

Tracking Column

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Ms. Jordan-Dodge was a major contributor to and influential force for the Virginia search and rescue community for more than twenty-five years. Her accomplishments include participating in countless searches for missing persons as a Canine Handler, a Search Team Member and a Search Team Leader. During this time period, Ms. Jordan-Dodge trained and fielded four dogs for search and rescue:

"K9 Buck" Operational in wilderness searches for live persons

"K9 Luce" Operational in wilderness searches for live persons and human remains detection on both land and water

"K9 Orso" Operational in wilderness searches for live persons and human remains detection on land

"K9 Romeo" Operational in wilderness searches for live persons and human remains detection in wilderness areas

Ms. Jordan-Dodge served as a State Certified Canine Evaluator and as President of K9 Alert Search & Rescue Dogs, Inc. In addition to her considerable contributions to the canine community, she served as a Special Deputy with both Nelson and Buckingham Counties of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Prior to moving to Italy with her two Labradors, Ms. Jordan-Dodge and David Michael Hull (Hull's Tracking School) worked together to present tracking seminars in Nelson County VA, demonstrating how man trackers and k9 handlers can effectively search together.

Even though Ms. Jordan-Dodge had retired Romeo from land search and rescue, last year they participated with Sea Rescue Dog Association, Pescara, Italy, receiving their Patente Sportivo. Ms. Jordan-Dodge, her husband, John and Romeo now live in the mountains of Abruzzo.

1. *Could you please tell to the readers about your experience with SAR?*

Back in the fall of 1990, I was looking for a volunteer organization that I could help support. I truly didn't know what I wanted to do and the church I was attending at the time didn't have any groups that interested me. To be truthful, I'm more comfortable out in the woods with my dogs than being with a large group of people. A friend of mine asked if I had ever heard of K9 Search and Rescue. Not rescuing dogs, as we all thought back then, but taking dogs into the wilderness to locate lost persons. I had never heard of this as it was relatively new in the United States. I located a dog group not too far from me and attended a night training. The group had very obedient dogs that wanted to work. The dogs worked off leash, as they were Air Scent dogs, picking up human scent as it moved through the air and landed on vegetation. A handler explained that there was someone hiding for the dogs in the woods and that her dog would find that person and 'tell' her that it found the person and TAKE the handler BACK to the person. Unheard of for me. I watched mesmerized as the dog, with a glow stick on its vest, weaved through the woods, the light stopped, then in a heartbeat the light (with the dog) returned to the handler, jumped up on the handler and they both ran through the woods to the person hiding. I was hooked instantly. I could do this! I loved dogs, especially working ones, like Labradors and I loved being out in the woods.

What transpired over the next 27+ years was a devotion to 4 different dogs and eventually one great K9 group, K9 Alert Search and Rescue Dogs, Richmond Virginia. All four of my dogs were/are Labrador retrievers. I understand the personality of this breed and not only are they my working teammate but also part of our family. Together, we certified in Area Wilderness, Water Recovery, Large Cadaver Wilderness and Human Remains Detection. Situated in Virginia, our group was under the umbrella of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and all standards and testing were controlled by this department.

As I was active for so many years, my K9 resume is chock full of many seminars, workshops, long hours of trainings, hundreds of searches. I've held Board of Director positions in our group as well as being an active Special K9 Deputy for our county with my third dog, Orso. There is a long list, and much was experienced and learned. Many wonderful talented instructors that I am very grateful to, have been a part of my time in SAR.

My current search dog, Romeo, is now retired, even though he is only 8 years old. When my husband and I decided to move to Italy fulltime, we discussed and agreed that it was time for me to retire from SAR and enjoy free time traveling around Italy and just being retired. So, two years ago, we made that decision and haven't regretted it. It has been difficult to say goodbye to SAR, being there to help others, but it has been the right decision at the right time in our lives for the right reasons.



2. How this commitment has changed your life?

When you decide to volunteer, no matter what the cause is, and you're willing to give it your 'all', be prepared to give hours and hours, without pay, to help that cause. The reward is untouchable... So Others Might Live... the SAR motto.

Personally, the downside was tough... long hours away from my husband. Callouts in the middle of the night any time of year, on any occasion or holiday. Tromping through thick vegetation with all kinds of hazards is normal for wilderness searching. Making sure my dog is not injured and that he doesn't suffer from heat exhaustion or a possible snake bite. Finding a deceased individual takes a toll on you... There is also the requirement for training, to keep both the dog's and handler's skills honed. Our group required attendance 2 Sundays a month, but many of us trained every Sunday. There is lots of hard work and long hours in SAR.

But the rewards are many... seeing that a young child is found safe to return to his parents, or finding a confused elderly person needing to find their way back home. There is also the sad but necessary closure you provide to a family of a deceased lost person. Being a part of K9 Alert SAR Dogs for many years builds lasting friendships, where you know, no matter what the situation may be, there are many that will help you out of a tough situation. The list is long on how SAR changed my life. It was a huge part of my life, and still to this day, I chat with teammates online about their successes and times not so successful. Staying connected is very important to me.

But most of all, working with my dogs and seeing their love of service, giving their heart to please me and to provide that happy ending or closure.... priceless.

3. Since now you have relocated in Italy, how and which similarities do you find with SAR in US?

To be honest, I've only been to one local training of a few dog handlers working their dogs on an extra training session. True to my word, I have not engaged with other SAR dog groups, the reasons being 1) I promised myself and my husband upon moving to Italy 2) I would want to return and return and it would be impossible for me not to want to be involved again. It was that much a part of my life and love.

With that said, I do follow many Italian teams on Facebook. What I can gather just from that very small sliver of information are that the teams are very dedicated. They train often and their dogs are versatile, obedient and happy to work. They attend workshops to improve their skills as well as give their dogs and themselves the opportunity to expand their working knowledge of various situations.

A few things I did see that were different from my experience from being a certified handler in Virginia, was their focus on skills. As Italy has many more incidences of earthquakes and has a wider area of mountains, many of the canine units focus on mountain climbing and disaster skills related to both. And the testing that the teams are required to take would reflect these differences.



4. Tracking and K-9. How can they take benefits from each others?

When I first joined SAR back in 1990, tracking was like a dirty word to us K9 handlers. We dreaded being paired up with a tracker at a search. Trackers were slow moving, just the opposite to how we worked our dogs off leash. We had to be careful where we stepped as not to ruin a track. We felt that trackers needed to work with other ground personnel, not us 'fast moving' K9 units. We just didn't see a way to make it work.

I held this belief for many years. It wasn't until I met David Michael Hull of Hull's Tracking School. Mike and I became fast friends as we shared the love of SAR and the woods. The fact that he lived just a few miles from me opened the world of tracking and how we could work together to find lost persons more effectively and efficiently. Both being Special Deputies for the local county, we started a local SAR group to assist the Sheriff's Department. Mike offered classes non only in tracking but incorporated using dog teams and trackers on the same search task. His approach spread to other SAR groups and the myth that trackers and dog teams can't work together has been debunked.

A very simplistic summary of how Mike and I worked follows... We would start out together, giving Mike the lead to locate the track. Once a direction of travel was established, I would leapfrog ahead but off to the side of travel, using the direction of wind to my dog's advantage in the hope that he would be able to move out ahead once he got into scent. If my dog didn't get into scent, we would continue along side of Mike until factors changed and dog was able to move toward the subject. It was a well-choreographed dance through the woods. I do not mean to be flip, but simply that Mike and I worked together well, and I finally understood the importance of Trackers and K9 unites as mutual resources.

