

PBGVs as Search and Rescue Dogs

Build a Solid Foundation



PBGVs could just be the best-kept secret in the world of Search and Rescue K9s. Increasing numbers of handlers have been looking at petits as an alternative to the larger, more familiar breeds because of their smaller size, ruggedness and stamina, excellent nose and trainability. Some bloodhound handlers have looked at PBGVs as a smaller and more versatile hound. PBGVs are certainly less stubborn than most bloodhounds, and don't have the less attractive attributes of drooling, the tendency to bloat, the large food bill and that familiar hound odor. The smaller hounds also have a longer working life, which is a significant benefit for anyone who is up to the challenge of becoming a certified Search and Rescue/Recovery handler.

It is said that only 10 percent of people who begin to train themselves and their dog for search and rescue work actually make it to certification or mission-ready status. Becoming a SAR dog handler takes dedication and commitment, is costly in time and money, and requires honest answers to eight challenging questions:

1. Are you willing to train three to four times a week in the first year of training? You will need to train your dog regularly, as well as join a team in your area and train as a group. Team training may be only once or twice a month, but your own efforts will take up a lot of your spare time.
2. Does your dog show potential? Is your dog young and healthy, with a strong drive to do the work?
3. Are YOU willing to learn the art of searching — outdoor survival skills, map, compass and GPS, land navigation, incident command procedures, search strategy, radio communications and other skills that will make you a valuable searcher with or without your dog?

Above: PBGV SAR team (left to right): Cindy Lou and Clue (Charlotte Allmann), Quincy and Heidi (Jill Fitzgerald), and Sophie (Jeri Schantz). All five are certified SAR dogs with Wisconsin Interstate Search and Recovery K9 Team. Photo by Jill Fitzgerald.

4. Do you have the kind of job that allows for time off on an emergency basis? Do you have an employer that encourages community service and rewards volunteerism for employees, and a family that will forgive you the occasional absence at a family function or holiday?

5. Are you financially able to purchase the required equipment, pay for training sessions and travel long distances to obtain certifications or specialized training?

6. Can you keep a secret? You must be discreet and keep confidences, as many searches can turn into criminal investigations requiring total confidentiality. Even in a non-criminal search, casual comments can cause distress to the missing person's family. You are never "off the record."

7. What is your motivation for becoming involved in search and rescue/recovery? If you are interested in having your dog be a "hero" or otherwise having your ego stroked, SAR is not for you. You must be willing to be invisible, quietly working out of the public eye, for the sole purpose of helping law-enforcement agencies or a grieving family. You must be willing to get out of bed in the middle of the night to go out in rain, cold, snow, or heat and humidity, put up with ticks, mosquitoes, sunburn, snakes, steep hills or desert terrain — whatever you face in your area. Rarely does a person go missing on a sunny Saturday afternoon in a park-like setting. Are you willing to go out in any weather when it just might be a wild-goose chase? Or drive 90 miles one way, only to be sent home because it's a false alarm?

8. Do you have the emotional strength to endure the sadness of a search with a bad end? Can you handle the grim scene of locating a dead body, possibly a child? A good SAR handler is calm, steady and emotionally healthy.

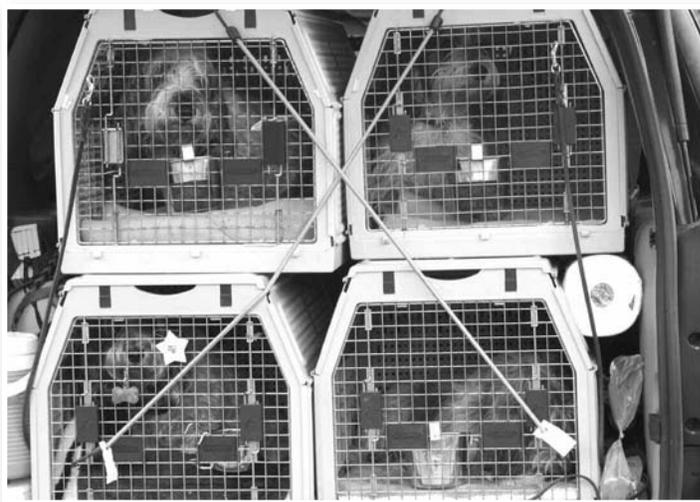
yourself and your dog. Dress for being outdoors for many hours, and be willing to do whatever it takes to prepare yourself. Many teams require a dog to be a year old before the trainers will take the time to evaluate it. Our team suggests that any new dogs have a CGC, and that potential handlers have at least a rudimentary knowledge of current positive-reinforcement methods of dog training.

Start with Socialization. Once you have chosen a pup or a young dog to work with, one that is healthy, sound in temperament, conformation and movement, and has a high "hunt drive," you will want to start with the basics, such as a Puppy Kindergarten, or beginner obedience class. Every day should be a learning day for your pup. A SAR dog will be exposed to many situations that are not commonly part of a pet dog's life, such as loud machinery, boats and motors, sirens, loud speakers and a wide variety of vehicles. There could be wild animals, farm animals, fences and loose dogs and cats to contend with. There will be helicopters, aircraft and possibly gunfire (don't ask). A SAR dog should be able to work around unusual sights and smells, indoors and out, around rubble, storm debris, floodwaters, rugged terrain, heavy underbrush, swamps, steep hills, in bad weather and good. Your PBGV also needs to be comfortable in close proximity to dogs of all sizes and breeds.

Proceed with caution, using common sense. Experiences should be positive, not frightening. Socialization does not mean dragging your dog out to the local construction site or through a crowded farm market or festival, with ears back and tail tucked. Condition your dog to loud noises very gradually, so as not to instill permanent anxiety. There is no exaggerating the importance of proper socialization!



Helicopters often appear on searches. Here, Cindy Lou investigates the underside of a National Guard chopper that just landed.



A cozy traveling 'dog hotel' at a SAR seminar.

Getting Started. If you truly love the Petit Basset Griffon Vendéen hounds and have answered 'yes' to the previous questions, there is much work to do to get yourself and your dog started. Get online and search for area teams. Find a group that interests you, contact them and volunteer to come to a training session (without your dog, usually) and help by laying tracks, hiding in the woods or fields for the working dogs to find you, and ask a lot of questions. Find out the requirements for dogs and handlers to be members of the team, and make a sincere effort to prepare

Crate Training and Obedience. A crate or kennel will be an important part of your dog's training, at home and on the road. The crate will become your PBGV's "home away from home," a refuge, a resting place. There will be lots of travel time for training sessions, seminars and searches, and a crate in your vehicle is the safest place for your dog. Staying in hotels is another feature of SAR training, and crates are often required for training seminars held in hotels, fire stations or offices. Training with groups will require that you spend time helping other *continued on next page*

Search *continued from page 27* handlers while you learn the ropes, and working short periods with your dog. While you are not working your dog, it needs a safe place to stay. The crate also becomes part of the learning your dog will experience. Dogs (people, too) retain the lessons they have learned if they spend quiet time alone after an exercise, without distractions. Barking or whining in the crate is to be discouraged, so don't allow it to become a habit, and be ready to leave your dog at home until it can relax in its kennel while you are busy with other responsibilities. When going on searches, it will be important that your dog is well-rested, even though you may be near a busy command post with emergency vehicles coming and going, and dozens of people and other dogs passing by. Incident commanders appreciate dog handlers who can come in to make reports without bringing their dog into the crowded and busy space of the command post.

Obedience for SAR Dogs. Basic obedience for SAR dogs is not much different than the training you will find at any qualified and respected training facility, as long as the training is focused on positive reinforcement and avoids aversive or punitive methods. Avoid choke chains, pinch or prong collars, and certainly shock collars! Clicker training is ideal, but any positive methods that focus on operant and classical conditioning and avoid punishment or aversive experiences will reap big rewards. SAR dogs will only be successful if they remain confident, curious, open to new



Quincy 'downing' at the source of the scent, which is his trained alert. Nice job, Quincy!

learning, without the fear of punishment. PBGVs can appear to be tough dogs, but are surprisingly sensitive to negative training experiences. I have found that most Petits are insulted by harsh corrections, and will shut down or possibly rebel against the trainer, giving him "the dewclaw," so to speak.

Although a SAR dog must be obedient, there needs to be what dog trainers call "selective disobedience." An example is the guide dog that refuses to go forward on handler command when there is danger approaching, such as a car running a red light. With SAR dogs, you must learn to trust your dog! And of course, the dog needs to trust you. Even though you may believe that the dog is going in the "wrong" direction, it may be telling you that it is you who is wrong, because it is following the

scent. This kind of trust will be broken if you, the trainer, are too harsh with your dog, or have expectations of obedience in the very strictest sense of the word. Many competition obedience trainers never allow the dog to make a choice — SAR dogs should be able to choose to follow the scent rather than a command when necessary. Dangerous situations unknown to the handler may arise when a team is searching in unfamiliar territory, and the dog may sense the danger first. SAR dogs must be always thinking and problem solving, and have the kind of trusting relationship with you that allows for this selective disobedience.

Choose Your Discipline. More later about obedience. Now that you are committed to going ahead with your training, you should tailor your foundation training to suit the team you will be working with, and the main discipline that you are interested in. There are two primary disciplines to choose from when training for K9 SAR: "live" or "dead." "Live" training involves either tracking/trailing or air-scent dogs. Tracking/trailing dogs are trained to follow the scent of where a specific person has walked. PBGVs make excellent tracking or trailing dogs, which is done on a long line with the handler following the dog on the track. The other "live" discipline, air scent or area search, requires that the dog cover large areas quickly, off leash, quite some distance from its handler. An air-scent dog samples the air currents for any human scent, follows it to the source and reports back to the handler. These teams are often called wilderness search teams because the style is suited to large tracts of unpopulated land. PBGVs are not ideal area search dogs because of their short stature, so most live-find PBGVs stick to tracking and trailing.

Another type of air-scent search is disaster. This is a specialty area of training, usually part of FEMA or another official disaster-response agency. Once a handler has a PBGV trained to work off leash, it is helpful to teach the dog some disaster-search skills so it is ready to respond immediately in case there is a tornado, earthquake or man-made disaster in their immediate area. SAR handlers are trained as First Responders in emergencies, and a K9 team might be the closest available resource, even if disaster search is not the team's specialty. A basic *continued on page 30*



Clue (Inspector Clouseau) alerting on scent in a community brush pile. All HRD dogs are trained to search in rugged conditions such as storm debris or rubble, very much like the disaster dogs.

Search *continued from page 28* introduction to rubble search will keep you and your dog safe while helping until the official disaster teams arrive.

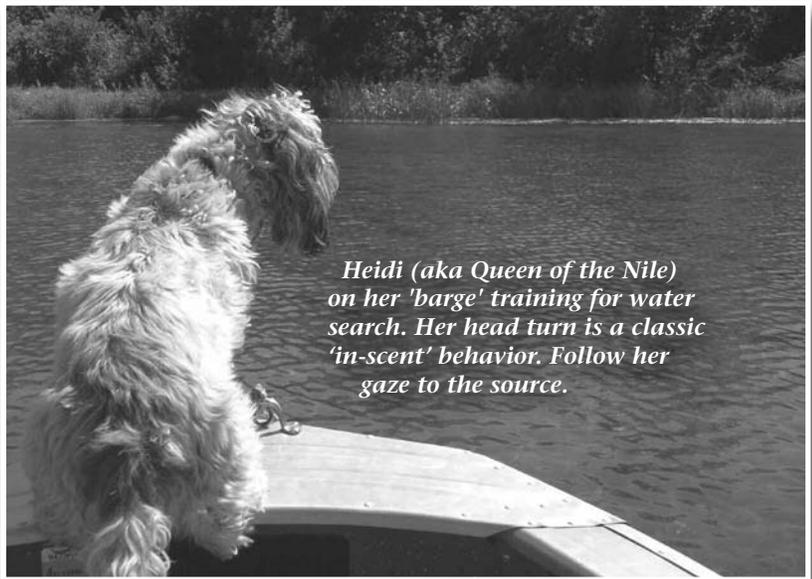
As for “dead” search, PBGVs make excellent cadaver dogs, more recently called human remains detection (HRD) dogs. HRD dogs are trained to locate and accurately report the presence of the scent of human decomposition. Some K9 groups require that a dog certify in a live find discipline before they go on to HRD search, and others believe in specialization, with a dog trained on only one form of scent to the exclusion of others. Many teams in areas with large tracts of wilderness land, mountains and unpopulated areas find that a cross-trained search dog — both live and cadaver search — is the most valuable. In heavily populated areas with lots of private land, urban, suburban and rural communities, the specialist teams are more prevalent. The specialist HRD K9s ignore live human scent and are used in criminal searches for missing persons, for evidence of a crime, in forensic searches looking for very small amounts of scent of evidence that may have been cleaned up, residual scent, and in very old cases where there may be scattered or minute skeletal remains. There is also a subset of the HRD specialty for historical remains such as ancient native burial grounds or old cemeteries where headstones have vanished.

Basic Commands for SAR Dogs. While you are learning the ropes as a searcher, you will be teaching your dog all of the basic obedience commands, with a nod towards the special requirements of your group. Specific training for your chosen discipline will be done separately from your basic obedience work. The team that you join will have a training director who is in charge of setting up training locations and scenarios, and helping each handler with the skill sets required for their chosen discipline. You will be taught the basics and given exercises to practice in between team-training sessions. Large monthly group-training sessions will cover many things to make the group a well-functioning team, while you will be expected to improve your individual skills to bring you and your dog to a level where you will certify quickly. The more often you train specific search skills, the faster you will be ready to certify. A solid obedience foundation will make the SAR skills training easier and much more fun for your dog. You will be appreciated if your dog is well-behaved, ready to learn with the group, eager and not distracted or disruptive.

Basic commands are: Come, Sit, Stay, Wait, Down and Leave It. Additional time can be spent with search-related commands such as: Find, Search, Go Out, Right, Left, Show Me, Check It, Over, Under and Kennel. For tracking dogs, it is very helpful to teach a “take a break” command, whatever word you like. This is a command to pause (off the track), while you take a drink (and water your dog), tie a shoelace, put on a jacket, look at a map or talk on the radio. This is followed by a “back to work” signal, and off you go again. You will need to practice this regularly so your dog is used to stopping in mid-search without losing enthusiasm.

It will be very handy to teach your dog to drink water and “go potty” on command. Drinking from a bottle is a useful skill, or from a tube in your hydration pack. Practice the “go potty” command in unusual locations, such as concrete, very tall grass and “smelly” areas — you never know where you will be searching.

Off-Leash Training. Yes, this is really possible for



Heidi (aka Queen of the Nile) on her 'barge' training for water search. Her head turn is a classic 'in-scent' behavior. Follow her gaze to the source.

PBGVs! The key is proper foundation training. Spend as much time as you can with the Come command, all the while building up the bond and trust between you and your dog. Absolutely never call your dog to come to you for a scolding or anything unpleasant. It is critical that your dog learns that coming back to you, even when it is fully engaged in something very interesting, doesn't mean that the fun is over. You can find several good recall programs on dog-training sites such as www.shirleychong.com/keepers/Lesson6.html. Leslie Nelson has put together a wonderful book and DVD, *Really Reliable Recall*, available from: <http://www.Dogwise.com> and <http://www.SitStay.com>.

HRD dogs will work best off lead, except in buildings or unsafe areas. A dog with a strong drive to hunt, together with advanced scent-work training, will be so focused on the target scent that the dog will not leave it or be distracted by competing scents. It may take awhile for you and your PBGV to become confident enough to work off lead, but it will happen. In the meantime, build up that trust between the two of you.

Make it FUN! There are almost endless activities to do with your dog to strengthen your bond and solidify your training skills. Go ahead and play regularly with your dog. Take agility classes, play scent games (use different commands for games), train lots of tricks. Make use of your down time with your now very well-behaved PBGV by getting registered as a Therapy Dog and visiting schools, hospitals and nursing homes to show off your skills. Down time on official searches offers a wonderful opportunity to practice Therapy Dog skills with resting searchers, friends and family of the missing person.

Every working dog needs a break from the serious stuff of life! Cindy Lou, my tracking dog, and I play around with freestyle dance. We do an occasional demo, and the nursing home residents just love to watch even though we aren't very proficient. Freestyle training is all for fun, and is a great way to build attention skills!

Common Sense Concerning Size. PBGVs are guaranteed to draw attention on a search scene for several reasons: They are uncommon, they are very cute, and there is the size question. We must face the reality of this issue because there is often a very narrow view in America on what constitutes a SAR dog. European teams have been successfully using different breeds and mixed breeds for search for many years, so there is no need for dogs to prove

themselves there. Not so in the United States. Be prepared to educate other handlers, seminar instructors and law enforcement agencies about the suitability of a PBGV for SAR. Do not be defensive. Study the breed standard — that is the best place to start. Learn how the breed is used, what it has been bred for, and know your own dog in particular. Learn all you can about your dog's pedigree, health history and the health and working ability behind the pedigree. You should be fully prepared to show up at a search with a very well-trained and reliable dog. Do your homework.



Clue on a search on the Milwaukee River with the Coast Guard and Milwaukee Police Department boats.

The most common reason for a raised eyebrow is the PBGV's size. They are not really small, just short, but people are used to seeing much larger dogs used for search, and often lump SAR dogs in with law-enforcement patrol dogs or narcotics dogs. You need to understand that volunteer civilian SAR dogs are very different from police dogs. We do different jobs, with scent work being the only similarity. Our civilian dogs do not need to protect the handler, look intimidating to criminals or work regular eight-hour shifts five days a week. They do not need to bite anyone and, in fact, are required to be completely non-aggressive to dogs or humans! We have the luxury of choosing a breed that fits our personality, our lifestyle, our family and our experience with canines. Work with a breed you love, and have some experience with training. We should enjoy and appreciate the dog we live with every day and not be trying to adjust to a particular breed of dog on the basis of tradition or because other SAR handlers recommended it.

Our WISARK9 handlers have had experience with a wide variety of breeds such as golden, Labs, border collies, German shepherds, a Norwegian elkhound, a Doberman, a vizsla, a springer, a rottweiler, a basset, five PBGVs and a smooth fox terrier. Size has rarely been an issue, and the smaller dogs have been equal to or even more useful than the larger dogs in house searches, on small flat-bottomed boats, in debris, rubble piles and in heavy downfall. You will be working where you live. We are in a heavily populated part of the country. Our team specializes in urban and suburban searches in public places, in the city and neighborhoods where the size of the dog doesn't matter at all. We

can pick up our dogs and carry them over obstacles such as high fences, or they can go under. We searched in a very cramped and dangerous abandoned industrial site in Chicago with crumbled stairs, broken ladders and collapsed block walls. None of it was a problem to navigate with our smaller dogs, whereas the bigger ones had to stay on the outside. Cindy Lou and Sophie are just as fast and accurate at tracking as the GSDs and bloodhounds, handling rugged terrain with creativity, style and enthusiasm.

Common Sense Should Prevail. There are advantages and disadvantages to every breed, and it makes sense to take advantage of any beneficial features that are useful in your area and chosen discipline. We have experienced some challenges based on size, no doubt about that. We have found, as mentioned in this article, that PBGVs do not make ideal wilderness air-scent dogs, due to short legs. And if you would like to do mountain avalanche rescue, get a big dog! But tracking and trailing is a perfect discipline, where the scent is on the ground and surrounding surfaces, and rarely up higher than a human waist. HRD recovery search is another good fit for the breed as there will be smaller areas to search, and for water work, a smaller dog is much safer in a boat than a tall, long-legged one. If the dog should fall overboard (which happens often, due to excitement at the source) a smaller dog is much easier to haul back aboard. PBGVs are excellent for extreme weather searches. We have learned over the years that these hounds tolerate very hot and very cold weather better than some of our other dogs. Heat has caused our black Lab and border collie to shut down, and lose the ability to scent due to panting while Clue easily whizzed through 90-degree weather problems, even at the age of 10.

All in all, the individual dog — its drive and motivation, trainability, intelligence, problem-solving ability — is much more important than breed and size. Certainly there is a place and a situation where a larger dog is preferable, but the same goes for a smaller dog. Smaller dogs have a longer working life than very large dogs, suffer less from bone and joint problems, and are more convenient for travel. They eat less and eliminate less, which is a very good thing! All in all, a PBGV is quite similar in working ability to a Bloodhound — dedicated, close to the scent on the ground, with long hairy ears, beards and moustaches to hold the scent instead of slobbery dewlaps and jowls. Those big black noses are just plain wonderful! ■

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