



A Dogged Determination

The canine-handler teams produced by the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation are the gold standard in their field. All the foundation needs now are some fake disasters the dogs can sniff.

Head up, nose twitching, a yellow Labrador named Nino bounded into action, zig-zagging across a jumble of rubble to try and catch the scent of a live human in the air. Following the directional signals of Jim, his handler, Nino headed for a 75-foot-by-25-foot area filled with mounds of debris containing wood, sheet metal, rebar, pipes, a wrecked car, bicycles, a mailbox, the remnants of an old bird pen and a horse trailer, all arranged to evoke the aftermath of homes demolished by

a tornado. Nino followed the “cone of the scent,” honing in on the area where the smell was the strongest. His well-calloused paws allowed him to work “bare-footed” and off-leash, nimbly traversing unstable and uneven terrain, accessing spaces too small or unsafe for rescue workers. While crisscrossing the mounds of debris, the dog was even, at times, out of the handler’s sight.

On a clear cool morning last May, 150 people gathered at Mead Ranch in Morgan Hill, Calif., to see Nino and his colleagues from the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in action. As

Nino clambered atop the pile, the audience held its collective breath, but Nino moved with the sure-footedness of a mountain goat. Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 — when an Ohio task force manager marveled at the agility and skill of SDF dogs at ground zero and asked California Search Team manager Dave Stoddard, “My God. How do we get dogs that can work like that?” — SDF teams have become the gold standard. They have been deployed to the aftermath of hurricanes and tornadoes, train wrecks and mudslides, and they located 12

survivors buried alive in the rubble of the Haiti earthquake last year. A red-and-white border collie named Hunter was the first SDF dog to find three Haitian girls alive, trapped under 16 feet of collapsed concrete.

Founded by Wilma Melville in 1996, the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation is the only nonprofit in the U.S. that recruits rescue dogs, partners them with firefighters and trains them to find survivors buried in the aftermath of disasters. The dogs and ongoing training for the canine-firefighter teams are provided at no cost to fire departments across the country, but it's difficult to keep pace with the demand. With 28 Federal Emergency Management Agency task forces in 19 states, the country needs a minimum of 336 canine-firefighter teams, 12 per task force; currently just 231 are available. And the shortage of search dogs is actually more acute than those numbers suggest: A growing number of state and regional task forces also need dogs, and search dogs do, of course, get old and die.

That shortage is part of the reason Melville has set herself and her organization an ambitious task: By the 10th anniversary of 9/11, she wants to build a one-of-kind national training center, estimated to cost almost \$11 million, where disaster search scenarios of all kinds, on a much grander scale, can be constructed and used for advanced training. She calls it "our gift to America."

Melville is a 5-foot-2-inch retired physical education teacher, quick to smile, with blue eyes that sparkle behind wire-rimmed glasses. When she first became interested in search-and-rescue training — and even after getting her certification in the field — she thought of it as a hobby, fueled by her love of dogs and a desire to do something special. But in 1995, she got the call for a 10-day deployment to Oklahoma City, she and her canine partner Murphy were sent to search



Search Dog Foundation handler Bill Monahan watches his partner, Hunter, train on the "wobbly monster." Opposite: The SDF's Debra Tosch and her partner Abby (center) search for survivors at ground zero.

for survivors of the bombing of the federal building. At that time, there were only about 15 FEMA-certified canine search teams in the country. She did not find any survivors in Oklahoma City, but she learned a valuable lesson: Even when no survivors are found in the aftermath of disaster, the dogs make it possible for work crews to move forward and for loved ones to find closure.

In those early days, most of the handlers were civilians; like Melville, they'd spent thousands of dollars and three to five years to gain certification. "Groups would generally meet for one weekend per month, and there were travel expenses, motels, gear, as well as the purchase of a pup, with \$600 being a typical price," Melville says. Even then, their skills were not advanced, and the emotional toll was more challenging for civilian volunteers than for professional firefighters trained to be first on the scene of a catastrophe. Melville vowed to find a better way.

The key to efficiency, Melville de-

cided, was concentrated training directed by an expert. When a fellow handler touted the work of one of the nation's top trainers, Pluis Davern, Melville tracked her down at her California home and asked, "Can this be done?" Davern simply said, "Yes." The two silver-haired women began with three dogs as a trial run.

At first, Melville ran SDF from a room in her home, investing \$44,000 of her own money. Soon, she expanded to a closet-sized rental office. Handler Debra Tosch joined her in that office, and within five years the foundation had 400 members and an annual operating budget of \$80,000. It had also trained 33 new FEMA-certified search dog-handler teams.

Further growth would require a full-time staff and a bigger budget. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a tragic catalyst. FEMA called for highly trained canine search teams to respond to ground zero; SDF provided 13 teams, one-third of those deployed. And that was when Americans across the country stepped up their contri-

Humans know that a real-life deployment is a matter of life or death, but for the dogs, it is a game. As Pluis Davern explained: "The dog isn't thinking, 'I'm going to rescue humanity!' It's thinking, 'Somebody out there has a toy for me!'"

butions. "The World Trade Center disaster caused such an outpouring of generosity, as the country reeled from the aggressive act, that SDF received \$1 million within about six weeks," Melville remembers. On the advice of a consultant, Melville put half into an endowment and used the other half to hire a staff and build a proper business. Over time, the endowment has more than doubled.

To date, SDF has trained 125 teams; about 70 of those teams are active, operating in California, Florida, New York, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah. Tornado-prone Nebraska will soon have teams as well. The handlers are all first-responders; the \$10,000 training cost per dog (including handler training) is covered by the foundation, and most teams pass FEMA certification within 12-18 months. "SDF has expanded to be a major player in the national disaster canine world, both on a state and federal level," says Teresa MacPherson, a canine handler in Virginia and chairwoman of the FEMA Canine Sub-Group, a committee of six that helps set national search dog policy.

Davern's canine curriculum reduced the needed training time for dogs to six months, and Melville, who drew on her years as a schoolteacher to design the handlers' curriculum, has been able to train firefighters in concentrated sessions that allow teams to pass certification within a year. SDF is the only organization that recruits young dogs from shelters, partnering them with first-responders at no cost to the fire department. SDF provides ongoing training and guidance throughout the dog's life, without any government funding.



SDF founder Wilma Melville holds a pick symbolizing groundbreaking for the group's national training center.

The May 2010 demonstration at Mead Ranch marked the first time in the 15-year history of the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation that it had actually built a pile to simulate a disaster. Debra Tosch, now the SDF executive director, and head trainer Davern visited the ranch a month earlier to figure out the best location. With some direction, and the help of a forklift, ranch workers built a credible "pile."

As the search teams arrived that morning in their vehicles — most drive an SUV or pickup to accommodate their canine partner's crate — they were directed to a reserved parking area so that the dogs would be in the shade. Three trainers, led by Davern, had worked out the day's program and held a briefing for the handlers, just as would happen on a real deployment. In addition to the searches, the teams were also aiming to demonstrate the dogs' agility and directional response

skills using tubes, ladders, planks and other equipment brought over from the kennel where the dogs were trained. While the briefing took place, a few local firefighters and ranch workers were being buried in protective air pockets and crevices deep in the debris pile up the hill.

The windy gusts — which had earlier spurred sales of SDF sweatshirts and fleece vests while the teams and staff milled with guests over doughnuts and cups of Starbucks coffee — now provided the teams with a challenge. Dogs use their powerful sense of smell to find people; when the wind shifts, so does the scent. Seated arena-style on bales of hay stretched in semi-circles on the hillside, the audience watched as one after the other, dogs searched for the "survivors" buried in the pile, people they could smell but could not see.



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Humans know that a real-life deployment is a matter of life or death, but for the dogs, it is a game, a task that, when successfully completed, ends with their all-time favorite activity — a game of tug and lots of praise. As Pluis Davern explained: "The dog isn't thinking, 'I'm going to rescue humanity!' It's thinking, 'Somebody out there has a toy for me!'"

Despite the wind and other potential distractions — including planted scents of live and dead birds and human cadavers — it took only minutes for each of the dogs to locate the survivors. An urban disaster area that would take dozens of people using

heavy equipment many hours to clear can be worked over by a dog in minutes. As Melville said, "People have to search visually. That rubble is heavy; much of it cannot be moved by hand. A dog just moves over the area and searches entirely with his nose. The dog covers large areas swiftly, and he does not have to sniff every inch. The movement of air brings the scent to the dog."

A keen sense of smell alone is not enough. The dogs' bombastic, exuberant nature must be tempered by control and a singular focus on the task at hand; on deployments, handlers often have their hands full, and they must be able to count on their dogs to stay close when commanded. They need a "Velcro dog," as L.A. County Fire Capt. Bill Monahan demonstrated by walking around the arena with his red-and-white border collie, Hunter, who remained close enough to touch his leg without ever tripping him up.

Over the course of the demonstration, a series of dogs came forward to show how they avoided dangers like hotspots and sudden precipices, largely by following the directional clues, stance and whistles of their handlers. Comet, a black tricolor border collie with a handler from the Salinas Fire Department, executed an emergency stop; a golden retriever named Baxter demonstrated his understanding of center of gravity by creeping forward on a teeter-totter. Then Nino, directed by a Marin County fire captain, demonstrated his spatial awareness, climbing up a ladder, walking across a narrow plank and descending another ladder, slowly, one rung at a time. Most dogs would have simply jumped down, but training dictated otherwise.

As Melville explained to the audience, collapsed buildings aren't necessarily amenable to the natural instincts of a dog; it is through agility training that the canines learn to ignore the unstable surfaces, the peculiar footing, the heights, and the things that tilt and sway under their feet. In addition to field training on piles, SDF trainers



Baxter searches for survivors in the wake of the Haiti earthquake, with help from Search Dog Foundation handlers Gary Durian and Ron Weckbacher.

use the dreaded "wobbly monster," a suspended horizontal ladder on which the rungs are boards that rock back and forth. Comet's easy passage across the monster proved his ability to maneuver over unstable surfaces, a skill that was useful when he was deployed to the wreckage left in the wake of hurricanes Ike and Gustav.

To remain ready, the teams must train continuously, and the more varied and realistic the training sites, the better they will perform on real deployments. "This is one of those jobs where you train to do things you hope you'll never have to do," Melville says. Training sites have included recycling plants, waste dumps and partially demolished buildings — any place where the dogs can experience conditions similar to what they might face in a disaster. But none of these substitutes can adequately simulate a real-world catastrophe. The pile built for the demonstration was a great simulation of tornado-like destruction in a rural area, but proper preparation for real urban destruction means being able to bury victims under 15 or 20 feet of concrete rubble.

The need for urban "piles" is one reason that SDF has committed to

building a new training center. The site is located on a 125-acre parcel in Santa Paula, Calif., donated by the Frank McGrath, Jr. Family Foundation, where space and heavy moving equipment will make it possible to stage a wide range of piles and disaster scenarios. It will be the only such facility in the U.S., and Melville intends for it to service not just SDF teams, but dog-handler teams from all over the country.

The National Disaster Search Dog Foundation now produces 16 to 20 teams per year, with an operating budget of \$1.2 million. By bringing the organization's kennels, training sites and administrative offices into a single location, SDF hopes to be able to consolidate its efforts, recruit and train more dogs, lower the training cost and train even more teams per year.

The cost of building the National Training Center is estimated at \$10.5 million. With \$4 million already in hand, the SDF held a groundbreaking ceremony on Sept. 11, 2010, and it is committed to opening the center on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. Can it be done? "Yes" is the only answer that Melville says she accepts. **M2**

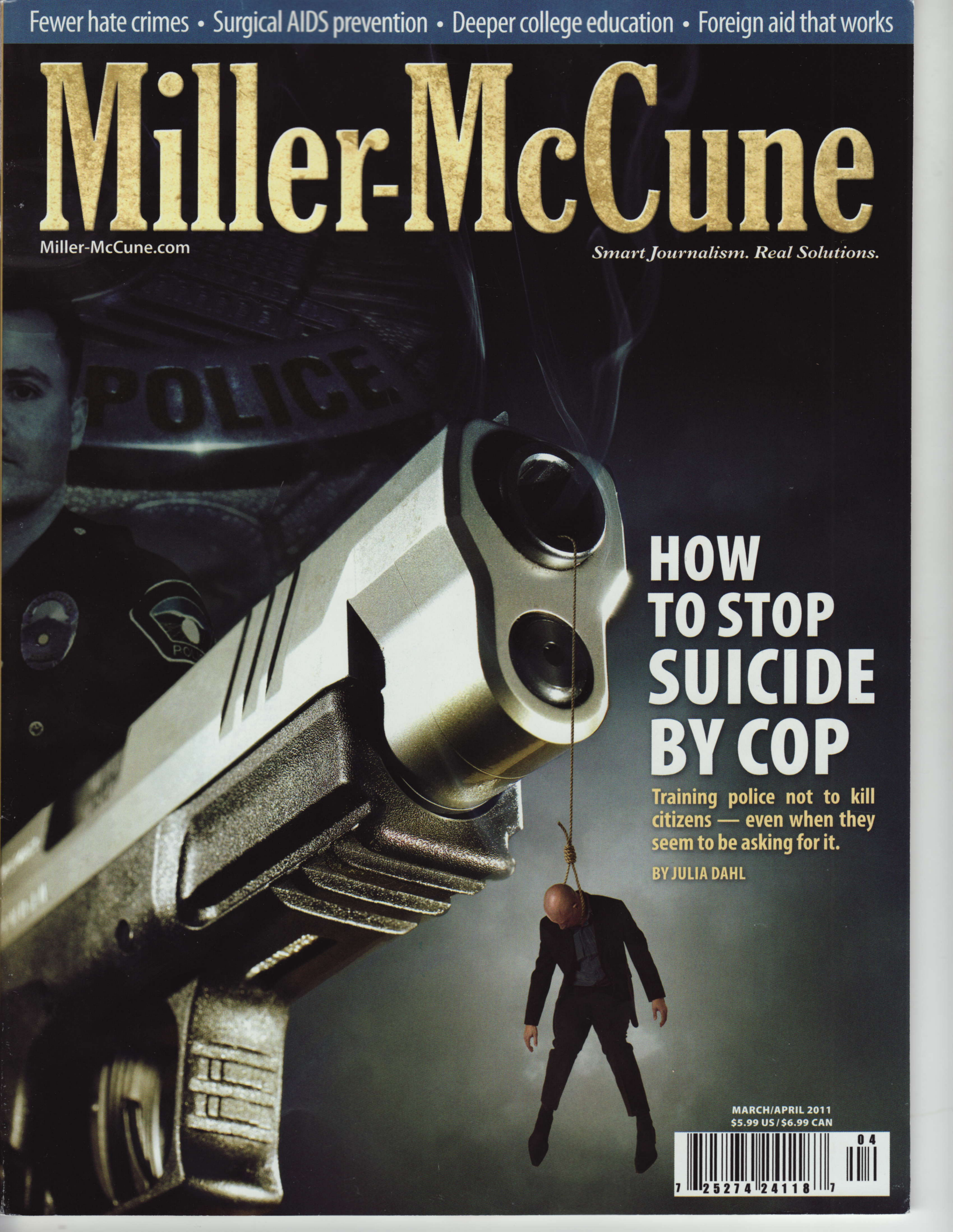
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