

Dog Talk

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DOGS IN OUR LIVES

In memory of the great dogs we have lost – Submitted by Elaine Sawtell

We aren't house-proud. If we were, we wouldn't abide the scratches on the doorframe, the holes in the screen, the darkened shine of worn spots on the chair. We would wince at the mottled carpet and fret at the hair clinging to our clothes.

We don't. If anything, we lovers of dogs are a tolerant lot, finding greater value in the unabashed affection of our friends than in immaculate sofas. Shoes can be replaced, but heroic dogs are timeless.

Without dogs, our houses are cold receptacles for things. Dogs make a fire warmer with their curled presence. They wake us, greet us, protect us, and ultimately carve a place in our hearts and our history. On reflection, our lives are often referenced in parts defined by the all-too-short lives of our dogs. – Paul Fersen



A Tribute to
Lucy
By Lynne Engelbert

Lucy was a 15.5 year old Border Collie who was a FEMA and CA Office of Emergency Services (CA OES) certified Type 1 disaster search dog and a CA OES certified Human Remains Detection (HRD) dog. She was a member of NASA Ames' Disaster Assistance & Rescue Team since 1996. Lucy died on August 4. Her last minutes were spent where she loved best, the rubble pile at N267



When I got Lucy she was a hardened professional with years of wilderness and disaster search experience. She had already survived two near-death experiences, one of which was a rattlesnake bite. She worked the OKC bombing with our Urban Search & Rescue team, CA Task Force 3. In the morning she would run over to my cot, give me kisses and then race back for her breakfast. We were buddies from the beginning. When I bought her from her former handler, Caroline, it took me six weeks to earn her respect. It wasn't easy. Those of us who witnessed her acceptance of me as her new handler could tell you the moment it happened.

At age 8 she injured her back leg and couldn't work on rubble for six months. In that six months she became a CA certified Human Remains Detection dog. Within a few months she had found a murder victim still buried 6-8 ft. deep in a landfill. Finding that lady's body put the bad guy away forever. That winter she found another murder victim and the next spring the victim of a drowning accident.

We trained and honed our skills as a team for years until we were called upon to work the World Trade Center in Sept. 2001 with CA TF4. She was incredible, finding her first human remains within five minutes of setting foot on the WTC site. In addition to her work locating the victims of this travesty, she would go up to firefighters, police officers and construction workers, offer little kisses of condolence and absorb their tears into her coat.

Following the crash of the Shuttle Columbia Lucy was requested by NASA to fly to TX to help locate the remains of our astronauts. She worked there for nine days as part of a massive team that eventually brought our astronauts home to their families.

Lucy worked with local police departments and sheriff's offices on crime scenes, went to grade schools and colleges to demonstrate what a disaster search dog can do and attended safety fairs. No matter what I asked her to do, she was more than willing to try, and she usually accomplished the task after only a few repetitions. It did take a while to convince her that "dead dogs" don't bark and roll their eyes.

I'm going to miss working with Lucy. She was truly my partner in addition to being my best friend, accepting anything I did and loving me no matter what.



Proposed Certification Process for 2007

The Canine Sub Committee has distributed changes to the Canine Search Specialist Certification Process (CSSCP) for 2007. They state reasons for these changes are due to 1) the reduction in federal funding and 2) the necessity to develop an evaluation that can be fairly set up, administered and evaluated. The 4 most notable changes are:

- 1) The reduction in test piles from three to two
- 2) The reduction in evaluators from ten to seven
- 3) The variable victim total (4 to 6) from the set total of 6
- 4) NO false alerts as opposed to one false alert formerly allowed

Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the proposed changes. If you have a specific question or need a clarification, contact your sub committee representative.

Comments on the proposed changes:

I support the changes in the new testing procedures. I think that the test does a better job of evaluating the dog and handler as a team, testing in more realistic search scenarios. The limited access pile requires the dog to search and indicate independently. The full access pile allows the handler to work right with the dog and to interpret correctly or incorrectly the dog's behavior. By requiring no false alerts, this really puts the pressure on the handler to not attempt to influence the dog and talk them into an alert. An unknown number of victims is also more realistic and will get handlers to more thoroughly cover their search areas.

My only concern is with the time. By adding another possible victim, handlers will only have an average of 5 minutes per victim (4 victim pile) to locate, mark, etc, reduced from almost 7 minutes per victim (3 victim pile). Not having enough time may be a problem. Hopefully, when the test is tested in December at the Canine Prep, that issue will be checked. If it is a problem, solving it is as easy as increasing the search time.

Susann Brown

I am concerned about the new standard, but not because I believe that it will be easier. I think that the added stress of potentially having so many victims (4) on one pile, to be searched in 20 minutes, is very difficult just in "processing" time. I would rather see a team work towards quality searching than sheer speed in searching. I also worry that evaluators will "think" this new standard is easier, and fall (again!) into the tendency of being tricky in set-up. This has occurred numerous times in the past, when the evaluator group has gotten a bit creative and set up a test which is more designed to fail the team than pass it... I have been and continue to strive for a test that can truly be called a national standard. This means that it is not the luck of the draw, but a valid and consistent test of the team's capabilities, across the nation from test to test. I also think that this new evaluation should be given a test-drive, as there will always be unforeseen glitches in a new format. I believe that most testing handlers are a bit concerned about the difficulty of the new evaluation, as evidenced by the rush to certify before the standard goes into effect. I am personally hoping that this budget-driven decision to change the standard will continue to turn out the fine teams that we now have in the system.

Ann Wichmann



After reading over the new standard I'm comfortable with the changes. While the change from 3 to 2 piles seems to be a lowering of the bar I'm inclined to say that it actually raises it. True, there is one less pile to search but by making the changes from 0 - 4 (with a POSSIBLE total of 6) think about the added responsibility on the handler to make sure the piles have in fact been covered FULLY. I'm not saying that it wasn't there before but this really hammers the point home to make handler work harder. There is added stress of having to find a 4th or commit to clearing the pile. I think you'll find that this will cause an increase in the failure rate by reducing the number of marginal dogs that just barely pass. Any standard will have those that just squeak by but by increasing the intensity and pressure (which at this time I feel this new test will do) those that barely pass will be that much better than their predecessors.

The new evaluation allows for better scrutiny of the handlers search strategy and I predict you'll see much more thorough searches than before. In addition this is a bit more realistic. I will leave the test not knowing if I missed two or nailed all four. I must rely on my skills to confidently clear two piles. While I'm no fan of the stress this places on the handlers and the long wait time to find out if you've passed or not I do feel we've amped up the test. Stress is part of the game.

Having offered my solicited opinion I will add that I'd like to see this new standard set up and run a few times by certified handlers so that we can see for ourselves how it really pans out. I think that it would be a good idea to test drive prior to implementation. I will even offer the Baltimore site as one of the options.

Sam Balsam

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It is clear that the changes in the CE testing standards are budget driven. Until the evaluations under the new standards are allowed to play out, it will be difficult to predict exactly what will happen. However, in the overall picture, the system has to deploy certified dog/handler teams. While we must train to pass the evaluation, we all must keep in mind what our true responsibilities are. We should keep in mind what we will be called upon to do on a real, upcoming activation. And, we must be able to proficiently respond to the needs of those in distress, under catastrophic conditions. This might require continual training on a level above that which is required to just pass the CE. This is the option of each handler.

Bob Sessions

Thoughts for Dog Talk – Revised FSA & Certification Process

Shirley Hammond

I'm sure you all know I do not favor the Revised Certification Process. I know the Canine Subcommittee members have labored and suffered over trying to **make a document that is not subjective.**

I truly believe the problem is not test subjectivity **but handler and canine poor preparation.** If the team is prepared they will not be quibbling over subjectivity. They will perform adequately and we will have a higher pass rate, not "it was a good day" pass. I believe this pressure by some Task Forces to have certified teams is part of the problem and it is up to us to solve it, but merely revising the Cert Process will not fix the problem. Let's face it folks, most handlers want to be certified and will train to the level they need to reach that goal.

If we are not wise enough to design the program to include the preparation needed, it won't happen. There are some dedicated handlers that are already training the skills needed to pass and they do pass. .

The FSA is the document that needs to be revised, it is not sufficient to make a team eligible to test for deployment.



That is the main reason the Type II was discarded and the difficulty of subjectivity was even greater there because it was a deployment test. I can take a lot of the blame for that, as I lobbied hard to get rid of the Type Two certification. I do not know if I would have had the foresight to see some of the difficulties, but it is very clear now. **I think the current certification version is a better assessment tool, I understand that the current reduction in federal funding may necessitate a less expensive test i.e: the reduction in piles and evaluators.**

However, if the Canine Subcommittee intends to keep the Revised version, and it does offers some good points such as: the No false alerts allowed, the variable victim 4-6, Unknown number of victims, but only if there are some changes made in the preparation process .

The FSA must be a more complete document. **It must prepare handlers and canines for deployment.** It doesn't come close. I have not attempted to rewrite the FSA, but some major point off the top of my head would include the following:

There is no set period of time before the team can take the Certification Evaluation (CE). The FSA does not prepare a team to take the CE. We see teams taking the FSA and then rushing to get their application in to take the next CE.

There are no provisions for the so-called advanced skill training necessary for deployment such as: Contaminated piles with buried and accessible food stuff, bedding, baby diapers, fresh blood, live and dead animals/birds as well as fresh blood and some decomp in containers.(I know that this was a controversial topic before, but it can be done without leaving bio-hazardous conditions behind if properly contained), which was one of the major concerns. It does not need to be on the CE, but it is a must in the training venue.

Teams need to search under real world search conditions of jackhammers and heavy equipment working in the same area. Just having a generator running is not sufficient to mimic real incident conditions.

The canines must have experience in finding multiple victims and the handler being confident in declaring an area clear on a zero pile.

In the latest FSA document sent out, the Bark Alert Exercise has been diluted instead of emphasized. Instead of repetitive barking for 30 seconds interspersed with digging and trying to penetrate. The new version says Focused barking FBILHS for 30 seconds (a minimum of 6 barks may be interspersed with digging)...this is a training issue! It does not need to be down sized.

How can we deploy dogs that do not have commitment to scent?? I do not believe this is adequately evaluated in the FSA. The dog should alert at the alert tube and at the buried subject in the CE with repetitive barking. When we allowed handler to go on the rubble pile with three (3) barks we shot ourselves in the foot. **That was the beginning of the downside!** Weaker and weaker teams are passing.

The canine coordinators can help a Task Force meet the deployment guidelines with qualified dogs. The TFs may need to fork over some money to get mentors in to help with the training, if that is what it takes. It is all a training issue. If the dog cannot meet and pass the training requirements it should not remain on the team. It is as simple as that. Don't make excuses for the dog because it is a nice handler.



Just some thoughts on the “new” CE evaluation

Sharon Gattas

- Major changes are :

1. Commitment to scent source taken out:

This means a handler can talk the dog into all alerts. The problem is that this does not create an independent search dog that a Task Force can count on in a stressful/real search where a handler does not know where or if there are victims. “In all do no harm”; leaving people alive is more compromise than I can take.

We are letting down the TF and, more importantly, the VICTIM when we pass a dog that cannot leave the handler and bark at live human scent, shame on us!

2. Two piles not 3 for a search evaluation, with 30+ minutes rest in between.

This is an exercise, not a test. This is a compromise I believe due to money spent on the number of evaluators.

A reasonable solution to this would be to keep 3 search piles and use only 2 evaluators per pile.

I would also eliminate the Chief position; this has added an unnecessary cost. We did this for many years before with less people, less money, and less political problems.

Another solution would be to use 9 evaluators, no chief evaluator but use 6 local evaluators and only fly in 3 evaluators from distance.

You can't have it all; something has to give but hopefully not the integrity of the testing process to a watered down “exercise”.

3. 4-6 victims, so there is an unknown number.

Great, a Task Force spends \$2000.00 to send a dog across the county to find 3 victims and pass, this sounds way more like the Type 2 test. What's wrong with this?

A good compromise would be a required find of 5 to 6.

4. No false alerts:

Been there, done this, this is a poor way to “harden” the test. Many good dogs failed on past tests when this was a rule because they did not have a perfect day. Found 6 out of 6 with great work, and FAIL, explain that to a TF leader!!

I firmly believe the pass rate will fall dramatically but I personally don't have this problem, why should I care?

No dog is perfect on a given day, at a given time,

What are we trying to accomplish? I assume that we need more dogs and this will not happen from this rule.

As an evaluator for 11 years and someone who has trained 3 Type 1 dogs I believe our test is not hard and is minimally subjective.

Our test is better than we had, many mistakes we had in the past are being repeated here. Our current test is stronger than the test the sub-committee is proposing.

I would say: In my opinion this test is not going to get us more dogs but it will get us weaker dogs. I may be in the minority with my views but really see many mistakes of the past being repeated.



Quote of the month....

"The performance we are told we are incapable of evaluating in the sterility of a test is the very performance we will be required to judge in the chaos of a disaster. Only the victims are different."

Elaine Sawtell

Search Canine Skills – Suggestions for Charting Progress

Elaine Sawtell

In determining a canine team's readiness for the CE, a chart of the team's abilities may be useful for Canine Coordinators and handlers. Some of these skills are listed here; there are no doubt others that should be included.

1. Pile Size – (6,000 to 15,000 Sq. Feet)

Canine must search independent of handler a rubble pile up to 15,000 square feet.

2. Deeper victims

Canine must independently alert on victim a minimum of 3 feet deep. Must be an unfamiliar hole to canine.

3. Diffuse scent

Canine must alert independently on victim in diffuse scent scenario. Scent should come from many angles.

4. Commitment to victim

Canine must alert independently, bark repetitively and maintain interest in victim until handler arrives.

5. Comfortable on different mediums

Canine must negotiate a variety of rubble types (concrete, wood, brush, combo) without assistance, with confidence, while searching independently.

6. Continuing to search

Canine must search an area for up to 20 minutes, continuing to search after placed victims found, until handler calls search.

7. Endurance

Canine must perform multiple search scenarios, minimum of three, with 0 to multiple victims, with less than 5 minutes between searches (extreme weather will be factored in)



8. Endurance of alerts

Canine must demonstrate acceptable bark alert in combination with #7.

9. Distractions

Canine must not alert on multiple and varied and combined distractions; i.e., food, clothes, noise, animals (dead or alive), humans.

10. Real world directability (control at a distance)

Canine must take handler's direction, left, right, back, angles, stop and redirect. Handler can be level, above or below canine, obstructed by rubble, debris, hills, woods, partially concealed or fully visible to canine. Handler can move as needed to direct canine.

11. Directability combined with search

Canine will take handler's direction in combination with search.

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To accurately assess performance, the skills should be demonstrated (A) away from home pile; (B) without prior practice by the team on the pile on the date of performance; (C) before a person approved by the Canine Coordinator

The skills could be completed over a several-month period as the canine and handler progress in training and experience, and performance recorded on the Skills Evaluation sheets.

One Master Sheet, which lists all skills, could be maintained for each canine and would give an overview of the team's progress and state of readiness.

It is assumed a Type 1 team up for recert has previously demonstrated these skills; however, the checklist may aid in determining weak areas in performance.

Note: There are some forms to assist with this process attached with the e-mail

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Please forward any news, scheduled events, letters to the editor, or other info you want disseminated via **DOGTALK**, the underground canine newsletter to Anne McCurdy: amccurdy@clarian.org

