

The Making of a Rescue Dog: A Personal Story

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The training of a rescue dog generally begins when the puppy is 8-10 weeks old, and that's when I started training Tara. Tara was a German Shepherd, a breed I have loved since childhood. I started the training by hiding treats around the house and allowing her to find them. At first, I would drag the treat on the floor and 'hide' it in a rather conspicuous spot. She was told to 'go find treat.' Depending upon the treat, she either took some time or went straight to it. Tara loved the game.

The next step was to make finding the treat more difficult. I stopped dragging the treat across the floor to its hiding place, and had Tara find it without a trail. Next, I started hiding the treat in more difficult spots such as behind sofa cushions, in drawers, and in closets.

Once Tara was mastering the 'go find treat' indoors, we moved outdoors. There are many more distractions and smells outdoors, so finding the treat in the yard was much harder.

When Tara became more proficient at finding treats outside, we started training her to find people. At first we would allow her to see the person (e.g.; my husband) go into hiding. Then I would give the command 'find him.' Tara would run to my husband and then was encouraged to run back to me. A rescue dog is taught to not make contact with the missing person, but immediately return to the handler. When she came back I'd say 'show me' and follow her back to my husband. Then she would get her favorite reward: playing with a stick.

The only time Tara was allowed to play 'stick' was after she successfully found someone and then brought me to him. You see, in a real life rescue, you need to have a reward readily available when a dog successfully performs a search. No matter the terrain, there is generally a stick available. So when Tara successfully brought me to the missing person, I had her favorite reward right at hand. I know of one rescue dog who, upon finding the missing person, would pick up a stick and bring it back to his handler, anticipating the wonderful game they would play when he brought the handler back to the missing person.

As Tara became more adept, I no longer allowed her to see the person go into hiding; she needed to find the person by scent alone. When rescue dogs work, they will often zig-zag back and forth, trying to find the scent, and then honing in on the area where the scent is the strongest. We refer to this as following the 'cone of scent.' On the graphic at the right, the missing person is the red (X). The concentric circles show the scent becomes weaker the farther away you get from the person. The 'cone of scent' which the dog follows is depicted in blue. The red dotted line shows the movement of the rescue dog toward the missing person.



Once Tara could find a person by scent alone, we made things even more difficult. Now I would send her on a 'find him' and while she was doing that, I would hide. Then she had to find me before she could take me back to my husband. Again, this would better simulate a real life situation. There is no way I could keep up with Tara on a search, so I could be a long distance away when she found the missing person. Finding the person is only half the task, she must learn to then find me and bring me to the person.

After Tara was performing successful searches for people she knew, she needed to learn to find people she did not know. And she needed to learn that not every person would be happy to see her. Some missing children, for instance, may scream or cry at the sight of a strange dog.

There are six basic search certifications, each one becoming more difficult. They are:

At 6 months of age, Tara was ready to become certified in trail search. She completed that successfully, and the first search and rescue we participated in, she was the dog who found the person! I was so proud of her. Over the next two years Tara completed all of the certifications.

In addition to the above certifications, there are also advanced certifications. These include searching for some article, and performing a water search. In a water search, the dog and handler are in a boat, searching for someone who may have drowned. Dogs with their incredible sense of smell, can detect the tiny air bubbles which are released from a person under water and come to the surface. Some dogs have been known to find a person in 90 feet of water.

Tara and I were members of the Headwaters Search and Rescue Dog Unit in Eagle River, Wisconsin. As a part of the team, I needed to learn map reading, orienteering (being able to use a map and compass) and drawing maps. We were all unpaid volunteers who provided search and rescue as a public service. Members of a search and rescue unit must learn to work as a team and have a coordinated response to an emergency. Rescue units are evaluated on a periodic basis.

Tara and I were involved in over 100 searches. Some of them ended with happy reunions, but unfortunately, in some instances, the people had died - some by their own hand. Rescue work has many great rewards, but it also can exact a toll from both the dogs and the handlers. Sometimes the dogs pick up on the emotional state of the handlers, and can become depressed. For rescue units involved in the Oklahoma City bombing, for instance, finding a large number of people who had died was extremely difficult, and it took a lot of courage and dedication from both the dogs and the handlers to keep on searching when there was little hope of finding someone alive.

Sadly, Tara died in 1995. I now have a 3-year-old German Shepherd, Mariah, who enjoys some games of 'find.' For medical reasons, I no longer do search and rescue work, though I have not totally removed myself from it. I now teach courses on wilderness survival training for children through 'Hug-a-Tree & Survive.'

Hug-a-Tree is a non-profit organization which was developed by a couple whose child died while lost on a camping trip. Through the organization, trained presenters offer a course for children 5-12 years of age. It provides them with simple principles necessary for staying safe in the wilderness. The program teaches children that if ever they become lost, they should find a tree, hug it, and stay by it until they are found. Children are encouraged to always carry a trash bag with a hole for the face to use as emergency weather protection. Each child should also carry a whistle. The children are reminded that their parents and searchers are not angry with them, but want to find them. Children should make themselves big by wearing bright colors. If lost, they should take sticks or stones and make an 'X' in a clearing so people in helicopters will see them. The children are also taught to keep themselves safe by not running, or climbing trees.

Parents learn to make an aluminum foil cast of their child's footprint prior to camping or setting out in the wilderness. The cast can later be used by trackers to identify the child's shoe print. If a child is lost, adults need to call the sheriff quickly and be available for interviewing so the rescue workers can have as much information as possible.

I have found that being involved in search and rescue is a truly rewarding experience. I am not only helping, meeting, and working with people, but also developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of my dogs' instincts and capabilities. There is a special intimate relationship that develops between the dog and handler when doing rescue work, and I am so thankful I was able to experience that.

For more information about Hug-a-Tree, check out their website at www.tbt.com.hugatree/



Jill Lemke and Tara on their first search and rescue. Tara made the find!!

- Trail search
- Field search
- Search through light brush
- Search through dense brush
- Search for multiple persons
- Search at night