

CLASSIFICATION OF POLICE SERVICE DOGS IN AVALANCHE SEARCH
AND RESCUE

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The R.C.M. Police have been using dogs for police work since 1935. The Avalanche Search & Rescue program was not official until the training of Park Warden Dog Master Alf Burstrom, of Jasper National Park, and his dog "Ginger" in 1970. Police service dogs chosen for avalanche search training have all previously received training in obedience, tracking, searching, and criminal apprehension, and the dog masters have had a minimum of one year field experience in the handling of their dogs. Because the dog is accomplished in searching, the specialized training required for avalanche work is minimal. The dog master, however, must learn many new techniques including how to use the dog effectively when searching an avalanche, how to reach an avalanche site without mechanical conveyance, and how to recognize potential avalanche hazard and safely travel through hazardous areas.

Using the Swiss Alpine Club Regulations as a guide, Cpl. B.D. Johson of the R.C.M.P. dog training kennels at Innisfail, Park Warden Alf Burstrom of Jasper National Park, and Alpine Specialist Willi Pfisterer of Parks Canada have compiled standards for Canadian dog/master teams (Pfisterer). Teams may be qualified at one of three levels of accomplishment. "C" teams have received basic training only; "B" teams are considered intermediate teams; and "A" teams are fully trained and experienced.

The dog/master teams are evaluated in their mountaineering ability, travelling capacity, avalanche knowledge, attitude, first aid and lifesaving knowledge, and search competence.

Ideally, dog/master teams should be located strategically near avalanche terrain, and should remain in the area for a number of years to gain first-hand experience in the region. However, because the R.C.M.P. is a semi-military organization, promotion and transfer of individuals is unavoidable.

While the R.C.M.P. does not have a monopoly on using dogs to search for persons buried in avalanches, an untrained civilian dog at an avalanche site is a hindrance rather than an asset to a search. The possibility of private organizations training their dogs for avalanche work is dependent upon the decisions of their members to organize such efforts. The European system of training many dogs through alpine clubs and local rescue organizations has proved to be quite successful. The Force would not object to our field Dog Masters forming part of an evaluation team; any certification; however, would be left to the body responsible for setting the standards.

Our Dog Masters are enthusiastic about improving their success with avalanche rescues, and would be more than willing to participate in training exercises with other persons involved in avalanche search and rescue. Our members are also available, when duties permit, to give presentations regarding the Police Dog Service and their work in the avalanche field.

Reference

Pfisterer, W. Avalanche Search and Rescue Dog: Standards and Training Procedures for Avalanche Search Dog/Master Teams. Mimeographed guidelines available from the author.