



# K9 Search & Rescue



**4 paws,  
a trained  
nose &  
a skilled  
handler**

When a 69-year-old man from Jeffreys Bay ended his own life on 8 May 2021 by jumping from the Storms River Bridge in the Eastern Cape, the ingenuity of SAPS K9 Search and Rescue teams again came to the fore. That was because members of the SAPS K9 Search and Rescue team in Gqeberha had to put their skills to the test during this dangerous recovery mission. Challenging weather conditions and raging waters made the recovery of the body extremely difficult and the only way down to find the body was to abseil from the bridge. SAPS divers and the SAPS K9 Search and Rescue teams abseiled from the 120 m bridge into swift, icy water. They located the body almost 2 km downstream, but due to the torrential rain, the body could only be retrieved on 11 May 2021 (SAPS, 2021).

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**D**uring the simulation exercise that took place at the Bon Accord Dam north of Pretoria on 17 November 2021, the Gauteng K9 Search and Rescue teams again showed their skills. It is always amazing to see how these dogs use their sense of smell to lead their handlers to a body or to a missing person. But where did it all start?

Capt Flippie Olivier of the SAPS Dog School in Pretoria had been interested in the use of dogs for search and rescue purposes for a long time. In 1994, the search and rescue section was established and the training of search and rescue dog handlers started. On Friday 26 August 1994, the first SAPS K9 search and rescue dog handler teams completed their training. The very next day, W/O Willie Botes from the Bronkhorstspuit K9 Unit and his newly trained search and rescue dog were called to a drowning scene at the Bronkhorstspuit Dam. The first body these dogs ever recovered was that of 19-year-old Const Johan Spang from Boschkop Police Station, brother of W/O Frans Spang from the Water Wing in Pretoria. He sustained a heart cramp while he was swimming in the dam. Since then, these handlers and their dogs have gone from strength to strength and readers of **Servamus** will know by now that the K9 Search and Rescue teams are close to my heart.

### All in a day's job

Search and rescue work is not a job for the faint-hearted and search and rescue dog handler teams often witness the most traumatic scenes. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Gauteng only has seven K9 Search and Rescue teams. Although there are some K9 Search and Rescue dog handler teams in the private sector and other search and rescue organisations, they are not allowed to work on crime scenes since it is the SAPS's mandate.

Search and rescue dog handler teams are on call 24/7, no matter rain or sunshine. This means that many family occasions have had to be interrupted. Some rescue missions have good endings when those who had gone missing are found alive. This was the case where an elderly woman, who is blind and physically disabled, went missing in the Welbekend area, east of Pretoria. Capt Johan Scholtz, the operational commander at the Pretoria K9 Unit who is also a K9 Search and Rescue dog handler, explained that the woman had a specific route along which she had crawled from her house to the toilet at night.



Unfortunately, one night at approximately 21:00, she got lost. The following day at 12:00, Capt Scholtz and his dog, the now retired Timone, were called to the scene. It was not long before Timone got the spoor and located the woman next to a dam where she sat - dehydrated, bruised and injured due to the crawling, but otherwise fine. However, many other times K9 Search and Rescue dog handler teams have the heart-rending task to locate the bodies of victims so that family members can get closure.

### Training

This job requires passionate, dedicated and disciplined handlers and non-aggressive, well-trained dogs. Only experienced dog handlers, with at least two years' experience, are accepted for training. During a pre-selection session, the handler's swimming abilities and fear for heights and confined spaces will be evaluated. W/O Rieme Engelbrecht from K9 Search and Rescue Training at the SAPS K9 Academy, Roodeplaat explained to **Servamus** that during the 135-day course, handlers undergo a rope rescue course and a swift water technique course before the rest of the course with the dogs can continue.

During the training, search and rescue dog handlers are trained in several specialist skills such as horizontal and vertical high-angle rope rescue techniques; swift water approach techniques and terminology; confined space terminology; collapse structurally terminology, dangers and search techniques; and search techniques on non-stable structures. They also have to obtain additional skills such as how to approach a scene, the use of maps and a GPS, helicopter trooping, first aid (for dogs and humans) and victim behaviour, to name a few (Geldenhuys, 2014).

Only one search and rescue dog handlers' course is presented for novices per year and only a handful of handlers can be accommodated. Every year a week-long refresher course is presented which includes high-angle training and swift water. However, due to COVID-19, all training was put on hold.

W/O Engelbrecht said that apart from the novice's course, an 85-day refresher course is also presented to experienced search and rescue dog handlers when a new dog must be trained after a search and rescue dog has retired or died. However, at this stage this course is also not presented and sadly a number of experienced handlers are without dogs.

## The nose behind the search

The imprinting of an olfactory library in a dog's memory is one of the most crucial elements of the training. This is where the dog is taught to recognise the kind of aerial and ground scents encountered in search and rescue scenarios. The dog is also trained to focus on the task at hand and to follow its handler's instructions.

Trained search and rescue dogs have the ability to sniff out a body under water, soil (in the case of shallow graves) and rubble. They can locate missing persons in almost any circumstances. When a person drowns, body oils float to the surface and the body organs also start to emit certain gases. The decomposing phase is a chemical reaction and scent rises to the surface. The dog can easily pick up the scent when the wind blows over the water to indicate the place to the handler. Determining factors on how fast the scent reaches the surface include water temperature, the depth of water and what the person has eaten prior to death (Geldenhuys, 2014).

Search and rescue dogs' powerful noses, their scenting ability as well as their strong physical endurance and willingness to work during search and rescue operations make them valuable assets to the SAPS.

## Search and rescue operations

Around the country, K9 Search and Rescue teams are involved in saving lives or recovering bodies. Capt Scholtz said that he and Timone have worked on many scenes and shared some of

the operations which stood out to him. He told **Servamus** that they responded to many drowning incidents, but working on crime scenes where they had to search for missing persons in murder cases is always interesting, although disturbing. "At these crime scenes you get involved with many experts such as members from the Victims Identification Centre and the Investigative Psychology Section," he noted. Crime scenes they have worked on include the Sheldean Human case (refer to the Crime Series in **Servamus**: May 2013), the Quarry serial murder case in the Samrand/Olievenhoutbosch area (refer to the Crime Series in **Servamus**: November 2012), possible serial murder scenes in Ga-Rankuwa and the Frances Rasuge case (refer to the Crime Series published from p44 in this issue). In the Frances Rasuge case, members of the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) told him that they had an idea where she had been buried, but that they wanted the dog's confirmation. Timone indicated the place where she was buried under the concrete and Capt Scholtz was the one who dug out her body in the presence of (now retired) Lt-Col Frans van der Merwe from Crime Scene Management. Capt Scholtz said the moment when he found a skull which was located next to the house's foundation and he turned it around, he told Lt-Col Van der Merwe: "This is Frances." He recognised her from her unique set of teeth.

Capt Scholtz also mentioned a case on which he worked in the Temba area at the end of 2006. He was informed about a body that was noticed in the veld, but the man could not remember exactly where it was. He and Timone then walked down the road and when the wind turned, Timone stopped and walked straight towards the body. A few metres from the body, the dog stopped in its tracks and slowly went closer. According to Capt Scholtz, this moment stood out as it was an excellent example of how a dog uses its nose.

They also worked at Orlando towers in Soweto which collapsed at the end of June 2014 to retrieve bodies. Officials found out about the collapse when paramedics received a call from an injured man who claimed to have been part of a group allegedly trying to steal cables and metal from the building. They worked for quite some time on this case. By August 2014, it was revealed that eight bodies were retrieved and five people were found alive (eNCA, 2014).

## Working across borders

When K9 Search and Rescue teams deploy abroad, it is important to look at the specific country's quarantine regulations with regard to dogs. Due to Japan's quarantine regulations these teams could not respond to assist with the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. They however deployed during the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the floods in Zimbabwe in 2020.

Capt Scholtz remarked that the deployment to Haiti will always be a career highlight despite the tragedy of the situation. "I've never seen so many bodies in one place and it is also very confusing for the dogs," he noted, but proudly told **Servamus** that the SAPS dogs were some of the best dogs working during the disaster. The British dogs could only manage for a day, before they had to be flown to Miami due to dehydration and heat. They however left their veterinarian for the South Africans. "This was very helpful as he checked the dog regularly throughout the day to see whether the dogs were fine to continue working as such disaster areas are also putting a strain on the dogs," Capt Scholtz recalled. However, the dogs gained a lot of experience

during the deployment. In situations like these, the dogs wear leather shoes to protect their paws from glass and other sharp or warm objects that may cause injuries.

With the deployment to Haiti, their aim was to search for survivors. According to Capt Scholtz, some buildings had no survivors, just thousands of trapped bodies. "We then only marked those buildings for recovery," he noted. In one incident the dogs indicated the possible place where the daughter of an UN official could be. They could not recover her body as the whole building had to come down before the body could be retrieved from the rubble. He mentioned that while working in the UN building that collapsed, they searched for one specific woman. "When we located the body, we noticed four arms and four legs. The beam from the ceiling had fallen on them. The UN was not aware of the other woman who was with this specific woman in the building," he recalled. He and Timone also worked in a church when an aftershock hit the island. "Dust came from the walls and you could hear the people scream as the aftershock was reaching them. A big clock also fell from the tower after me and Timone had gone, within no time, through a window to the outside," Capt Scholtz said. "It is impossible to describe to someone what it is like to work in such disaster areas. The smell is unbearable," he noted, but quickly added that he would rather handle that smell instead of the heavily polluted Hennops River that runs through Ivory Park in Gauteng.

Interestingly, Capt Scholtz mentioned that from the buildings that were least impacted and remained standing after the huge Haitian earthquake, were some of the oldest buildings in Haiti which were built with stone, clay and reeds as well as the shacks that moved with the shocks. In an article that was published in **Servamus**: January 2022, Mr Colin Deiner, the head of the Western Cape Disaster Management Centre (WCDMC) made a similar comment about the structure of old buildings.

Working with other nations during such deployments is something that is difficult to explain to people. **Servamus** heard that some international rescue teams work with equipment of which South African rescue teams can only dream. "It is incredible to work with the Americans and Russians. They have excellent rescue teams which arrived there with Black Hawk helicopters, trucks and bulldozers. They are fully equipped for dealing with big disasters. We have the heart, skills and knowledge, but lack such amazing equipment," Capt Scholtz remarked.

### Cooperation with other role-players

Capt Scholtz is of the opinion that it is important to have a good working relationship with other role-players such as Search and Rescue South Africa (SARZA) and the Mountain Club of SA (MCSA) Search and Rescue. He said that when



working at a scene, the K9 Search and Rescue team from the SAPS is usually alone or there might be a second team. This is extremely difficult in situations where high-angle rescue operations must be conducted. It is impossible to do swift water with such a small team. Therefore, it is important to have others to help them. "SARZA plays a big role in this. They have the right equipment and skills to assist us," he said and added that he has worked closely with them since 2006.

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K9 Search and Rescue handlers are passionate and caring people who will do anything in their ability to bring comfort or to save lives ... And their dogs are simply amazing creatures with a sense of smell like none other.

### Editor's note

The list of references is published on p78.

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