

The Handler's Role In Search & Rescue Part 4



By Jack Fields *It takes a village to raise a child (African proverb)*

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As I was driving, I thought to myself, "This is it!" For me, it was a 3-hour drive deep into the wilds of Northern California. I knew I was going to be up in the mountains because I already had the general location of my testing site. Everyone has their own experience; but the scenario usually involves a long drive that begins in the dark of the early morning and ends in some remote wilderness location. It is a big deal; it is your Mission Ready Test.

By this time, you have put in a lot of hard work and a lot of miles. You have been a regular at your team's trainings and every month you have attended Regional Trainings. Your obedience and search skills are sharp, and you have not only taken classes, but you have also worked hard to truly know the skill sets. Your logbook and other sign-offs are complete. You have passed all of the tests to this point and accumulated your observation hours plus some. Your paperwork is turned in. This long journey is about to come to an end. When you get to this point, you will likely feel the pressure to perform. This is natural. I remember looking down at my young Rottweiler, Java, who was asleep on my lap as I drove, thinking how much we had riding on today. There had been those who said, "Rottweilers just do not do this kind of work". I felt pressure, as if we were not only representing ourselves as a team, but our breed as well. As I said before, everyone who makes it to this point will have their own experience, but odds are you will feel the pressure!



Dedicated exercise will enhance your overall program

Learning to control your nerves is vital. I believe it is the demise of many a dog team. It really does not matter the genre, from Schutzhund to conformation, if you are overly nervous your dog will look at you like a weird stranger and things will break down. It's that first time (or tenth time) competing pressure! Learning to control your emotions is the first step towards success. For me I tell myself that this is just another training day. It really does not matter the trick, but if you're the kind of person who gets nervous taking tests you will need a coping strategy. You need to remember that this is just another day to your dog unless you show them otherwise. You have done your homework and you are as ready as you are ever going to be. It is time to get it done!



You have put in a lot of hard work to get here

CARDA's (California Rescue Dog Association) Mission Ready Test is designed to simulate a real search operation. As a Search Dog Team you will be tested on your ability to function effectively. There are no points. Either you pass every test objective or you get a "NO/GO" and will fail the test. The test objectives are very similar to your prior tests except your Mission Ready Test is on a much bigger scale.

Your Mission Ready Test must take place in rugged terrain conditions. Your search area will be 100-120 acres. One to three subjects will be placed in widely separated areas a minimum of thirty minutes prior to the start of the evaluation. The number of subjects shall be unknown to the handler being tested. The subjects will be carefully concealed and are not allowed to wear bright colors. There must be an elevation change in your test area of at least 200 feet. At least 60% of the test area shall be covered with the opportunity for concealment including, but not limited to, trees, rock stands, deadfalls, shrubs or moderate brush. You also need to be aware that just because there is no obvious area for concealment



Your test subjects must be carefully concealed

in open space, it is easy to be fooled because a subject could be placed in a depression in a grass field. That big field may look empty, but you have no idea what lies in the deep grass! A friend of mine who is a very experienced searcher once failed a test this way. He thought that there was no one out there in that grass field. Can you say NO/GO? Now that same friend teaches, "Leave no rock unturned". It really is great advice, so tread lightly, grasshopper! No more than ten percent of the test area shall be heavy ground cover that substantially impedes progress. You will be expected to search for a minimum of three hours and shall have a maximum of four hours to find between one to three subjects. If the team locates three subjects or reports that the team has completed the assignment prior to the three hours, the team shall continue to work the area until the minimum time has elapsed. If the team reports that the assignment is complete at any point during the evaluation and yet has not located all of the subjects, the evaluators will terminate the evaluation and inform the team it is a failure. The team shall not be informed as to whether or not all of the subjects have been located until the test is over.

The team will be given a scenario, a map of the search area indicating three clearly defined boundaries and one undefined boundary based upon a compass bearing or contour line, and time to develop a search plan. The test clock will start when the handler deploys the dog. Slow down and make sure that you take the time to properly prepare your search plan. Remember, that "haste makes waste" and that you are going to need to bring your "A" game today!



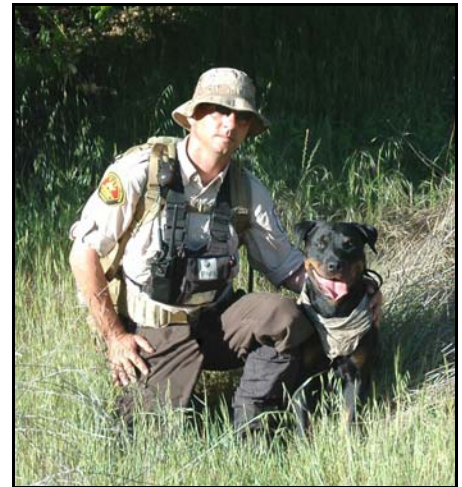
Passing your test is a big event for everybody

The team will be evaluated on essential search skills including: clue recognition and action taken by the team, handler and dog stamina, search plan and implementation, map, compass, GPS, radio communication and interviewing skills. Your evaluators are there to assess and report the team's performance with a YES - objective, YES - threshold, or a NO. It is important to be aware if any assessment item receives a "NO" rating by one or both of the evaluators it will result in a failure of the test.

We linked up with our evaluators and were taken to the test site. It felt as though a million eyes were on us, perhaps a bit like being a contestant on a reality show. Immediately, we were given a scenario and started prepping for our test. I could hear my evaluators going over my paper work in the back ground. It was nerve racking to say the least because I kept expecting them to say, "Sorry, this or that is not current!". By the time they finished checking my paper work and gear I had my search plan in place. I felt a bit nervous, but in control. Here we go!

Just like that it was on. Java and I were off into the search area. We were a team, Java acted like she was born to do this. I must say that I had a moment when I felt like a proud parent watching my little Rottweiler cut into and out of brush and float up and down ridge lines. She was not playing, and I believe she knew how important today was for us. Java and I completed our Mission Ready test in three hours and forty minutes. The actual test is a complete story in itself that I will save for another day. Looking back, I can say that it was very

much a rite of passage and it ended with the two of us officially joining the ranks of Certified Search Dog Teams. I was proud of my little dog and of myself, too, especially when the evaluators said we had done a great job as a team, and that we could come and search in their county any time!



You are Mission Ready, but a new journey is about to begin

As I was driving home, I found it hard to believe that it was behind us now. As soon as I got back into cell phone range the phone started beeping with messages from our team members asking, "Did you pass? Did you pass?" As in any other area of dog sport you build strong bonds with those with whom you train. They become like an extended family. This journey, like most others, is most difficult to take alone. Only with the help of a dedicated team can you truly reach your potential. "It takes a village to raise a child".

It is almost official. Now you simply wait for the paperwork to be turned in, pray that nothing weird disqualifies your test, and then finally get that white patch sewn on your uniform! It took about a week then I received my official letter stating Java and I were a Certified Mission Ready Team! It was a good day for us and our breed.

It does not take long for the accomplishment of passing your test to become "old snow", because soon you will be out there for real and then you will face a different kind of pressure. Even though you are now certified, you still have much to prove because you are a "green team". It is similar to the big step between getting that Schutzhund 3 title and then competing at a regional or national championship. Everything we had been through was only preparing us so that we could get out and do it in real life. Testing, while hard, is an accomplishment. But doing it in real life is a whole different game. It quickly becomes not about "the winning or losing, but the living or dying".



The search area was a condemned neighborhood

Our first real world deployment was in a county south of us about 120 miles. It was kind of anticlimactic. I was waiting for that pager to go off in the middle of the night, but instead I got an email from CSST (Canine Specialized Search Teams, a cadaver



Java worked like a seasoned search dog



When somewhere out there someone is lost

specialty unit located in Northern California) requesting us for a Cadaver Search. The difference with cadaver search is that it is not a rush job. When a live person is missing the teams rush to

deploy. Someone's life may be at stake and time is working against you. With a cadaver deployment you have time. Your subject is not going to be found alive. I remember driving south thinking "Here we go Java!" Java's head lay in my lap and she slept as usual. For her, this was just another training day.

We arrived at base camp. There was no mistaking it as there was a collection of police and firefighter vehicles and of course dog handler rigs. There were German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, and Border Collies as these are the breeds one normally associates with SAR. I got more than one look from a police officer that would say, "Is that a Rottweiler?" I had to smile to myself thinking about how much we had done to get here. I keep saying that everyone will have his own experience, and this was mine. For you it will be different, but I guarantee it will be an experience to say the least.

We had a briefing that was similar to searches I had been on in the past. The difference was that in the past we had been looking for a potentially live subject and we were working a wilderness area. Today's search would not only be real, but I would be handling my own dog. In the past I had been gaining observation hours so I was only supporting a dog team. Today we would be the team! Another huge difference was that this would be an urban search as we were tasked with clearing over 400 buildings in an old neighborhood that was being turned over to the county and would eventually be demolished and redeveloped. We were supposed to ensure there were no bodies dumped or vagrants that had expired within this once nice neighborhood. It was important to note that there was a good chance that there was a possible 3-year-old murder victim somewhere in the search area from a cold case file from the late 1980s.

After our initial briefing we had a secondary briefing with a local vet. We were given a short class on poisons and protocols if our dog came into contact with poison. It quickly got me thinking about what I was requiring my dog to do. I realized that this is the real world, and not a sterile training environment. When briefed it is standard to go over potential hazards one might expect in the search area. Hazards for the day's search would include, but not be limited to rat poisons, debris issues (sharp, broken or rusty items) possible electrical hazards, Methamphetamine labs or left over hazardous material from labs. There was the potential for skunks, raccoons, stray dogs, spiders and the looming threat of vagrants. The neighborhood buildings were in various states of degeneration so there could be potential structural issues that could present a safety hazard. The Sheriff's office informed us that they really were not sure what we might encounter "so to keep an eye out, and stay in radio contact." We would be searching in two dog teams with a third person acting as the team leader to document the search and coordinate the search efforts. The good news was that we would have a law enforcement security detail not far from us in case we ran into trouble or if we located a target (cadaver source). Then it was on to any last questions and then "smoke 'em if you got 'em". Before I knew it, we were in the field searching. The neighborhood was worse than I had expected. It looked as though we had deployed to the site of a hurricane. I was just as excited as my dog. I was happy that

Java acted just as if it was another training day. She was off; in and out of crawl spaces as room by room, yard after yard we cleared each living environment. The hardest thing for me was that Java would get the scent of another search team on an adjoining block and then she would take off to go make the find. I would call her off and redeploy her. We did this on several occasions. If it had been a wilderness search, I would have let her hit the target and then followed up, because hikers are a good source for information. The hikers may have seen our subject, and it would be an opportunity to have more eyes in the area that would be aware of the missing person. Today, on the other hand, I already knew there was no one alive that we would be looking for in our search area. I must say though that it was a pretty sight to see my dog hit on human scent from a block away! So the morning was spent clearing houses and yards. After 4 hours in the field, and what seemed like countless houses, we decided to set up a house for a reward session. While we ate lunch, a friend of ours put a cadaver source, (some blood in a small vial), in a nearby house. It was placed in a small dresser drawer. We let the source set while we finished lunch and let the dogs rest. After lunch, we redeployed the dogs. Now, when searching room after room, house after house, you start to question whether your dog is working or whether they are they just going through the paces. So I am working the setup house and walking down a hallway illuminated by my flashlight and I see my dog's head flip. (Ahhhhhhh, I think to myself, she has got the target), and she shoots into the room containing the vial of blood in the dresser. She offers a beautiful alert and refund. This presents a great opportunity to reward and play with my dog, but more importantly it helps to reassure me that my dog is doing what I expect her to do. It was common at the World Trade Center for FEMA teams to hide live subjects so that the dogs could make a positive find and get rewarded. Keeping morale up is vital. Later in the afternoon, we were escorted to the site where a murder victim had been exhumed 16 years earlier. The original crime scene was part of the motivation behind the search operation this day. The victim's daughter was never recovered and it was believed she could be buried somewhere in the neighborhood. To my amazement, Java alerted on the gravesite. It is a real testament to the dog's olfactory capabilities. Towards the end of the day, we were working a house and my dog runs to the back bedroom, circles and circles and then gives me a strong alert taking me to a back bedroom window. Java is standing on her hind legs trying to reach the tall windowsill. I followed her to the window and looked but I saw nothing other than the windowsill. "Is she tired and giving me a false alert?" I'm thinking to myself. It would be out of character, but anything is possible. But then when I looked outside through the window I could see that it was the site of the original crime scene. The faint scent had been collecting in that location over the years and leaking in through the windowsill. You will learn to trust your dog!

Java performed like a seasoned Search Dog that day. It was a great first search for us as a team and a huge confidence builder for me as a dog handler. The odds are that your first search will be very different from ours, but it will be an experience you will never forget. This is what you trained for. You have reached your goal of becoming a certified Search Dog Team. Now on a cold rainy night, when most people are snuggled up in their warm beds you will be driving out to some remote location in the dark. Your gear is packed and ready and your dog is "good to go", because somewhere out there someone is lost. You are now a piece of the machine of both paid and unpaid professionals who are giving their all "so that others may live".



Java and I will be a part of the machine that helps to bring them home