

Search and Rescue for Patrol K-9 Teams

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In the last 20 years, the basic police response to lost and missing persons has changed, and will probably continue to change. The number of calls for lost or missing persons seems to be increasing as the median age of the population increases, resulting in increased numbers of elderly with dementia issues. Substance abuse, autism and other mental and physical disabilities lead to some individuals becoming lost, missing or stranded in the outdoors, often in weather or circumstances that are hazardous. Not too long ago, many departments had blanket policies that delayed responses to missing persons calls for 48 hours before the department would consider investigating the issue. In Maine, in winter, a delay in a ground search for a person missing in the outdoors often results in their death within that period.

Thus, in many jurisdictions, departments are spending more time addressing lost and missing persons, or passing the complaint on to agencies or organizations that have jurisdiction over or can conduct such searches. Who is in charge depends on the jurisdiction. My experience has shown me that when the statutory responsibilities for search and rescue (SAR) are clear, a good system and resources for SAR usually exist. Where responsibilities are not clear, the situation is often chaotic.

No matter who is supposed to be in charge, the ball falls first in the court of the department that received the complaint. To ignore the complaint or fail to pass it on could very well result in a lawsuit for the agency. Since credible resources for SAR, professional and volunteer, now exist in most states, departments should be aware of the options they have to conduct a search and/or pass on responsibility for searches or investigations for lost and missing persons.

Call K-9

Often the first thing a dispatcher or supervisor will do is to send a K-9 Unit to the scene. This is great, because it can take years for K-9 handlers to convince department personnel that they are better at finding people and things, and the assignment shows that the department is finally learning this. But are you and your patrol K-9 really the appropriate resource for this call?

A court case from January 2010 from the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit involving the use of a “find and bite” patrol K-9 to locate a missing teenager in Maryland, Melgar vs. Greene, addressed the issue of using dogs trained to bite persons upon finding them for the location of missing persons. I asked Terry Fleck about this case and his reply is given below. I added some minor wording changes in brackets to make his quick summary easier to read:

“[There are] Several issues in the Melgar case:

1. The Court ruled:

[A] police officer's specific use of his patrol dog to locate and stop father's missing son, which resulted in son being bitten by dog, gave rise to a "seizure," even though the seizure did not occur in quite the manner officer had envisioned; the dog was trained to bite any individual he found when tracking, and although focus of officer's conduct was to help [the] son, there was also an element of criminality involved due to the possibility of underage drinking.

Genuine issues of material fact existed as to [the] feasibility of muzzling canines, [the] police officer's patrol dog, trained to bite fleeing criminals before using it to locate and stop father's missing son, the reasonableness of length of leash (15') used on dog, and whether officer should have recognized from dog's actions that dog was close to finding son, precluding summary judgment in favor of officer on issue of whether officer's conduct, which resulted in dog biting son, resulted in an unreasonable use of force under the Fourth Amendment.

Police officer's alleged conduct, in using patrol dog that was trained to bite fleeing criminals to locate and stop father's missing son, was not a violation of clearly established law (NOTE the date [of the incident]: on March 17, 2006), so as to entitle officer to qualified immunity from § 1983 suit for excessive force arising out of dog's ultimate biting of son. [Mitigating factors were that the] bloodhound, which was trained not to bite, was not available at time of search, time was not on officer's side, as missing person was a teenager who was not only lightly clothed but whose condition was believed to be exacerbated by potential alcohol poisoning, and officer kept dog on a leash at all times, expecting that his control over the dog by means of leash would render any warning unnecessary.

2. This case is a classic example of an accidental / unintentional bite. As there is normally 100% liability in State Court for negligence, this case should have been settled immediately by the agency.

The agency lucked out in this case. As of the date of the event, March 17, 2006, this issue was not "clearly established law". Now, in 2010, it is.

3. As far as using SAR K-9, they are normally not a fast enough response in an emergency situation. Very few SAR K-9 groups can deploy as fast as patrol K-9 can. The reality is, patrol K-9 will be there first and able to deploy immediately in an emergency. As such:

Deploy on a very short lead, 6' maximum. Flank the dog on both sides with officers, preferably other K-9 handlers. Once the dog determines direction of travel, that typically removes 180 degrees (half) of search area. The instant the handler or another handler sees a change in the K-9's behavior that he is getting close to the victim, restrain and remove the dog from the search. Let the human searchers continue and locate the victim.

If the dog does not pick up a track, the dog would be used to cover paths of least resistance and high probability locations / areas. Once the SAR K-9 team arrives, that team takes over and the L.E. team is removed.

If the dog will tolerate a muzzle, that may be appropriate. Unfortunately, my personal experience over 30 years, is that the muzzle is problematic. The dog over-heats quickly in muzzle. I have also seen numerous K-9's break a person's bone (typically the nose) in a muzzle blast. I'm not convinced [a] muzzle is appropriate."

Thus, Melgar vs. Greene establishes that, if you use a dog trained to bite lost or missing persons upon finding them, and the dog bites the person, you will most likely be liable in federal court for a Sec. 1983 suit as well as liability in state court. In this case the officer was following department policy that allowed the use of find and bite dogs to locate missing persons if no better resource was available.

Not all patrol dogs are trained to automatically bite someone they find. Some patrol dogs are trained to do a bark and hold, others bite only on the handler's command and/or if the handler is assaulted. There is no doubt that some jurisdictions with serious crime issues need dogs that are trained to automatically bite the person they locate. However, these dogs should probably not be used for search and rescue applications.

Automatic Bite vs. Bite on Command

When I first started in K-9 in Maine way back in the 1970s, it was expected that the dog was supposed to bite everyone it found on a track or in a building search. Our training group found, however, that always training bites in tracking quickly produced a dog that would go after everyone it saw, tracklayer or not, in anticipation of a bite. We switched to non-aggressive tracking training which produced a much more reliable tracking dog. We only added enough bites to the ends of tracks during training to make sure the dog would bite on command if needed. So our dogs would track, but not automatically bite the person at the end. In many situations the dogs showed some judgment – standing on and growling at (but not biting) prone and unmoving suspects they found hiding in the woods and giving a friendly approach to children and non-aggressive victims they found. Perhaps this “judgment” by the dog was created as much by the handler's emotional state during the search as well as the dog's temperament, but this type of response was fine with us.

Building searches were another matter. We trained for a bark indication unless the dog could get to the person, when they were expected to bite. In real applications, however, most of the dogs we trained did not immediately bite a motionless and non-aggressive person in the building. This may have been due to the training not making the dogs “hot” enough, and/or the fact that most Maine dogs are picked to be less civil and to be more social, calm and stable so that they can relate to the public in a friendly manner more often than an aggressive manner.

I have seen and worked with departments that train and pick dogs to be immediately aggressive and to bite when encountering a person during a search or track. But I feel that some patrol dogs can be safely utilized in SAR work if they are not trained to immediately find and bite and they have a basically social and stable temperament.

What type of dog you have depends on your needs, your personality (admit it, you know it is true), your department needs and the training and basic temperament of the dog. Some handlers and departments have the need for a “search and seize” type dog and others have a need for a “search and indicate” type dog, and handlers from each type should respect the others. Just know what will happen when YOUR dog finds the lost drunk under the bush or an autistic teenager who runs away, and whether or not the dog’s response will be appropriate for the circumstances.

I also know from training my personal dogs, that if you do training for friendly finds for SAR work, you will probably change the response your dog gives in what are supposed to be aggressive searches. For example, I initially trained my dogs to do aggressive building searches, as well as a find/refind type indications for open area SAR searches. I never did extensive training for long “find and bite” type open area searches, but did certify all my dogs in air scent search and rescue. Eventually some of my dogs started doing find/refind indications for building searches. The find/refind is a type of indication where the dog finds the victim, returns to the handler and then leads the handler back to the victim. It is used by most SAR dog Units doing wilderness searches and is highly effective. However, it was contrary to the find and stay with the suspect building search training my dogs had originally received. I suspect that much of the change was due to the amounts of training – I was doing much more SAR training and deployment than building searches, since, in 30 years of K-9 work for Warden Service, I responded to a total of 3 building searches versus responding to hundreds of SAR type searches.

How you train your dog depends on the needs of your department. The Maine Warden Service needs dogs for search and rescue much more than it needs dogs for apprehensions. As of this date, Warden Service has never had any accidental bites of lost or missing persons even though some of the dogs used on searches were “patrol” trained to Maine State and USPCA PD1 requirements.

So, ...Dispatch Calls...

So, dispatch calls you, the on-duty K-9 handler, to respond to a report of a missing autistic child. The weather is cold and wet and a real danger of hypothermia exists. What do you do?

First of all, hopefully your K-9 policy addresses the use of patrol K-9s for search and rescue, and there has been a discussion within your department about this type of deployment and the potential liability it might incur. If the policy exists or the discussion has been held, you can let it guide your response.

Policy or not, if you have a “search and seize” patrol K-9 that would be inappropriate to use in these circumstances, and you have no intention of using your

dog, you still need to do something with the call or request. You should know what other search and rescue resources are available in the area, and/or what department or agency has jurisdiction over these types of calls. If the initial information about the situation is good, these resources should be called out ASAP, or as soon as it is clear that a search should be initiated. To fail to initiate a search or investigation could make you and the department liable if the person is found deceased or injured.

When should a search be initiated? As soon as it is clear that the missing person might be in danger or is unable to help themselves, and if enough information exists to start a search. For help in decisions, the National Association for Search and Rescue provides a priority ranking to help prioritize searches.

When I say “enough information exists to start a search,” I mean that information exists that puts the person in a specific area so that area can be searched. As an example of a situation where we can’t search, in Maine, every year, one or more mentally compromised persons, whether they have dementia or whatever, will disappear after having left in their car. They are reported missing by relatives or friends after they don’t return for a few days. In Maine, we have miles and miles of woods roads that are uninhabited and not travelled for months at a time. These people often end up stuck or stranded on one of these back woods roads. The first task becomes to try to find the vehicle, which, given the distance someone can drive in a vehicle over several days, becomes a very large area. This is not a job for K-9 at this point.

When is a person in danger? This depends on the physical and mental attributes of the person and the environment they may be missing in. This requires some judgment and experience and some “what if” thinking in borderline situations like a runaway or missing child, an alcoholic who habitually disappears for days at a time, etc. Only careful investigation and interviewing of the complainant, friends and relatives and an examination of the area the person was last known to be will reveal what the actual search priority is, unless it is a no-brainer like a small child or frail elderly person missing in a blizzard. Don’t ever dismiss a search as being low priority based on second hand or limited information. Often there are facts that point to a high priority search that have not been revealed in the initial information given by a dispatcher.

I know that K-9 handlers want to be out working their dogs rather than interviewing relatives, but where to search is as important to know as whom to search for. Only by knowing the person’s habits and capabilities and situation can you know whether to search or not, and where to search. If you are working a scent discriminating dog, one or more scent articles (for teams that may respond after you), will have to be collected when you visit the person’s residence or vehicle. And, as Wardens have learned the hard way after years of SAR work, always have an eye witness show you exactly where the person was last seen. Don’t rely on second hand information if the original eye witness is available.

A little bit of information collecting can save a great deal of work. If you never start your track in the right place, you will never get to the end of it.

It should be obvious by now that a single K-9 handler is not an adequate resource for a department to send to a lost person call. The K-9 handler will need a supervisor to make some of the heavy decisions as well as to help coordinate resources and communication. An investigator should be called to do interviews and work talking

to people in the general area. Many searches are resolved by investigations alone, or by applying the information uncovered by investigators.

If the lost or missing person turns into a criminal event or homicide, the department and investigation are much better off having these resources on scene from the beginning rather than after the crime is discovered. This is definitely a situation where making an effort early can save the department considerable time and money later on. Even if the situation turns into a "routine" lost person, the more time that elapses since the person left, the farther that person can travel and the larger the potential search area becomes.

Tracking K-9s at SAR Scenes

SAR tracking deployments are usually the hardest tracks K-9 handlers encounter. They are usually old and heavily contaminated. They usually occur at dusk or night after the friends and family have searched most of the day and finally decide to call for help. Although night is not as easy for humans, nightfall usually enhances scenting conditions and drives the amateur searchers out of the woods. Often the path the person takes is not what a "normal" person would take (that's why they are lost). The subject will backtrack, circle, walk into thick cover and swamps, places and maneuvers most patrol tracking dogs don't train for or tend to avoid in training. Sometimes the team may luck out because, increasingly in this urbanized world, people just don't search very far into the woods. The general population is becoming much less able to navigate in areas without streets and walking paths. Often they will walk only as far in the woods as they can and still see the open area they left behind. If a K-9 handler is confident in his ability to navigate away from landmarks and penetrate difficult to woods areas, often he or she and the K-9 will be the first ones to check the area beyond the sight of landmarks. If the dog reacts to scent or a track, it will probably be that of the missing person, and the track or scent can be followed up.

So, even if your dog is not the best tracker for this type of work, give it a try if the dog can make a friendly find. Chances are that you and your dog will not mess up the scene for more qualified teams that will arrive later, because a really qualified SAR tracking team should be able to handle the contamination.

Tracking dogs can be a great help even if they don't actually find the person. If the team is well trained and qualified so that the handler knows the dog will scent discriminate, the team may give a direction of travel. Sometimes a tracking dog will indicate that the person is not lost in the woods but has walked down a road or was picked up by a car. My personal best was an 18 hour old track for a missing teenager. My dog tracked from his girlfriend's driveway (she had just dumped him), nearly a mile down the paved road past several residences as well as the crowd at the search scene at his residence (I had to help her get by that one by re-starting on the road), a short ways down the road to a short woods road, down the woods road to the end, and through the woods a short distance to a house where a friend of the boy lived. The lost boy was sleeping inside the house when the dog and I arrived. His friend, who knew the boy was at his house, was over "helping out" at the search and had told

investigators he did not know where the lost boy was. The dog saved us quite a bit of expensive search time that day.

Good tracking dogs can also tell where the person has NOT been. This can help to further the investigation and determine a direction of travel. I am sure most experienced K-9 handlers can tell a story of when their dog said there was no track present and the “crime” turned out to be a false report by the complainant. The situation is similar at SAR scenes, where negatives can help to determine where the actual track may be.

When a major search is going on, a qualified tracking dog should be on standby at all times, in case ground search teams locate a clue to the person’s location that would give a point for the team to start, or if a sighting comes in. If the dog is a reliable scent discriminator, the sightings can be checked or confirmed by the dog’s actions.

If your patrol K-9 is not up to these tasks, then know the dog teams that are up to the task. Be familiar with the local credible search and rescue dog teams and what their capabilities are. Most department administrators will not have the knowledge and time to check out information about other dog teams. As a K-9 handler, you know that you are automatically the “go to” person for anything dog related, so make it your job to be informed. Remember that 1) the proper resources need to be called in a timely manner to reduce liability and 2) knowledge of and networking with other credible K-9 resources will only enhance your training, knowledge and experience, as these resources may be able to help you with training, equipment and other aspects of your job. If you can’t run the track reliably, then make sure you inform your supervisors which teams should be called.

Unfortunately, there are some bogus individual search and rescue handlers (they are rarely part of a large SAR Unit), that hurt the reputation of all dog handlers by their actions. If you don’t take the initiative to check SAR dog teams out yourself, you may see one of these bogus handlers (who usually advertise heavily to uninformed administrators and family members) showing up at a search in your town.

Most volunteer SAR dog teams can respond to searches in a timely manner. They may not be there immediately, but they can usually be there within hours, and will work for extended periods of time for nothing. They don’t have to worry about supervisors sending them home because they might incur overtime.

Quick Tips for SAR Deployments

First, teach your dog to be a reliable, scent discriminating tracking dog. You don’t have to have a bloodhound to do this, you just have to spend time tracking in a structured and careful manner with the objective of teaching the dog to stick to a target scent. If your dog tracks very well now but doesn’t know how to target the specific scent you give him, it will not take much to teach your dog to pick a scent off a scent article. That is the subject of another article (or book). If your dog doesn’t scent discriminate, but won’t be a liability, call out a qualified scent discriminating team and work your dog in the areas you do feel comfortable with, like uncontaminated areas the person might be or have walked through. If you can’t do the higher levels of tracking, a friendly find

dog can be easily taught to do “hasty search” work which allows the team to search along terrain features for the victim. This requires teaching the dog to work off lead, to search the surrounding area and to indicate the presence of anyone they find. The traditional, aggressive find “area search” trained patrol dog should not be used for area searching for lost persons. Besides liability if the person is bitten, most patrol area search dogs are trained to work small areas and short periods of time and to find an aggressive or at least alert person. Time and time again at real missing person complaints, I have seen patrol dogs fail to “indicate” to their handlers the presence of an unmoving, unconscious or deceased victim if the area search goes on beyond a few minutes or the dog goes out of sight into thick cover. Hasty searches are a function the dog and handler must be trained to do, not something left up to “I think we can do it” because the team is trained to find criminals.

Second, call in some help to manage the search and take someone with you when you deploy your dog. If you are headed into a large area, and if you can't find a fellow officer you trust to keep up with you, there might be a fit and qualified member of the family that hunts or frequents the area that can go. Often they can be a big help in knowing where you are or where you should search. If they are one of the ones who contaminated the area, then this is a help because your dog should know they are not the one you are looking for. You will need someone to navigate, observe and communicate with others because you will be busy with your dog. If the lost person runs, you can't send your dog, but you might be able to send your helper after them. **MAKE SURE THEY CAN KEEP UP WITH YOU** before you take them with you.

Third, learn to use navigation tools: map, compass and GPS. The newest GPS units give you a map (or even aerial photo) of the area you are in, your location, and record the track you are taking. They are reliable and accurate 98% of the time, even under woods canopy. Having a GPS gave me tremendous confidence in my ability to get into and out of the woods. If you have any doubt about what you are doing and your ability to get back to your car, that doubt will run down the lead to your dog and impede the dog's ability to track because the dog will feel your lack confidence. GPS tracks also give you an excellent record of your work.

Fourth, take EVERYTHING you will need for an extended trip away from your vehicle. Most K-9 officers become dependent on having their vehicles nearby. On a long track or search you will need water, a water bowl, a flashlight, extra radio and flashlight batteries, map and compass, surveyor's flagging, first aid kit etc., and not having any of these things may end your track or search before it should end. You literally may cost someone their life by forgetting to take extra batteries. At the very least you may endure some personal discomfort or embarrassment. Take the time now to put all the needed items in one place in a small pack or bag so you can find them easily when you are at a scene and three people are asking you questions at the same time. For extended deployments, consider survival equipment and whatever clothing you may need for the next 12 hours. At one search I worked at, the night sky was clear and temperatures in the high 30's, so I didn't take rain gear. After I got well into my search area (I was supposed to walk about two miles along a stream to the next road), I found that the waist high vegetation was covered with dew, and I quickly became soaked and chilled. I knew I would be OK if I just kept walking and kept my activity level and body heat high until I got out. I was fine until we found the victim by voice contact.

He was sitting on a beaver dam in the middle of the stream, and he couldn't walk, so we had to stop. Then I became hypothermic. I was to the point where I was losing the use of my fingers. It is sobering when you realize that your life or at least health of yourself and the victim depends on getting one of 5 waterproof matches lit and everything around you is wet and unusable as a striker. Pants legs and zippers were not working to light the matches. We finally got the second to last match lit on the hammer of the revolver I carried and built a fire using for tinder a fishing law book I had in my breast pocket. I now carry a small piece of sandpaper in my match case.

Fifth, take a search management or strategy course, or do some networking and training with people who have search training and experience. Having a little knowledge of the steps to take at a search gives you a place to start when you respond. Search scenes can be very chaotic with friends and family of the victim and the press all trying to talk to you. It can be very overwhelming. Learn the steps of proper search management so you can have a plan to follow when you arrive.

Sixth, take responsibility for what you can do best. If your dog is not trained for SAR work, then work as back up to a handler who has a dog trained for SAR work. Or help with the search planning and management or in investigations. If you have extensive experience as an officer or in searching, and other K-9 teams are arriving, you may find that your best use at that time is in managing the other teams rather than deploying. In my later years as a Maine Game Warden, I arrived at search scenes, eager to strike off for a nice walk in the woods with my dog and escape the stress of dealing with the family, only to find that four other equally or better qualified SAR dog teams were due to arrive at the search within an hour. Since I knew that usually the first responding warden on scene would not have the knowledge or time to deploy those teams properly, I would put my dog up and manage the dog assignments at the search, and often the whole ground search itself for the first 8 hours if it lasted that long.

In summary, knowing your and your dog's capabilities are part of your responsibility as a K-9 handler. Don't try to deploy your dog in a manner that you and your dog are not trained for. Knowing how a search can be best accomplished and what your best role in it are also part of your responsibilities, because often regular patrol officers and supervisors won't have that knowledge. Prepare and train yourself and your dog now to have success at search and rescue scenes later on. Even though your primary function might be to find and apprehend criminals, the same principles of searching and search management apply to SAR work, and many of the same skill sets overlap.