

An Interview with Mary Lehman

by Micky Adams

Mary Lehman has been involved with Search & Rescue for over 16 yrs. She has had the opportunity to work with a variety of dogs. I was able to catch a bit of time from her busy schedule to get some insight on how she got involved in SAR and the role of the German Shepherd Dog.

In addition to Phoenix's Avalanche, Wilderness and Cadaver certifications she also received his show rating in the Young Dog Class, passed the BH and earned an AKC obedience title. This is quite an accomplishment for an active Search & Rescue dog.

*Photo on Right:
Mary on a training exercise with SG1 Phoenix v. Valkyre BH, CD, CGC, Certified Avalanche, Wilderness & Cadaver Search Dog, trained in Narcotics*



How long have you been in SAR work and how did you get started?

I began training my Rottweiler, Nora, for search work in August of 1994. It all started with a homicide investigation I was part of while working in Prescott, AZ. A woman's body was discovered in a freezer in a Ryder truck at the home of a local house painter. After a thorough search of his home local Law Enforcement located identification for several women and were concerned that there may have been more bodies on the property. Cadaver dogs were brought in from out of state to search the property outside the home as well as a large excavated area beneath the suspect's home. Fortunately, no bodies were found other than the one in the freezer. I was given the opportunity to watch these dogs work and had many conversations with their handlers.

What teams or departments are you involved with today?

At present I am a FEMA Certified Canine Search Specialist with Texas Task Force 1. TXTF1 responds to state disasters as well as national disasters. I am involved with our local search group, Alamo Area Search & Rescue, located in San Antonio, TX. Within that group I hold a BOD position as well as Secretary.

[Note: Mary has just relocated to the San Antonio, TX, area from Utah and is already involved in active searches in that community.]

How many breeds have you used in SAR?

My first SAR dog was a long-haired Rottweiler. She was a great dog to learn with and she was an awesome trailing dog. She had several assists to her credit. I call them assists since she was able to give us a direction of travel (DOT) after cutting the lost person's track and heading in the correct direction. Once the DOT was determined that information was radioed to base camp at which time Jeep teams were deployed farther out in front of us resulting in finding the lost person.

Since that time I have predominantly utilized German Shepherds as my personal favorite. I am currently training my 4th GSD. I have also trained 2 Belgian Malinois as SAR dogs as well as my current FEMA dog, Casey the Yellow Lab.

What led you to GSDs?

Growing up as a kid in Northern Minnesota my Dad loved to hunt ducks, geese and upland game birds so it was only

obvious that we had bird dogs in our household. It wasn't until I moved out of the house that I got my first GSD in 1979. Since that time I have always had at least one in the household, but usually more.

I made the switch because I liked the noble look, intelligent nature and trainability of the GSD. After I got my first one I was completely hooked.

What was your most memorable deployment?

In terms of scale, I would have to say my most memorable deployment was to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, although by the time we responded it was for recovery and we were not allowed to deploy our dogs due to the conditions in the field. There was raw sewage everywhere after the water had receded as well as loose, feral dogs that were hungry and not opposed to fighting.

During our time in Arizona I was deployed on so many incidents and I will remember each and every one of them as they were all just a little bit different than the one before. Since living in Utah the number of searches has decreased significantly due to technology, i.e., cell phones and GPS units. However, there were also many memorable searches there as well.

Now that we are living in Texas we have already begun our work in Search & Rescue. Dave helped out with a drowning during the summer of 2009 and most recently we assisted San Antonio Police Department. They received information that an 8-month-old baby may have been murdered by his mother and placed in a dumpster in the San Antonio area. That search ran for approximately 3 ½ weeks with no evidence of the baby sighted.

How do you manage an active business along with training for SAR?

As you can well imagine my husband, Dave, and I pretty much eat, breathe and sleep dogs. We don't have any children, except of the 4-legged variety—our choice. While in Utah I worked for the State of Utah full time and ran my dog training business. Training for SAR, both FEMA and local consumed nearly all of our free time.

Now that we have relocated my focus is purely on my dog training business, Who's Walking Who(m)?, as well as search

& rescue. I am in the process of training Prada vom Valkyre, a pup from my male, Phoenix vom Valkyre, for live find area search as well as human remains.

Typically, our vacations are usually SAR training somewhere. We are on our 3rd RV and each was purchased with the number of dogs in mind. We currently pull a 38-foot 5th-wheel toy-hauler, only we don't have toys in the garage area, but many crates for the dogs. It's a great way to travel and take all of our canine companions with us.

Your husband Dave, is he involved in the handling or training?

Dave is very involved in the training and handling of all our dogs. I am very fortunate to have married someone with just as much, if not more, love for animals and their well being.

It's nice to have someone to bounce things off of when I'm having a training problem. He usually can shed a new light on what may be going on and a good way to fix it.

What type of time frame does it take for a successful team?

Ideally I like to choose a puppy for Wilderness type SAR. We start them as soon as we get them, i.e., 8 to 10 weeks of age. Our certifying standards don't allow for certification until the dog is one year of age which I believe is an acceptable time frame. It is, however, really pushing the envelope unless training specifically for one discipline, i.e., cadaver/HRD, area search or trailing. An average of 18 to 24 months is typical for training a SAR dog.

You start them at 8-10 weeks of age? I would think at this age there is not much they can do physically.

Puppies are sponges when it comes to introducing new things to them. Their eyesight is very limited at that age and so they have no other choice but to utilize their heightened sense of smell to play the hide-and-seek game.

For live-find victims it begins with very short runaways, say 10 to 15 feet, into the wind. The subject, most often the handler, will have a favorite treat for the puppy and make a big deal when they run off showing them they have a treat before doing so. As soon as the subject is behind a bush or tree the handler releases the puppy to run and find the subject. When the puppy makes its find there is a BIG party with the puppy but only with the hiding subject. It is very important for the handler to stay out of the party picture. The focus must all be on the hiding subject. These exercises are done in groups of 3 or 4 in a row, always ending on a positive finish.

When we begin training a puppy for Human Remains (HR) odor we begin by putting a container on the ground that has odor inside of it. When the dog begins to explore and investigates the HR object he/she is given a treat and a word marker, such as "good". The object is then moved to a different location for the puppy to start exploring again. We prefer to use 2 expens put together to keep the distractions to a minimum and to keep the area well defined for the pup. Once we know the pup understands the odor we will begin putting 2 or 3 more blank objects in the area. The pup then has to decide which is correct by smelling each one.

Once we know that the pup really understands the odor by disregarding the blank containers we will begin shaping the

indication, i.e., sit or down. We prefer passive indications as opposed to active. This is mainly to prevent destroying crime-scene evidence.

We shape the indication utilizing a treat to lure the dog into position once it has nosed the correct source. This exercise is repeated a number of times until the dog will begin to sit/down automatically at the odor. With puppies it usually isn't very long before that begins to happen.

You mention you have a new GSD puppy. What traits led you to choose her and why?

I have had the opportunity to choose several puppies in the years I have done SAR utilizing specific tests for the above-mentioned drives. My current puppy was chosen a little differently. I had the opportunity to interact with 2 separate litters that were 4 days apart in age. During this time (3 days) this puppy really impressed me with her independence and solid-nerve strength. Nothing seemed to bother her, especially if she was focused on a toy—that really impressed me.

Even today she continues to surprise me with her tenaciousness and boldness. She has no fear of water—she jumped in the pond after her Daddy at about 3 months of age. She loves to climb on rock piles, which is extremely important for a disaster dog. Her soundness and inquisitive nature have made her lots of fun to train.

What type of tests did you do with your latest prospect?

With my current puppy, Prada, I didn't do formal tests as I had done in the past. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interact with 2 different litters over a span of 3 days. I got to watch them with children, adults, their littermates and many different types of toys.

The first day was spent watching both litters with very little interaction. From there I had decided which pups stood out as a good, working SAR dog. I look for independence, but not one that just goes and lies in the corner away from the other pups. I want a pup that will investigate things away from its litter mates, play with toys on its own yet interact with humans when they are around.

I don't want an overly aggressive pup. One that can take a soft correction and bounce right back is good. I also don't want the runt of the litter or the shy one. Puppies that can interact with toys utilizing a tug game and retrieve are high on my list.

If you are considering looking at a litter is there anything in the parents you look for before evaluating?

Structure is a huge thing for me. If the parents are not structurally sound they will not have the athleticism that is demanded for SAR work. Often times our searches will have long 10 or 12 hour days, sometimes many days in a row. If the dog cannot physically keep up the demanding pace we aren't much help to Law Enforcement.

I also look at the trainability of the parents. What titles do they have, how long did it take them to obtain those titles, what were the scores. I prefer to have lineage that had higher scores in any discipline over lower scores in several.

The parents should be social, first and foremost with people and secondly with other dogs. There are times when we may be

required to work closely next to another team and it's important that the dogs know they are working and it's not a time to play or fight.

You look at the parents and their titles, does the RTP [Rescue dog suitability] appear to be a title that would help prospective handlers in their future choices?

If the parents have an RTP title it certainly would influence my decision in choosing them as the parents of a prospective SAR pup. It shows me the nerve strength and scenting trainability of the parents.

Future of SAR:

What do you see as the biggest hurdle to keep GSD's at the forefront for SAR given the number of dogs coming up from Malinois, Labs or Dutch Shepherds?

Over the years I have worked with many different breeds and each individual chooses their breed for a specific reason. I chose the GSD due to its fluid movement which allows them to go long distances. In addition, I really like that they mature mentally at a much younger age than a retriever. It makes the training process go more quickly since they are great problem solvers.

What is the best reason GSDs should continue to be used in SAR work?

My personal opinion is that GSDs make wonderful working dogs as well as personal pets. When choosing the right dog you can have both in one. I have Malinois and even though I love their workability, I prefer to have my GSDs in the house with me as they are calmer and less "explosive" to things outside.

Any words of advice to someone thinking about placing their dogs in an SAR home or testing/watching/breeding for proper ability to do this type of work?

Over the years I have seen lots of people who are "interested" in SAR come and go. It is a huge time commitment, not only training the dog, but getting personal training as well in areas such as First Aid, Map & Compass, GPS, and Search Strategy to name a few. We have many people who want to see if their

pet dog can do SAR. Unfortunately, many are not suited either physically or mentally for the task. We have begun testing dogs to determine if they are right for the job, rather than letting the person train for a year or sometimes longer only to have to wash the dog.

Any final words for someone who is interested in getting involved in Search & Rescue?

My suggestion to someone looking for a pup is talk to someone who has a GSD already working in SAR, find out who their breeder was and then do more investigating on your own. There are many breeders out there and lots to choose from. It comes down to finding the right combination of traits for the purpose in mind.

A special thanks to Rebecca Rodgers of Zwinger vom Valkyre for allowing us to obtain three of our GSDs from her breeding plan. Over the past 10 years Rebecca has become not only a breeder to us, but a special friend and unique person demonstrating her true love of the breed. I've had the opportunity to see her interact with future owners of her puppies and she has nothing but the puppies' best interest in mind. ∞



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