International Commission for Alpine Rescue

Meeting record Search Dog Handlers Sub-Commission Zakopane 2019

Thursday 10th October

Introductions.

The usual introductions were made with special welcomes for the representatives from 2 dog groups new to the ICAR Dog Commission.

1. Search and Rescue Dog Association Scotland
2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Presentation of Rescue Dogs in the Polish Mountains (TOPR) by Lukasz Migiel.

First search dog used in 1914, almost exclusively German Shepherds used until the late 1990's when other breeds started to be used too.

Currently have 7 dogs, 4 certified and 3 trainees.

Training dogs starts from 8 weeks old, with socialising and familiarisation of many situations including helicopters. Helicopter familiarisation is greatly helped by TOPR having a dedicated aircraft.

An interesting approach to avalanche training during summer was described, using 'bodies' laying in sections of large diameter plastic drain pipes which are then buried in gravel or sand! The same system of using a section of large diameter pipe is also used during winter too, the pipe containing the "body" being buried in snow by a piste machine.

The Norwegian system of using small diameter pipes to breathe in to the snow and create a scent without having to bury a body is also used during training.

Marcel, Examples of good team work in Switzerland.

3 Skiers.

In one incident 3 people skied into an area of level 4 risk and were avalanched. 1 was buried to more than 3 metres depth, the other 2 were not buried. One of the 2 companions made a direct personal call to the dog handler who then put the rescue services in to motion and with a very quick and efficient response located the buried skier. The dog was indicating the location less than 40 mins after the avalanche (this was backed up 8 minutes later by a Recco signal). It then took 30 mins of digging in wet snow to get to the victim at 3.25 metres. Fortunately the casualty had an air pocket, suffered no trauma but was cold.

2 Workmen.
In another incident 2 workmen were avalanched whilst clearing a remote road. 1 was buried. Fortunately there was a mobile signal so the rescue teams were called immediately by the second workman. The snow was very wet as it was quite warm.

The dog handler was on scene in 15 minutes. The dog and handler worked for 70 minutes before the dog made an alert. The victim was dug out in 20 minutes and fortunately had an air pocket, had suffered no trauma, and despite being buried for 105 minutes before being dug out was in good condition.

2 days later he went back to the scene and described the experience to a TV crew. He was back at work less than 48 hours after the incident!

Pora Jonadottir, Iceland, Avalanche incident near Reykjavik, Learning Outcomes.
Firstly Pora outlined the rescue services and challenges posed by Icelandic geography, geology and population distribution.

Whilst there have been some very serious major avalanche incidents in Iceland, taking sections of villages and involving multiple fatalities, avalanche incidents generally are relatively rare.

Pora described an avalanche incident near Reykjavik, involving 2? Hikers, where there were some command and deployment issues (for example a dog handler deployed to a suspected avalanche area completely alone).

Some of these issues were related to the incident being close to Reykjavik and hence a substantial number of rescue teams and resources being deployed in a relatively short time.
Subsequent debriefing highlighted many areas where improvements could be made in coordination, deployment and management.
Pora highlighted the importance of a willingness to learn when an incident has not gone to plan.

Knut Skar, Norway, Erasmus Project.
Knut reported on the completion of the Erasmus programme involving Norway (NRH), Iceland (BHSI) and England (LDMRSDA) (note, LDMRSDA did not receive EU Erasmus funding and paid its own costs) plus involvement to a lesser extent of Sweden and Malta.

Areas covered included structure, finance, callout systems, integration with police and other rescue teams etc., training systems and structure, avalanche search, wilderness search, urban/disaster search and selection and training of instructors.

These discussions were achieved by 5 meets.
1. England December 2017, Organisation, Finance and Call-Out Management.
2. Norway April 2018, Avalanche training and certification.
3. Iceland August 2018 Wilderness Search and tracking/trailing training programmes, methods and assessment systems.
4. Malta, November 2018, Urban and Disaster Search, training programmes, methods and assessment systems.
5. England May 2019, Instructors, selection, training and standards.

All the groups have found this cooperation to be beneficial in both looking at the way other organisations work and examining their current systems and training etc.

They are planning to continue the cooperation on an informal basis by having one meet per year, rotating the venue between the countries involved. The first of these will be in Iceland 2020.

To progress this programme further under the Erasmus scheme would require the participation of a major educational institution i.e. a university.

Tracey Christensen, Wasatch USA, Backcountry Rescue.
Tracey described the challenges associated with attending searches and rescues in areas that do not usually have these types of incidents and have no appropriate rescue infrastructure in place. Unusual snow conditions and more people using snowmobiles for instance can contribute to these incidents.

In effect the whole team required for the search and rescue response has to be transported to the area of the incident. If no helicopter availability this may be many hours' drive away and the whole response requires the cooperation of several agencies including local sheriffs and law enforcement.

Dog Commission Workshop 2010, May 2020, Slovakia
Discussion regarding dates and focus of the workshop.
26th to 30th May 2020
Horský Hotel Akademik
Račkova Dolina
032 42 Pribylina

The disciplines covered will be Wilderness, Mantrailing and Cadaver Search.
The Focus will be working with young dogs.

Dave Benson, LDMRSD (Lake District Mountain Rescue Search Dogs).
Report and Recommendations from the Dog Welfare Focus Group.
David reported on the progress of the group and submitted a series of recommendations from the group for discussion. It was decided to discuss these during the last session on Friday afternoon and then formulate recommendations to go forward for the official paper...

Andy Peacock, LDMRSD, Using Dedicated Volunteer "Bodies".
Andy outlined how LDMRSD (and other UK and Irish Search Dog Groups) use dedicated volunteer "bodies" and how this assists search dog training.

The use of volunteer "bodies" enables much more work to be done during a typical training session compared to using handlers as "bodies" and having to constantly swap round to allow all handlers their turn to work.

A small number of "bodies" are prospective dog handlers who act as "bodies" for a few months before starting training a Search Dog.

The Majority of "bodies" however are people who volunteer exclusively as "bodies", most are not in Rescue Teams but enjoy being in the mountains and working with dogs. They often say "I could not be in a rescue Team but this is my contribution to rescue work".

LDMRSD provide training to the "bodies" about how to interact with dogs during training and what else is required. They also receive instruction about using radios etc. Individual "Bodies" often suit different stages of dog training i.e. those that need to be very interactive with young dogs and those that need to interact far less, for instance working with qualified dogs and those on assessments.

Chris Francis, LDMRSD, Teamwork in the Lake District.
Described a large scale winter search carried out, at night, in the Lake District. How the rescue teams and search dogs are called out and how, often overlooked, "behind the scenes" teams also play a vital role in rescues by maintaining key systems used during incidents (e.g. SarCall and MR Map).

The incident demonstrated how other rescue teams and resources can be called in progressively to back up an ongoing major search and how the requirements then changed when the casualty was found, hypothermic and severely injured.

Due to the weather no helicopter evacuation was possible. So evacuation required a 4km stretcher carry with the casualty on an autopulse the casualty having gone in to cardiac arrest just after stretcher evacuation started. Incident duration approx. 10 hours.

Friday 11th October, Morning

TOPR search dogs Outdoor Demonstration at Morskie Oko
The TOPR search dogs gave a very impressive demonstration of the rapid deployment of search dogs by helicopter winch to a large avalanche incident. A boulder field simulated the large blocks in an avalanche and also defined the area of the “avalanche”.

It is clear having a helicopter as part of TOPR is a great advantage when familiarising and training dogs and handlers to work with aircraft.

Friday 11th October, Afternoon

The dog commission welcomed the ICAR President, Franz Stampfli, who attended part of the afternoon programme.

Marcel, Team Work in Reserve Military System Alpine Rescue Switzerland.
Marcel described the entrance tests, basic training modules, the regulations for each rescuer etc.

How the dog teams work through 4 main stages having to pass an assessment at each stage before moving on to the next stage.

Courses are held in January and March where the assessments at each stage can be carried out, there are 2 chances to pass each test.

Jennifer Coulter, Canadian Avalanche Rescue Dog Association, Work Like a Dog, Howes Peak.

Jennifer described a very demanding avalanche incident on Howes Peak, 3295m.

3 World renowned climbers (and friends of some of the rescuers involved) attempting a route on the east face of Howes Peak were reported overdue on April 17.

A response was mounted immediately and observed signs of multiple avalanches and debris containing climbing equipment. Based on an initial aerial reconnaissance of the scene, it was concluded that all three members of the party were deceased. An avalanche transceiver was left in the vicinity of the debris to facilitate later search and recovery efforts. Weather and avalanche conditions did not permit any ground search and recovery efforts.

Due to weather and avalanche risk no ground based search or recovery operations were possible on either the 18th or 19th

On the 20th, it was possible to conduct an aerial search which included the climbing route from base to peak and a possible descent route on the opposite side of the mountain. Rescuers were then inserted by helicopter long-line into the vicinity of the transceiver which had been covered by snow following a storm and fresh avalanche debris. Due to the very high avalanche risk, the rescuer stayed attached to the long-line to allow for immediate evacuation in case of avalanche. The site was probed and searched unsuccessfully until the weather and light conditions deteriorated, halting recovery efforts.

This process was repeated on the morning of 21st when further probing was unsuccessful, a dog and handler were deployed using a 45 meter? long-line. The dog was attached to the handler by a further 35 meter? line (it was considered using the dog without the line to the handler). The dog searched the area and after about 20 mins working was able to locate the 3 climbers.

This was despite working under the helicopter as the handler remained attached to the long line at all times A recovery team was deployed to the location and successfully recovered the bodies of the three climbers.

Radio silence was observed when rescuers were working to enable clear notification from the spotters in the case of further avalanche.

Phillip Imboden, KWRO Searching crevasses with Rescue Dogs.
Phillip outlined the structure of KWRO and the requirements for wilderness and, avalanche search. He also described a new project, started in 2018, training mantrailing as a discipline with dogs that also work wilderness and avalanche.

The main part of the presentation was describing the system for searching crevassed areas with dogs, covering how to work on glaciers, suitable ropes, technology and equipment. The dog has to be graded ‘B’ or above. The dog wears a suitable harness and is attached to the handler with a 30metre rope, the handler in turn is roped to a guide. The dog marks by digging, staying and barking. Working as a team is vital!

Avalanche incidents in the Pirin Mountains, Bulgaria.
2 incidents were described.

1. A female climber who had fallen through a cornice and then a substantial distance down the crag and steep ground below ending up well below the bottom of the crag covered in the debris from the cornice collapse and subsequent avalanche.
Because of the timing of the incident the search and recovery was carried out in the dark.

Problems encountered included transport of the search dog by snowmobile (no helicopter was available)
The very high avalanche danger.

Articles from the victim distributed in the avalanche.
Finally, after the dog located the body under about 30cm of snow, the transport of the victim's body.

2. An avalanche near a ski area, 2 skiers off piste in a forest area (Level 4 Conditions).
Rescue team on site 16 mins after avalanche reported.
20 minutes later first body found with transceiver.
After a further 34 minutes second body located by probe

All.
Report and Recommendations from the Dog Welfare Focus Group.
These received further detailed discussion, a key point was the proposed wording "will never cause distress or discomfort to the dog" most of those present thought, given the work we and our dogs carry out during training and operationally, that this was impossible to guarantee.

For example the majority of dogs are probably not very happy being winched in or out of a helicopter and though they tolerate it quite well due to training, are probably distressed to some degree temporarily by the winching process. Also, given the hostile conditions we operate in on many occasions, again, even with the best of care, it is likely the dogs will at times be subject to some degree of discomfort, because of the weather, as indeed are the handlers. It was agreed by all that actions should be taken to minimise the effects on the dog by issues such as these.

It was therefore decided to use wording to the effect of "will minimise any distress and discomfort to the dog within the limits of operational work"

A list of requirements and recommendations were approved subject to the above wording.

Thanks

To end the search dog commission, Marcel thanked all attendees for the great and active work

Lake District, 02th January 2020

Minutes writer

Christyne Judge