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Search and Rescue Dogs

the K-9's with a nose for the job

There would have to be little doubt that dogs have been used by humans throughout history to hunt, track and even attack. Police as far back as 1888 unofficially recruited dogs, presumably for basic searches because they used bloodhounds which were renowned for their acute sense of smell. The British and Germans were the first to employ dogs in police work; and realising the potential of these K-9 recruits, special training of them began around 1899. Since then the program expanded to other countries and search dogs are now a universally-accepted and necessary addition to any police and emergency response service.



Not all dog-breeds are deemed ideal for this work; and, depending on the particular tasks required of them, those best suited are extensively trained before they go into the field. German Shepherds would have been the most popular as far as policing went; their size and strength being a definite bonus when apprehending dangerous criminals.

But over time it was realised that other breeds had particularly useful talents too. A common sight in airport concourses is the friendly beagle which can sniff out all manner of things, often illegal, that passengers mistakenly believe they can transport undetected. Then, dear oh dear, this cute little Snoopy sits next to their baggage and waits for its handler to call security - game up, job done. Labradors are also frequently deployed to search cargo holds and baggage trolleys for drugs and contraband.

Search dogs are trained to recognise and follow a particular scent specific to their allotted job; and different breeds would seem to be more suited than others. Herding breeds such as German or Belgian Shepherds and Border Collies are often favoured for picking up scents in the air. In cases when there are numerous people to be found, such as possible survivors of an earthquake or building collapse, non-scent-discriminating dogs are generally used, having been trained to follow diffused or wind-borne scents of any human being. In such circumstances they are frequently allowed to roam unleashed to cover a wider area. Once a target has been discovered they may return to their handler, then guide the way back to the survivor; or wait by the subject, barking to call their handler to them.



Rather than roaming free over a wide area, tracking or trailing dogs are generally restrained and begin their searches either from the last-known location of the subject; or by being given an item of clothing worn by a missing person, then taken to the place they are most likely to pick up a starting scent. Able to detect that same scent on the ground from such diverse sources such as skin-cell shedding, evaporated perspiration and even respiratory gases, they will lead their handlers for great distances. That can mean up to eight hours on the track; and if in wilderness situations they are trained to ignore diversions such as wildlife. With a definite nose for the job, these amazing dogs can detect an airborne scent drifting towards them from up to a quarter of a mile away or more.



As well as the exciting aspect of search operations, there is also a gruesome side. There are times when the subject is thought to be deceased; and this is the realm of those special canines known as cadaver dogs specifically trained to follow the scent of decomposing flesh. They work on and off the leash and can sniff out a dead body, or decomposing body parts; even scents rising from the soil when the source has been buried. Unpleasant

though these types of searches might be to contemplate, they have been known to help solve cold-case crimes, as well as bringing closure to the victims' relatives.

So, let's give thanks to these incredible animals which are our best friends, for sure. Without them our police forces and emergency services would have to rely on human talents which are not the sharpest at the best, or worst of times. This final photo is of a German Shepherd still searching. I have no doubt that the search would have resulted in a positive outcome. I don't imagine "no way" is in a K-9's doggy vocabulary.



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