Dog Ops for FTL
Jan. 28, 2004 – KFM, SDJ

These training materials are based loosely upon "Dog Team Operations for Staff," by Jason Dalton, revised 10/9/99 and available at www.asrc.net under "Training."

Definitions

Dog Team – A dog and handler, usually with an additional human serving as a "walker" to assist with certain tasks (see below).
Dog – Woof!
Handler – The human who is trained and certified to work in search and rescue with a PARTICULAR DOG. Dogs and handlers are not interchangeable, each pair is a unit, and if either half is altered, then the team is no longer operational. The handler's job is to know his or her dog and interpret its signals about the scent.
Walker – The role you'll be fulfilling! Generally, this is a person who handles radio, medical, and navigation so that the handler can concentrate on his or her canine partner.
Scent – The substance which a dog detects and can discriminate, allowing a lost individual to be detected by the dog.

So what is scent really, and how does it work?

There are many theories as to what exactly scent is – for the purposes of this class, all you need to know is that scent is stuff in the air that the dog can detect a lot better than a human can. Also, since it is "something" suspended in the air, scent is highly susceptible to air currents. Scent is given off continuously by all humans from all over our bodies. This produces an effect known as the "scent cone," which will be discussed later. As a walker, you need to be very careful when working with a dog team and stay exactly where the handler tells you to, otherwise as the air currents shift, your scent may mingle with the subject's, and you'll foul the dog's ability to track. As a general rule, stay downwind of the dog – it is better that you smell him than he smells you!

Searching with a dog

First things first, again, STAY OUT OF THE WAY! Similar to sign cutters who will chop your legs off if you tramp through their footprints, a dog handler will...let's just say that your entire body gives off scent at all times, so the punishment will be more severe.

There are three main types of dog – air scent, tracking, and trailing.
1. Tracking dogs will generally be given a scent article (pillow case, used underwear), shown to the PLS, and told to "Go get 'im!" The dog will then follow exactly along the subject's path.
2. Air scent dogs are a little more general – they tend towards searching an area for any human scent at all and then following it up.
3. Trailing dogs do a little of both – they can follow the ground scent for a distance, then pick up the air scent and use it to cut corners if the subject took a very circuitous route.

A dog team will be given an area to search very a ground team's task area. The difference is that there's a total of one searcher on this team, rather than 10, and it's the dog. Also, the dog doesn't need a direct line of sight like we do if he's going to detect the subject; he just needs to get his little nose inside the person's scent cone. For this reason, the search tactics are often very different from those used by a human ground team. Three examples are:

1. *Perimeter search* – this is the canine equivalent to a hasty. Walk around the outside of the search area, checking for scent.
2. *Ridges and Drainages* – a VERY tiring method of searching, the dog handler will lead the team up and down all of the drainages and ridges in the search area, checking for scent pockets. While it is an exhaustive method, it generally yields exhaustive results in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and is a very effective way of checking an area.
3. *Contouring* – the handler will lead the team along a specific contour, staying at that contour and following it all the way around back to the start point. The team will then go to the next contour and repeat.

Dogs are trained to be able to do the searching themselves – they just need a handler to interpret their results and translate them into English so appropriate actions can be taken (send an evac team). As the dog is searching, it will produce several different types of results. All of these the dog and handler will have worked out a system so that they understand each other, it's your job to then take whatever action the handler asks you to, probably radioing the information to base.

Interest – dog searches the area more heavily than other areas. Doesn't necessarily mean anything, but it might.
Alert – Dog signifies to the handler that it has detected human scent – its version of a clue. Be prepared to notify base, especially with wind direction, **your location** and your direction of travel.
Scent check – After detecting human scent, the dog comes back to check the team and see if the scent is one of you.
Find – three guesses, and the first two don't count.
Indication – part two of finding the subject, the dog lets the handler know
Re-Find - the final part, the dog brings the handler back to the subject. Obviously, knowing location is going to be vital at this point since you're going to have to go through the usual find protocols with base.

Summary

Dogs are one of the most effective SAR resources available, and almost never miss if a subject is in their task area. It is important to remember that on a dog task, the handler is the FTL! Follow their instructions as you would any other FTL, with an eye open for safety hazards and situations you aren't comfortable with. Do your best to keep the land nav and communications going strong and follow their instructions to be an effective walker. If the opportunity presents itself – try to learn something about canine SAR! The handler is an expert after all.