



Colorado Task Force member Ann Wickman crosses the pile of rubble with her dog Jenner at Ground Zero.

Photo credit: Mike Rieger/FEMA News Photo

In what was believed to be the largest canine deployment ever, an estimated 350 canine teams participated in the rescue and recovery efforts at New York's World Trade Center site. With names like Dutch, Tuff, Porkchop, Bella, Bigfoot, Sally, Max and Cowboy, these four-legged troopers worked 12-hour shifts methodically working their way through the twisted steel knots of debris that were once part of the World Trade Center.

They searched for signs of life and death among the ruins. Some dogs barked if they found remains. Others would lie down. In the days following the tragedy, most of the dogs discovered so many human remains that many dog handlers lost count. Many handlers and their canines were overwhelmed by the scent of decaying flesh.

But as days turned into weeks, few or no barks could be heard. To avoid depressing the dogs after a disappointing day, some handlers would hide and let their dogs discover them.

An emergency room like no other

Tables of syringes, cabinets of gauze and bandages, bags of intravenous solutions hanging from posts and stations for ear cleaning and eye cleaning. If not for the Musher's secret paw protection (an extremely dense waxed-based invisible barrier cream that protects a dog's paw from

The Making of a

Four-legged

Hero

It's dark, cold, and his feet hurt. He's been searching for hours but never once complains about the dust in his eyes. As he crouches to avoid hitting the low ceiling above him, he hears a whistle in the distance.

"Here boy," his handler commands. With a pat on the head confirming a job well done, and with tail wagging, he sets off to explore a different pile of rubble. Who could ever imagine — man's best friend, searching for signs of human survivors.

tough terrain), toys, bones and biscuits supply, one might mistake this as a MASH unit for the canines' human soldiers.

Within hours of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Public Health Department had deployed the Veterinary Medical Assistance Team (VMAT) to open an onsite hospital unit to care for the canine rescuers. The center, run by the Suffolk County SPCA and staffed by local veterinarians, treated more than 300 canines. Some were from California, Mississippi, Georgia and a few from as far away as Canada and Europe.

As many as five or six dogs came through the triage center every hour. Nearly all required their eyes washed out and their paws massaged, as well as a liter of intravenous fluids to rehydrate these undemanding heroes.

Some dogs, like Dwyer, a German Shepherd working as a patrol dog for the New York City Police Department, entered the VMAT unit suffering from diarrhea, a symptom of stress-related canine colitis. Most were administered antibiotics to fend off possible infections from stress and injuries obtained from climbing rubble. Some suffered from respiratory problems

By Kim Proescholdt

caused by dust surrounding the collapsed buildings. All received baths to rid them of the dirt and grease that tarnished their shiny coats as they maneuvered through the rubble.

Many of the search-and-rescue (SAR) dogs on scene were monitored by state-of-the-art medical equipment. To help track a dog's health, the center was equipped with a donated blood-testing laboratory that checked each dog's kidney and liver functions within minutes. The VMAT expressed a need for the portable blood chemistry analyzer in order to triage dogs on site and provide immediate care to those that were dehydrated, overworked or otherwise incapacitated. With access to this type of information, vets could continually monitor each animal's physical condition, to get them up and back to work at the site of our country's worst terrorist attack.

The need for canine teams

According to *Dog World* magazine, dogs are used widely in SAR

efforts because their noses perform better, faster and more reliably than any tool yet devised. Dogs have a sense of smell thousands of times more sensitive than a human being's. They can pick up scents through concrete and in the tightest of spots, where large search equipment cannot possibly venture.

In a study performed by the Lansing, Michigan, police department, canine teams found 27 of 29 people hidden in a variety of buildings, compared to just 17 of 29 found by officers unaccompanied by canines.

Disaster search dogs, of all the fine dogs who are a help to mankind, are the only animals at this time who are trained and tested at rigorous national certification standards.

Because of earthquakes, the training of disaster search dogs originated in California. Surely, there is both a need and a means to increase the number of certified disaster search dogs and highly-trained handlers. But it takes a special kind of dog to do such demanding and often dangerous work.

The making of a four-legged hero

A successful search team requires four elements: a great dog, a committed handler, precise training, and allocated funds to allow the training of both over a period of up to three years.

A search dog candidate is not hard to find once the needs are clearly defined. The dog most likely to succeed as a trained disaster dog is a friendly, risk-taking dog that is very active and considerably high-energy. They often engage in hunt and fetch games and are overly obsessed with toys. They must also have a boldness of character and not frighten easily by the commotion that often occurs at a disaster site.

Preferable candidates are young and healthy, usually 2-10 months in age. Historically, the Labrador and Golden Retrievers, and a handful of Border Collies, have the highest success rate in most programs. However, there

are also programs that currently use slightly older dogs (age 1 to 1 1/2 years old) retrieved through breed rescue groups and animal shelters. These recruiting methods have produced positive results.



Photo credit: NDSDF

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Photo credit: NDSDF



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Three examples of the training the dogs go through as part of the NDSDF certification program. These are part of a six-month "pilot" program at the Sundowners Training Kennel in Gilroy, California.

Originated in June 1995, the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation's (NDSDF) main objective is to increase the number of certified disaster search dogs and highly trained handlers. Founder and CEO Wilma Melville finds it ironic that dogs who have been surrendered by their owners because they are "unmanageable" or "too much to handle" may have characteristics and temperament that a search team looks for.

"One of the nicest things the Foundation is doing is rescuing dogs and turning them into rescuers,"

Melville says. "Because you don't know what a puppy will be like at a year of age, we decided we had to get grown dogs. The obvious place to find such animals that were not in the bosom of a happy family was at the animal shelters."

In 1995, Melville and her black Labrador Retriever, Murphy, were among the certified SAR teams sent to Oklahoma City to locate victims beneath the rubble of the Murrah building. It was there at the site of a major urban disaster that the work of highly trained SAR teams was seen as the invaluable resource that it is. Even

though no live victims were found beyond the first 48 hours, the dogs reassured rescue workers that they had done everything possible to locate survivors. The importance of these highly trained dogs to the efforts at tragedies like those in Oklahoma City and New York City confirms the necessity

for having specialized teams readily available.

At NDSDF, Melville created an innovative "pilot" instruction method, initiating the dog's training before they are matched with a handler. After a suitable dog is selected, the foundation raises the funds to train the dog, a six-month process that takes place at Sundowners Training Kennel in Gilroy, California. Following this initial training phase, it is at this time a handler is selected.

The financial cost to the volunteer handler can be daunting, averaging about \$5,000 per year. Because

Photo credit:

the handler must first learn to be a dog trainer, sometimes it can take up to three years to train a dog before he or she can be deployed.

Firefighters, who typically become the dog handlers, may end up picking up part of the tab, but most of the money is raised through a corporate or individual philanthropic entity that either becomes a foundation member or just simply donates. "The kind of help we need is certainly financial," Melville says.

search more difficult rescue simulation courses. It takes years of training for a search dog to reach basic certification. Many good search dogs never receive advanced certification. Today, there are approximately 100 FEMA dogs certified nationally as Canine Search Specialists. However, there is a need for more than 300 of these highly trained dogs.

The canines work in tandem with their handlers, who have trained together in other programs.

and wobbly surfaces under the guidance of the handler are a few of the skills required for basic certification.

The specialized dogs must learn new tricks that oppose their innate instincts. When a dog runs, it digs its claws into the ground. When the surface upon which they are standing moves or becomes unstable, a dog instinctively jumps off. But specialized dogs learn to keep their feet spread without disturbing anything in their path. This explains why most of the

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Of the 54 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) certified search dogs in California, half are NDSDF dogs. There is a need to double that number, according to the California Office of Emergency Services. These trained disaster search dogs are a valuable resource deployed nationwide wherever disaster occurs.

Becoming a federal employee

Cadaver dogs often get years of training with their handlers, who are typically members of fire departments or are emergency medical technicians. They must be unflustered in the face of screaming people and earth-moving equipment and physically capable of moving through confined space and even climbing ladders. Though many police department K-9 units visited the World Trade Center site, it was the local urban SAR teams that had the most rigorously trained dogs, some of which meet standards of performance set by FEMA.

There are two levels of FEMA certification for SAR canine/handler teams. Basic certification requires the search animal to perform to specific standards under the handler's supervision and guidance. Advanced certification requires the search animal to perform to those standards outside the direct supervision and guidance of the handler, and to successfully



Photo credit: Andrea Booher/FEMA News Photo

An urban search and rescue worker takes a well deserved break from the search operations underway at the World Trade Center.

Canine teams must be re-certified at least every two years in order to participate in SAR operations. For the handler, certification includes written and verbal tests regarding SAR strategies, briefing and debriefing skills, and canine handling skills. For the search animals, testing is more detailed and physically challenging.

Proper command control, agility skills, barking alert skills to notify rescuers of a victim and willingness to overcome innate fears of tunnels

dogs at the World Trade Center site preferred not to wear the donated canine booties. They also learn to crouch, lowering their center of gravity, when rubble shifts beneath them.

Additionally, dogs are tested for other FEMA-required specialized qualities. These skills include heeling off leash, a drop on recall, long stay, and agility on an obstacle course. Dogs are taught to climb a ladder, go through a long tunnel, navigate on various surfaces and even climb barrels.

With agility, obedience and alert behaviors in place, the dogs are ready to start searching the rubble. The dog's strong desire for the toy is what helps to successfully transfer all behaviors to a rubble pile.

Displaying confidence and comfort atop rubble is a requirement for FEMA certification. Teaching a dog direction control, stopping to a whistle cue and moving left, right, backwards and forwards with hand signals while atop rubble, is an important behavior trait taught aggressively during training. But suitable training sites are few and far between. Large areas of unsightly rubble are needed out of the way of public sight and access.

A valuable resource

During a time of loss of hope and security, dogs provided additional resources to aid in the search-

and-recover efforts in New York City and Washington. It is apparent that dogs are invaluable resources to helping save lives. They, too, are brave. Like their human counterparts, they too display brave and heroic efforts. The wonderful “specialists” – human and canine – cannot be praised enough.

September 11, 2001, taught a lot of people that not much in life can be taken for granted. That certainly proved to be the case with our brave emergency rescue workers and the hundreds of dogs who were there to work beside the human rescuers.

We know we will see our canine friends helping even more in the future as the landscape of America has changed. Recently, newspapers printed a story about how the demand for specialty dogs far exceeded the supply needed to perform such security-related tasks as sniffing for bombs. Let's hope we don't have to see them working alongside their handlers in emergency situations, but it is consoling to know they are ready to protect and care for, as we all should do for them.

For more information about NDSDF, visit www.ndsdf.org or call 888-646-1242. For information about FEMA SAR teams, visit www.fema.gov/usr. 🐾

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