

SNOW, SWEAT, AND SALAMI: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN AVALANCHE DOG

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by Laurel Miller (<http://gadling.com/author/laurel-miller/>) on Mar 10, 2010

With avalanches, timing is everything. Your chances of surviving burial without asphyxiating (if you're not instantaneously pulverized) are 90-percent during the first fifteen minutes. Things go downhill quickly after that, and at 30 minutes, your odds are 50:50. The most important thing to do if buried in a slide is create an air pocket.



John Stimberis

Salami is also helpful to your survival (as you'll see). Odds are, if you're caught in an avalanche, a Search and Rescue (SAR) dog will be first at the scene. The little caskets of restorative brandy attached to their collar? Alas, just a myth.

I recently found myself playing crash (smash?) test dummy at Alpental (<http://www.summitatsnoqualmie.com/Mountains/Alpental>) ski area, in Western Washington's Snoqualmie Pass. The region is the most active avalanche area in the state, and home to three separate ski resort BARK teams, including Stevens Pass, and Crystal Mountain. BARK (Backcountry Avalanche Rescue K9s) is a statewide, non-profit, volunteer-based mountain rescue organization of ski

patrollers and Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) avalanche workers, and their canine *compadres*.

Ski patroller Kevin Huggett, 47, is president of the Alpental team. Last month, he invited me to participate in one of their weekly training days. It's been a freakishly warm winter in Washington, but spring conditions can actually increase avalanche risk by creating instability within the snow pack.

A contemplative, deep-voiced man with a dark, bushy mustache (imagine an alpine Tom Selleck) Huggett helps oversee trainings, in which the seven dogs and their handlers practice drills that simulate avalanche and lost person rescue. He's a busy guy, but it's his workaholic, six-year-old black Lab, Bazuka, who's achieved local celebrity status.

Bazuka's a bad ass, assisting in the rescue of the buried and hapless. Last summer, she alone found a lost, disoriented, 75-year-old woman who had wandered away from her family. Bazuka loves rappelling from helicopters, and rides the chair lift to work. Her sensitive nose can detect the difference between live human scent buried beneath up to ten feet of snow, and that of an article of clothing; she was tracking at ten weeks of age. Bazuka is trained in cadaver retrieval, but she's also a pet, living in nearby Hyak with Huggett, his wife, Judy, and their 11-year-old Lab, Porter, a BARK veteran.



Alpental BARK

When I meet Bazuka, she is wearing a red, nylon pocketed vest stuffed with first aid

(<http://skimlinks.pgpartner.com/mrdr.php?>

url=http%3A%2F%2Fskimlinks.pgpartner.com%2Fsearch.php%2Fform_keyword%3Dfirst%2Baid) supplies, a transceiver

(<http://www.gadling.com/tag/transceiver/>) (avalanche beacon), and other equipment. She greets me by licking my hands, then barks at Huggett to take her to work, *already*.

Obediently, we take Chair 2 to the ski patrol

(<http://www.gadling.com/tag/skipatrol/>) hut atop Edelweiss Bowl. Inside, it smells of frying sausage and testosterone.

Patrollers Kevin Marston, Kevin Ward, and Alpental avalanche forecaster Bram Thrift, are sitting in front of a heater. Their dogs, Greta (dignified yellow Lab), Hoss (Golden the size of a Mack truck), and Gibb (squirrely Australian shepherd), wait patiently in cubbies near the door.

At 11am, we set off into a white out (nothing screws with your self-esteem like skiing with patrollers in crappy weather) to the “open trench” site. Each dog will run the procedure, locating in turn their handler, a “known” person, and a stranger (aka me) in a shallow hole, then again, while we’re buried under six inches of snow.

As Marston shovels snow over me, I recall that the last time I went caving, I had a claustrophobia-induced freak-out in a tube. This time, at least, my face isn’t shoved into ten thousand-year-old bat shit, but it’s easy to imagine being entombed in snow is its own special hell. Yet, I feel strangely peaceful. Meditative. Probably because there isn’t 165 tons of snow on top of me, and I’m equipped with transceiver and radio.

I’m in the fetal position, clutching a handful of cured meat as a training reward, and trying not to huff too much oxygen from the small air space I’ve been provided. I have several minutes to contemplate the forces of nature, and wonder why out-of-borders so enjoy courting death. I hear Marston command Greta to “Search!” Within seconds, she scrabbles above me, tunneling into the snow. Her head and shoulders (http://www.amazon.com/Head-Shoulders-Clinical-Strength-Dandruff/dp/B0043OSIVM/ref=sr_1_2?

ie=UTF8&qid=1351192634&sr=8-2&keywords=head+and+shoulders) burst into the trench. Our noses touch. As instructed, I cry, "Good girl! Good find!" and shove salami in her face.

With each drill, the dogs yip and leap in ecstasy, whining when their handlers disappear from view. I ask Huggett if they have separation anxiety. "They get excited, and don't like to be left out of the fun- for them, it's play." he explains. "Their bond with us teaches them to find someone." Moments later, he directs Thrift to keep Gibb- a newbie- engaged longer at the rescue site, to make the "find" the most thrilling part of the exercise.

SAR dogs are trained using positive reinforcement. "Dogs always cheat," says Marston. "Their sense of smell is so acute, we need to try and confuse them. We increase the difficulty by dispersing scent on articles of clothing, so the dog has to determine if it's live scent, and if it's coming from under or on top of the snow. We always change locations, and use a snowcat to scatter debris, to erase any visual cues."

The second site is a half-mile from the hut. Two caves have been excavated beneath six feet of snow; their construction enables "victims" to remain safe and comfortable for up to an hour. Our skis and poles, and some items of clothing lie scattered about the site, to further distract the dogs. Each animal has 10 minutes to leave the hut, locate, and rescue. The remaining team verbally enacts rescue procedure, relaying logistics and site assessment via radio.

At my turn, I slither into a six-foot-long cave, where I'll remain for 30 minutes, as Bazuka and Hoss take turns rescuing me from hypothetical slow death. In reality, I'm pretty comfortable, if a bit cold, reclining on an insulated foam pad. A hot toddy would be nice. When I hear Bazuka barking wildly, I know she's located me. Her reward of choice? A rubber Kong toy.

Given the time, expense (roughly two thousand dollars annually, including equipment, gas, and vet bills), and rigorous training involved to certify SAR dogs and handlers- for exhausting, dangerous volunteer work- it's obviously a labor of love. The dogs get accolades, playtime, and Scooby Snacks. What drives guys like Huggett and his crew is a desire to also use their pets for a purpose, "to help people."



Alpental BARK

Besides, he adds, "How can you not enjoy playing with dogs all day?"

By 2pm, training's over, and the dogs are off-duty until the 3pm closing "sweep." Then, they'll help the patrollers cover the 300-acre ski area, making sure everyone is safely off the upper mountain. Huggett is also working the lower mountain's night-skiing shift. He and Bazuka will have put in 15 hours by the time they're done, but they don't mind. "If our dog teams make a difference for just one person," Huggett says, "it's all worth it. In Dog we Trust!"

If you'd like to make a donation to BARK, please email alpentalbark@yahoo.com (mailto:alpentalbark@yahoo.com).

What is SAR?

SAR (<http://www.nasar.org/nasar/>) is a domestic, non-profit, volunteer training/certification program that provides search and aid for people who are lost, in distress, or imminent danger. Rescuers can specialize in one or more of the following areas: K9, Horse, Snowmobile, Ground Search, Disaster, EMT, Ropes, Avalanche, etc. SAR criteria are dictated by state and county. Other countries also have versions of SAR.

BARK members are trained to SAR standards, but BARK is its own entity. Only qualified ski patrollers and WSDOT avalanche workers can be in BARK.

If you want to know more about all phases of canine search and rescue, contact the National Search Dog Alliance (<http://www.n-sda.org>) (NSDA).

Saving Your Hide in a Slide

If you're attempting any (legal) backcountry (<http://www.gadling.com/tag/backcountry/>) pursuit (out-of-bounders = douchebags), you should take an avalanche awareness course, check conditions before heading out, and always carry a beacon and probe. Let people know where you're going/when you'll be back, and go with at least several partners. Sometimes, shit happens anyway, but since many people don't follow even this relatively basic Darwinian protocol, remember that searchers are risking their lives- and their dogs'- to save yours. For information on avalanche awareness classes (<http://www.gadling.com/tag/avalancheawarenessclasses/>), contact the American Avalanche Association (<http://www.avalanche.org>) (AAA), the American Avalanche Institute (<http://www.americanavalancheinstitute.com>) (AAI), or the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (<http://avtraining.org/>) (AIARE).