police and SAR Dogs Otago members are willing and available to be called upon to assist in a SAR operation in any capacity, whether or not Search Dogs are required.

It is the responsibility of the Search Controllers to decide if the use of a Search Dog is appropriate. In a search operation, it is frequently appropriate to deploy Search Dogs as an initial response, particularly at night. This provides a thorough, rapid search of what experience suggests are the most likely casualty locations.

However, it must be remembered that their deployment, does require a thorough understanding of their relative capabilities. Search Controllers need to know what Search Dogs are capable of achieving and have an understanding of the way they operate in order to deploy them appropriately. It is desirable that a Search Dog representative is consulted in the development of a search strategy. It is clearly important that the Search Controllers are able to call upon dogs that are of a consistently high standard. This requires that the dogs that are deployed are assessed by some means to being of a standard suitable for operational use.

Search is an Emergency, and can be a matter of life and death. Thus the timely and appropriate deployment of a properly trained Search Dog can prove invaluable.
