

## **Some History and Perspective on Search and Rescue Dogs in Maine**

By

Warden Specialist Deborah Palman  
MESARD Founder and Training Director  
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Prior to the 1980's the only type of dog teams utilized to look for lost persons in Maine were police K-9 or bloodhound tracking teams that followed the ground scent left behind as the person traveled. In Washington State during the 1960's and 1970's, Bill and Jean Syrotuck developed training systems for dog teams that relied on searching for lost persons using the air borne scent of a person rather than the ground scent. Based on their systems of training and the deployment of teams, the American Rescue Dog Association (ARDA) was formed by a number of search dog units that trained and deployed German Shepherds using Syrotuck's methods of training and search planning. Due to the excellent leadership of these units, the ARDA name became associated with a high level of competence in search and rescue. ARDA certified units were not just a collection of teams that worked at the direction of some other authority – they came to a search equipped and prepared to plan and run searches themselves for at least a week at a time.

Jerry Sukeforth of Sukee Kennels in Warren, Maine, trained with Bill Syrotuck and worked to establish an ARDA unit in Maine. Two different groups of dog teams trained by Jerry consisting of German Shepherds were the first search and rescue (SAR) dog units in Maine. Unfortunately, they suffered from a lack of search calls and participation fluctuated with the coming and going of dogs and handlers. The last group to work successfully was Pine Tree K-9 Search and Rescue. The group was under utilized because authorities running searches at the time did not understand what air scent dogs were, and there was no one authority in charge of SAR or a central clearing house of information on SAR and SAR resources. The Pine Tree K-9 teams did have an excellent find at a massive search in the wilds of western Maine for two retarded children. In this case, a handler let her dog out to relieve itself before going to her search area and the dog ran off and then returned, signaling to the handler that it had found someone. The handler wisely recognized the dog's actions and followed the dog into the lost child who had been missing for nearly a week.

In 1981, about the time the Pine Tree Unit was dying out due to lack of call outs, a statute was passed that put the Maine Warden Service in charge of inland SAR. Selected Warden Supervisors were sent to National Association of Search and Rescue (NASAR) training on how to conduct and manage searches, and the use of air scent ARDA trained dogs was emphasized and praised in all the training. Warden Service used ARDA teams on a few of their massive searches, most notably the search for George Wescott outside Greenville, and was impressed with their capabilities and professional manner. Warden Service decided to support the formation of an air scent dog unit in Maine. Specialist Deborah Palman, then a Warden Service K-9 handler, began researching training methods. The help of Jerry Sukeforth was enlisted to train the first few teams, and Penny and Tim Sullivan, founding members of the ARDA group Ramapo Search and Rescue and good friends of Gary Anderson, the first Maine SAR coordinator, provided additional training and help. This new unit was called Maine Search and Rescue Dogs or MESARD for short. Jerry Sukeforth certified the first MESARD teams according to the ARDA team testing standards.

While the original MESARD dogs were mostly German Shepherds, other qualified handlers and dogs joined the team with other breeds and the group decided not to become an ARDA certified unit because ARDA required that all the dogs be German Shepherds. ARDA standards also required that the unit be capable of providing their own logistics and planning for the search, functions that were largely fulfilled by the Maine Warden Service search organization in the state of Maine.

Although not an ARDA unit, MESARD adopted testing standards that were similar to ARDA standards. MESARD recognized the success that ARDA groups had using standards with the multiple field tests: a trail search, a dense brush search, a night search and large area search. MESARD was incorporated in 1984 and trains both air scent and tracking dogs to this day. During the 1990's, disagreements between MESARD and Search Dogs Northeast over dog team standards eventually led to the writing of the Maine Association of Search and Rescue (MASAR) standards for search and rescue dog teams. The MESARD standards were changed to accommodate the testing additions imposed by the MASAR standards.

MESARD has provided SAR dog services to the Maine Warden Service at an average of about 20 searches a year and has many finds of victims to their credit. A large part of the unit's success was its attention to the proficiency of its dog teams and its adaptation of ARDA training methods to the thick and heavily wooded terrain of Maine.

Most ARDA units worked in the relatively open woods and areas of the western US, or in farm country or the open hardwoods of the more southern latitudes where handlers could see their dogs while they were working. The first MESARD dogs were certified according to ARDA standards and trained with the "find/refind" alert method. With this type of "alert," or indication that the dog has found a person, the dog finds the victim, returns to the handler and then returns to the victim. Handlers recognized the change in their dog's body language and/or relied on the dog's "come hither" stop and stare or eye contact to know that they had to follow the dog. In open cover, the handler can see the dog leave the immediate area of the handler and make a long run to the victim, so often the handler knew when the dog first hit the scent of the victim and left.

Experience searching and training in the thick woods of cut over areas and conifers of eastern and northern Maine as well as extensive night searching made it clear to the experienced MESARD handlers that simple "eye contact" or body language reading would not work in search environments where the handler could not see the dog. Dog teams are usually assigned to search areas where ground searchers and aircraft are ineffective because of reduced visibility, so, at actual searches, MESARD teams usually ended up searching areas with reduced visibility. Maine is the most forested state in the US, and it became clear to the MESARD handlers that the old ARDA training methods would have to be modified to create a more "handler-proof" alert.

MESARD handlers also began to select dogs from working lines instead of show or pet genetic lines. Working dogs are bred to work and are easy to motivate, work longer and harder and show more independence and energy when searching than pet or show lines. They are far superior for searching than non-working dogs, but they tend to range farther away from the handler and thus, when actively searching, cannot be seen in conditions of low visibility.

MESARD training methods were changed to teach the dog a trained alert that involved the return of the dog to the handler and physical contact with the handler or a return with an obvious soliciting behavior like barking to signal that the dog has found a victim. The proofing of the alert behavior made searching when the handler could not see the dog much more effective and became the foundation of all MESARD air scent dog training.

To some extent, the success of MESARD air scent teams and Warden Service K-9 teams in finding victims since 1990 has made Warden Service search planners rely on them more and more. Dog teams have become a little too trusted because not all dog or police K-9 teams are as highly trained nor experienced at SAR as the Warden

Service and MESARD teams. Most wardens don't know the difference between a dog that follows ground scent (tracking dog) and an air scent dog, so they don't understand that each has specific uses and limitations. Wardens also don't understand SAR dog certification requirements and what is needed for SAR dog teams to be effective. Well meaning but less reliable dog teams that are not certified in SAR functions are treated by most wardens as being as good as SAR certified teams when sometimes they should not be relied upon.

Unlike tracking dog handlers who start a track and either find the victim or don't, air scent or area search dogs are assigned areas to search and clear. Using a bomb dog to search a school to determine if a bomb threat is real is an analogous situation to an air scent dog searching an area. What is important is how reliably the team can say the victim or bomb is not there and force the search or situation to progress to new areas. The easiest solution occurs when the team finds the victim and the search can stop. When an air scent dog team searches an area and does not find the victim, search managers then have to make a decision about the effectiveness of the team and whether or not the area should be searched again by another search resource. Since MESARD and Warden Service dog teams have been so successful in finding victims, and air scent dog teams are so efficient compared to ground search teams in clearing areas, most Warden Service search planners will not immediately re-search areas covered by air scent dog teams. In searches involving massive areas of wild land, it is highly likely that areas searched by dog teams will never be searched by another resource before the search is terminated. Because of their real life search experience, MESARD dog teams understand that they may be the only search resource working their assigned area, so they train and search with the understanding that they may be the victim's only hope.

Understanding how crucial the SAR dog resource in Maine has become, MESARD and MASAR have taken steps to ensure the reliability of their teams through certification and re-certification standards. The MESARD standards were amended to provide for the annual re-certification testing of all teams to ensure their proficiency.

Along with standards development, MESARD adopted a Code of Ethics and rudimentary "procedural" policies that address team conduct at searches and the call out and use of certified and uncertified dog teams. These policies were often discussed, agreed upon and adopted by the membership after a problem developed between members or with a team's performance. Regarding the use of certified teams, initially MESARD policy stated that only certified teams could respond to SAR incidents run by Warden Service. The policy did not address the use of member dog teams by authorities other than Warden

Service, some of which worked at the direction of other law enforcement agencies. However, a recent incident involving an uncertified MESARD dog revealed the weight that wardens and search planners place on the performance of MESARD teams. Since some search planners don't even know how dog teams work, it is really up to the responding dog handlers to understand and control their deployments according to their capabilities. During the summer of 2005, a MESARD handler using an uncertified tracking dog unknowingly created a problem at a search for a lost nursing home patient. The patient was 40 years old did not have any major physical problems, but he was brain damaged with the mental abilities of a four year old and unable to care for himself. He escaped the home by climbing out a window. The nursing home called the local police and they called the MESARD handler, who had previously used her certified MESARD tracking dog to track under the police department's authority. In this case, since it was a missing person, Warden Service was also requested, but it took some time for wardens to respond.

Since her previously certified dog was deceased, the handler used an uncertified dog that she had started training to replace the other dog. The dog ended up running a 5-mile track that was "continued" another half mile by a newly operational State Police team. The wardens running the search trusted the first handler because she was a MESARD handler, so they gave up the search for the night and assumed the lost person was OK. Fortunately, the weather was warm at the time. The next day a more experienced Warden planner and an experienced Warden K-9 handler responded and assessed the situation. They were both a little skeptical of the tracking dog results but the planner allocated the majority of his resources to search out where the track ended. Luckily the Warden Service K-9 handler elected to start his tracking dog back at the nursing home. He successfully tracked the patient out into the woods only a half-mile behind the nursing home. The man could not get up or walk by himself by the time he was found, having been without water or food for 20 hours in hot and humid weather.

This incident pointed out to MESARD how much trust is now placed in dog teams. The MESARD policy was modified to prevent the use of uncertified dog teams where search managers may rely upon them, whether or not they are deployed by MESARD, Warden Service or another authority.

MASAR is also considering SAR Unit standards that will require each Unit to control the actions of their members and keep untrained or unqualified members from deploying in situations they are not qualified for. The use of dogs to locate human scent is unique and not a use that someone who has not trained a dog for SAR can intuitively

understand, so it is crucial that SAR dog handlers police their own ranks.

Another training and deployment change that has come since the original ARDA training is the use of GPS units in Maine SAR. Warden Service now relies heavily on the use of GPS units to plan searches and keep track of what areas have been searched and what have not. GPS units allow for better navigation and allow search managers to know exactly what searchers have done. GPS use has eliminated the confusion caused by searchers trying to locate unfamiliar area boundaries in the dark in areas unfamiliar to search teams and planners. Planners can give starting coordinates or even enter search area boundaries directly into searcher's GPS units. When searchers are done, their routes are downloaded into the planner's computers and the planners can see directly what has been covered and what has not been. New roads and other points of interest can be recorded with GPS units and added to the data needed to conduct a search. Because of this extensive GPS use at Maine SAR scenes, GPS use and training is required for MESARD certification. In addition to the overall use of GPS units for search planning, GPS use makes covering and navigating within a search area much easier, and there is no better way to record a tracking dog's track and route of travel.

Although not included in certification requirements for air scent teams, in training all MESARD dogs are exposed to cadaver scent sources to test their reaction so the handler can know if their dog avoids, is attracted to or is neutral towards cadaver scent. This allows the handler to know how the dog might react if the victim they are searching for is deceased, a situation that may or may not be anticipated when a search starts. Some advanced MESARD teams formally train in cadaver work and provide assistance to the State Police, Warden Service and the Medical Examiner's Office in searches for human remains.

MESARD teams also train and certify in water search and searches for evidence or articles with human scent. Besides helping to recover personal items of the handler, MESARD dogs have recovered car keys, pagers, radios and GPS units for members and others and assisted law enforcement agencies with evidence searches. The skill of locating articles with human scent can be crucial to the recovery of items left or lost by a victim and provide valuable clues to the victim's route of travel even if the victim is not located.

MESARD dog teams provide a valuable service to the people of the state of Maine by maintaining their professional standards. The training, certification standards and policies promoted by MESARD and MASAR are the result of years of search training and experience by the past generation of ARDA SAR dog handlers and nearly 30 years of

search experience in the State of Maine. MESARD will continue to pursue better ways to train and deploy search and rescue dogs and continue to promote the effective training and use of SAR dogs by other SAR units and law enforcement agencies because experience has shown MESARD that the life of the victim may be at stake with every deployment of a dog team at a search and rescue incident.