

Q & A: Becoming a Search Dog Handler.

Question – What skills will I need to learn?

You will need to have a current First Aid Certificate before you can go out on a search with your dog.

You will have to become proficient in the use of a map and compass and know how to use a radio.

Question – What must I train my dog to do?

The training your dog receives will be dependent on whether it specializes as an area search dog, a tracking/trailing dog, a water search dog or a cadaver dog. They also need agility training so they can safely negotiate obstacles during a search. The dog must also be able to swim.

Question – How do I get this training?

We can help you train your dog and will provide some of the skills training that you will need, but some of the training you must get on your own. St. John's Ambulance conducts First Aid Classes and has training for CPR and Emergency Response. Our instructors will provide classes to ensure you learn Radio Communications along with Mapping and Navigation.

Question – How long does it take to become an Operational handler?

Search Dogs Australia expects first time handlers to certify within 12-18 months from being accepted into the unit. To do so involves following our training programme, attending training, handling radio communications and act as a support to certified dog teams.

We would rather have a solid team take a little longer to become ready than set a strict deadline; at the same time the handler that isn't putting the time and effort into training and participation will need to look elsewhere for a hobby with their dog. We are not a dog club!

Questions – What if me or my dog doesn't succeed?

There are no guarantees in training a dog to search. First evaluate the situation. Did the dog have the necessary drive to do search or were you not able to put in the time and effort into consistent training? Were you inconsistent in your methods and intermittent in training? Was the dog questionable from the start, difficult to work with, but you continued training anyway knowing it was an uphill battle? If the problem is with your ability to do the training, you may reconsider search work. Decide if you want to continue to pursue search work as a dog team. If you do, you must decide what to do. Some handlers find it difficult to have more than one dog, especially when one dog is a pet and the other demands attention and intensive training and time. The decision of what to do is a personal one. You would not be the first handler to give up on a dog and place it in a new home; neither would you be the first to juggle two dogs, one of which was a potential search dog who just didn't make it.

Eventually your dog will be transported in close proximity to other dogs and people, who may be unfamiliar. Other people have to handle your dog at times. A well-mannered dog is essential.

We require basic obedience that focuses on direction and control – the ability to control a dog off lead to facilitate search coverage and to ensure safety.

We expect the dogs to be able to take direction from the handler from a distance in the field and be well-mannered in the busy setting around people. However a dog has to maintain his independence when it comes to finding a missing person. A dog that needs continual input from its handler to tell it what to do lacks the independence to do its job. This is why the dog-handler relationship is so important. Each part of the team, a dog and handler, has their role that they fulfil – as a team.

Question – Is there a lot of travel involved and why?

Yes. Expect to drive a lot. Both dog and handler must learn search in many different environments under all kinds of conditions – cool, hot, steep, flat... Handlers also need to observe other teams working and the only way to do that is to get out to different training locations. The dog needs a lot of repetition to learn their lessons on how to be a search dog, and that means searching in new and different environments as well.

Question – Are there physical considerations for the dog?

The dog must be physically fit. Physical fitness is a requirement – Search dogs are athletes. You ask a lot of your dog and to do what you ask, they have to be in shape and ready to respond. Fortunately, getting the dog in shape is pretty easy to do. We can help you with that. The dog also must have a clean bill of health and be free of veterinary conditions that affect its health and fitness. Dogs with physical limitations or sensory impairments are not considered suitable. Fitness in the handler is vital as well. Sometimes handlers are expected to walk 15-20kms over various types of surfaces and different terrain.

Question – What are my responsibilities as a handler?

There is considerable responsibility. As a search dog handler you are expected to have excellent navigational skills with a map and compass and GPS. You must be fit so as not to be a liability to your team. You must be in control of your dog at all times and be able to read/ interpret your dog's behaviours. You must be able to follow directions and work independently for extended time periods. Maturity and good judgement are important qualifications for a handler to have – as a handler you are responsible for the safety of yourself, your dog, accompanying search team members, and the victim!

Finally, all equipment, food, training, veterinary care, and transportation to training and searches, are the responsibility of the handler.