



Canine Alert Search Teams Hosts RH Seminar and Trial with IRO Judge and Author Dr. Resi Gerritsen

by Liz LaPointe

Photos by Liz LaPointe

Canine Alert Search Teams (CAST) of Peterborough, NH, a volunteer canine search and rescue group, hosted a week-long training seminar with Dr. Resi Gerritsen from July 31–August 6, 2010, culminating in a RH trial on August 7 and 8. A number of WDA members were in attendance and while all breeds were welcome, GSDs were the majority of the dogs worked.

Dr. Gerritsen has been training rescue dogs for over 30 years and has participated in a number of international missions including the earthquake in Armenia in 1988. She along with her husband, Ruud Haak, worked to develop new methods for training rescue dogs documented in their 1999 book, *K9 Search and Rescue: A New Training Method* (Detselig Enterprises, LTD, Calgary, Alberta). Working with the Austrian Red Cross rescue dog team, they successfully competed at the World Championships for Search and Rescue Dogs in the late 90's and achieved the world team championship in 1999.

Dr. Gerritsen is a judge with Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI) and with the International Rettungshund (Rescuedog) Organization (IRO) and has taught seminars all over the world. She is passionate about optimizing the training of search dogs and ensuring teams are tested under established standards that include obedience and dexterity as well as proficiency in the different specializations of canine search work.

The seminar opened with two mornings of lectures hosted at Canine Comeback, a rehabilitation and training center located in Hillsboro, NH, owned by Debora Ash and Karen MacIntyre. Dr. Gerritsen introduced

the international organizations she has been working with that have set the standard for rescue dog testing (IRO RH trials) and the FCI, which oversees international kennel club organizations and trials. The IRO is working in cooperation with the United Nations in the deployment of rescue dog teams (tested under IRO standards) to assist in international missions.

While organizations such as National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR), Northeast Wilderness Search and Rescue (NEWSAR) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as well as individual search teams have their own certifications and standards, IRO standards are practically unknown in the U.S. and canine search teams have limited U.S. access to IRO testing. CAST, as an associate member of the IRO, is the first U.S. based team to host a trial under IRO standards in this country. The week leading up to trial included a significant amount of training and discussion on the expectations of the tests and on what the judge is looking for.

Some members of CAST and seminar attendees had prior experience in RH trials under SV rules which interpret the IRO standards differently. The USCA club, OG Boston, has held 2 trials (in 2008 and 2009) under SV judges, but no WDA club has thus far hosted a RH trial.

Under the IRO, the following designations for testing are used:

- RH-E: Suitability Test
- RH-F: Tracking Test
- RH-FL: Area Test
- RH-T: Disaster Test (rubble)
- RH-L: Avalanche Test
- RH-W: Water Test

In addition to showing proficiency in the different areas, the dogs are tested at different levels (A and B with B being the most advanced). In order for a search team to become a full member of the IRO, they

must have a minimum of 6 “B” level dogs tested under IRO standards. Teams that are full IRO members and have dogs trained and tested to the requisite level will be used for deployment on international missions.

All RH tests require 3 phases much like Schutzhund: obedience, dexterity and demonstration of the search (in the appropriate category: area, rubble, tracking, etc.). E level tests are the most basic—the obedience section includes basic heeling on and off leash, the long down under distraction, group heeling, and heeling with gun shots. Dogs must also “go free” to show they will range away from the handler and come when called. Dexterity for E levels includes walking a plank, jumping obstacles, heeling over a debris field (unpleasant materials) and being carried by the handler and handed off to another individual.



Kerri Davis & Lokie training on the teeter-totter

Obedience at the A and B level includes the Begleithund (BH) heeling routine off leash, heeling in a group (including a neutral dog), sit in motion, down in motion with recall, stand in motion with recall, retrieve (a search type article such as bound rope), the send-out, the long down under distraction, and crawling 10 meters. In addition, gun-shots may go off during any exercise, and engine noises are required during heeling. Dexterity for A and B levels includes walking an unstable plank, a see-saw, jumping a broad jump, walking a raised ladder set parallel to the

ground and being lifted off, going through a tunnel, heeling over a debris field, and a direct-ability exercise to show the dog can move to the left, right or forward under voice command.



Deborah Palman & Quinni von Sontausen on debris field

Area searches for E level dogs require finding one person and demonstrating an alert to the judge. At the A level, the dog team must find 2 people in a larger area within a set amount of time. At the B level, the area is again larger and the dog and handler must find 3 or more people within a designated time frame. Similar requirements are set up for dogs testing for rubble titles.

In the afternoon of the first day, Dr. Gerritsen evaluated the quality of the seminar dogs' alerts. It is imperative that a search dog give its handler a very clear alert or indication when the dog has found someone. Dr. Gerritsen noted that on long missions when dogs have been searching for hours or days, the level of the alert (especially the bark alert) is reduced due to fatigue. Therefore, dogs must have extremely strong alerts in training; otherwise the signal may be too weak during a real mission to be readable by the handler. The seminar dogs were training at a variety of different levels and their alerts were also quite variable.

Dr. Gerritsen discussed the 3 basic types of alerts. The bark alert is quite common. The dog, when he finds a person, must remain in place and bark continuously until the handler arrives. With dogs that range quite far, this could require barking for a fairly long period. In trials, dogs using the bark alert must not move farther than 2 meters from the found subject.

Dogs may also use the "find-re-find" alert. When a subject is found the dog returns

to the handler and performs some pre-trained behavior such as a sit in front of the handler. When given a command such as "show me" the dog returns to the subject. If the subject is far away, the re-find alert may be repeated several times until the handler comes to the subject.

Dogs may also use a "bringsel," a small piece of wool-bound leather that hangs from the collar. When a dog finds a subject, the dog picks up the bringsel in its mouth, and returns to the handler. When the handler sees the bringsel, he removes it from the dog's mouth and follows the dog back to the subject. The dog does not need to sit, bark or provide any other alert. The act of having the bringsel in its mouth cues the handler that the dog has found the subject.

The bringsel is actually Dr. Gerritsen's preferred alert. The "fading alert" syndrome on mission is far lessened with a bringsel as it doesn't require as much effort on the dog's part. In addition, she finds the bringsel easier to train than the find re-find alert as dogs are frequently inconsistent with this alert and it can be harder to read on a dog that is excited by its find.

Dr. Gerritsen stressed the need to train the alert separate from the search work. She starts dogs with a favorite toy and works with the dog on initially hiding the toy, then proceeding to hiding a person with the toy. The toy becomes the prey item and the reward for the search effort. Dr. Gerritsen also stressed the importance of playing with the dog and developing the play drive.

After a full week of intensive training in area searching, rubble searching and obedience and dexterity, the participants and their dogs made significant progress. Dr. Gerritsen was tireless in her teaching and her efforts truly paid off in a very short time for a number of the dogs and dog handlers.

During the weekend trial, 2 dogs passed their RH-E test (area search) (Kerri Davis with Lokie and Liz LaPointe with SG Bonnie vom Mack-Zwinger BH, AD, "a" normal); 4 dogs passed their A-level test: Karen MacIntyre with Nessie vom Patiala, BH, RH(1)-FL, OFA good H&E, CAST Level 1, 40A Wilderness and Basic Water Certification; and Debora Ash with Judgement Dancer's Sterling Lass CGC, BH, RH1-area, OFA, IPWDA basic cadaver, CAST Level 2 area and basic water cert. (both dogs receiving RH-FLa for area search); Deborah Palman with

Quinni von Sontausen SchH1 (RH-Fa: tracking); and Janet Merrill with Chai FEMA Advanced US&R (RH-Ta: rubble). Two dogs also received their B level: Karen MacIntyre with V Zareh vom Mack Zwinger IPO2, KKL1 "a" normal RH(1)-FL, RH(2)-Ta, RH(2)-FLa, IPWDA basic cadaver certification, CAST Level 2, 40A Wilderness and Basic Water Certification (RH-FLb: area search) and Janet Merrill with Chai FEMA Advanced US&R (RH-Tb rubble). Janet Merrill and Chai, who are members of MASS Task Force 1, were also high in trial with a V rating for their A level and a SG rating for their B level.

CAST would like to thank Dr. Resi Gerritsen for her time and efforts during the seminar and trial. The attendees were exposed to a number of new training techniques that broadened their perspective on search work and strengthened the focus of the dogs that were trained during the week. CAST is already planning to organize a similar seminar and trial with Dr. Gerritsen in 2011.

CAST also appreciates the efforts of numerous individuals who assisted the team during the week. Thank you, to Sam Mullen and Devon Skerry who assisted in building hiding places in the rubble and then were kind enough to hide in them as well as hide anywhere in the woods for the dogs; Robert Rosen for functioning as Trial Leader; Officer Nick Hodgen for assisting nearly every day; Wayne Campbell, who participated as a victim in the area searches; and especially to Bill and Diane Fitzpatrick who allowed CAST access to their land and the granite quarry for training and testing during the week.

CAST is a member of NASAR and NEWSAR and is working toward full membership with the IRO. More information about CAST may be found at www.caninealertsearchteams.org. ☞



Janet Merrill & Chai on the rubble during RH-Tb test