

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

FESA provides USAR canine capability for WA community Lynne and 'Reg' prove their bark has bite

Support for a canine capability has been strong, right from the inception of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Task Force in Western Australia.

FESA Rescue Manager Rik Liefink said that early in 2004, WA Fire and Rescue Service Station Officer Peter Sutton accepted the role of Taskforce Canine Liaison Officer.

“Peter’s previous dog training experience gave FESA an excellent springboard for developing a suitable capability,” he said.

“Initially Michael Rooke, a State Emergency Service Volunteer tracker dog handler and his dog Max (a German shepherd), were recruited. Six months later, Lynne Finch joined the team with her dog Reg (a labradoodle).

“During the development stage the team welcomed Elke Effler from the Australian Swiss Search Dogs Association (REDOG standard) and also Brenda Woolley of New Zealand Search and Rescue Disaster Dogs Standard. Both participated in FESA-coordinated workshops on training standards and assessment guidelines. As senior assessors within their own agencies, Elke and Brenda were a fountain of knowledge and experience.

“A special Memorandum of Understanding with the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) has also seen the WA USAR Task Force benefit from their generous assistance. Peter, in particular, developed a close working relationship with the SCDF Dog Section which possesses the greatest capability of International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) certified dogs in the



FESA canine trainer, Lynne Finch and her dog 'Reg' searching for victims in a simulated collapsed building rubble pile.

region. In fact, their team has been used in Taiwan, Singapore, Pakistan, Banda Ache, Yogyakarta, Kobe and at other major disasters.”

FESA made the decision to train to the New Zealand standard, an adaptation of the USA Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) standard.

NZ and FESA have a very similar structure and procedure model and during past USAR Cat II courses good working relationships had been formed. It was hoped that similar could be developed in the canine area.

Dog handlers in NZ, incidentally, are also drawn from within the NZ Civil Defence which is very similar to Australia’s State Emergency Service.

REDOG and New Zealand standards as well as the FEMA standard are minimum requirements for USAR Canines to be operational as per the National USAR Working Group and the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) USAR committee guidelines.

During the development stage, Peter worked with both handlers to develop a training package and sites

for training and equipment over a six to 12 month period.

A date for assessment for the “Basic” Canine Readiness Evaluation Process (CREP) was chosen for December 2006, consisting of:

- Aggression Test – human and canine
- Heel work
- Vet check
- Down stay
- Focus Bark Indicating Live Human Scent
- Emergency Stop
- Direction and Control
- Agility
- Rubble Pile

Regular training sessions followed during the week and on weekends. On average this amounted to forty hours a month, with each team member doing training at home or at the six rubble pile sites to which the team now had access.

These sites varied from concrete and brick, to green waste. Agility work and direction and control was completed at the Canine Association of WA which allowed the team unlimited access to their venue.

Mike and Max attended a Basic and Advanced CREP near Wellington NZ in 2004. Mike implemented many of the good ideas he received on the program.

In October 2006, Peter took the opportunity to travel to New Zealand to observe their Basic and Advanced CREP. This enabled the team to be prepared for the upcoming CREP and was certainly of great value in removing any anxieties the two handlers faced. He also secured the services of an independent Police Assessor, Paul Beveridge from WA Police K9, and the President of the WA Vet Association, David Kneek, to assist in the assessments.

Peter said that both dog teams were assessed in early December



The Basic Canine Readiness Evaluation Process (CREP) assessment team, Dec, 2006.

by Brenda Woolley (from NZ) and Paul Beveridge.

“Starting at Canine Association, all initial elements were completed successfully,” he said.

“The team was now required to move to a local landfill where a purpose-built green waste/concrete pile was used. The handlers were required to clear the pile in twenty minutes and locate two victims buried within the material present.

“On initially searching, the dog was to work independently of the handler and upon finding and alerting the first victim, the handler then had full access to the pile. It transpired that Michael and dog Max were unsuccessful in locating the second victim. It is not unusual for dog teams to do this, however, as the delicate balance of silent cooperation and meeting the assessment criteria is extremely difficult.

“Lynne Finch and her dog ‘Reg’ then proceeded to successfully search the pile, locating both victims.”

Rik said that Lynne and Reg’s success was the result of a great team effort as they were ably assisted by Michael Rooke and Peter Sutton, with the support of the FESA Rescue Branch.

“Lynne and Mike belong to a most dynamic SES Unit situated in Rockingham, WA,” he said.

“The support of other members of the dog tracker section and the unit

leaders, especially Grant Pipe who is also the USAR Task Force Logistic Assistant, was vital.

“Local SES units provided volunteer casualties that greatly assisted the accelerated training of the dogs. The team now continues to train in preparation for Lynne and Reg’s Advanced Assessment in Mid 2008 and they look forward to more handlers joining the team in the future.

“The use of canine capabilities in searching for victims in USAR is highly respected within FESA and everyone is totally delighted and very proud of Lynne and Reg’s achievements.”

Peter said that the future would increasingly involve Lynne and Reg in operational training and exercises, with the entire USAR Task Force benefiting.

“FESA is producing a training awareness DVD for its own use as well as other agencies involved in USAR canine. In line with the national USAR strategy, this will be available for any jurisdiction that wishes it.

“The end plan is to have at least one canine team for every sector. There is some way to go yet, but the initial obstacle is now breached and we are on our way to better things and improving the level of service to the community.”