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**A RACE AGAINST TIME: HOW URBAN SEARCH AND RESCUE
CANINE/HANDLER TEAMS ARE PREPPING FOR THE NEXT MAJOR DISASTER**

May 16, 2018 — Beep! The long blare of the facilitator’s horn interrupts the morning silence. Diesel, a Dutch Shepherd, scampers up the massive debris pile. He scurries from end to end, ears flapping in the wind on this brisk spring morning. Every second counts, and though no real lives are currently in danger, today is a certification examination, Diesel continues his desperate search for any scent or sign of life, knowing that one day real lives will be counting on these next few seconds.

Canine certification is important to the emergency management field. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), all of the 28 FEMA Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) task forces have canine/handler teams trained in urban search and rescue strategies and tactics. Each canine/handler team undergoes a rigorous certification and must re-certify every three years in order to participate in search and rescue operations.

“Our certification process assesses skills that we have found to be necessary to do this job. While there is no training or test that can truly replicate a deployment, we have found that a team that successfully completes the certification process is successful on deployment,” said **Teresa MacPherson, former chair of FEMA’s Canine Work Group**. “For example, we cannot train on trapped infants among thousands of deceased bodies, yet the dogs were able to find babies among the death and destruction in Haiti (earthquake 2010).”

According to FEMA guidelines, the canine certification includes proper command control, agility skills, a focused bark alert to indicate a live find, and a willingness to persist to search for live victims in spite of possible extreme temperatures and animal, food, and noise distractions. The team tests on two large rubble piles for an unknown number of victims, implementing all of their knowledge, skills and abilities acquired from years of training. The canine must be at least 18 months old to attempt the test.

“Ours is a specialized job and it takes a very special dog to do it,” **MacPherson** said. “There is an extremely small percentage of dogs that are born with the right stuff; the rest is up to us – the training.”

“Training is key,” said **Neal Campbell, NYPD detective and canine search specialist and Diesel’s handler**. “From the day you get certified as a search and rescue dog, your training has to be kept up. This is a perishable skill, if you do not use it you lose it. You have to keep that dog hungry for that game. The reality is what he is doing is a game. He is playing canine hide and seek; we are telling him to go and play hide and seek, and when he finds somebody hiding, we tell him that he did a good job. You have to practice the way you play.”

Practice What You Play

The New York City Emergency Management Department manages the team that is composed of specially trained personnel from the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) and the New York City Police Department (NYPD). While US&R teams were established as a response system to natural disasters, their roles have expanded. The team deployed in response to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the Atlanta and Salt Lake City Olympic Games, the 1997 presidential inauguration, and the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. During 9/11, NY-TF1 canine/handler teams worked for seven months, digging through mangled steel frames and concrete, searching for any trace of life.

The NY-TF1 canine training facility is located at the Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island New York, housed on the property of the city's Department of Sanitation (DSNY). DSNY teamed up with FDNY, NYPD, and NYC Emergency Management nine years ago to construct two massive rubble piles used to conduct the canine trainings and certifications. These piles simulate a real-life structural collapse or disaster scene. They consist of reinforced concrete, structural steel, rebar, ads pipe, precast concrete, vehicles, and wood structures. To obtain the highest certification for their canine/handler teams, the NY-TF1 team uses the rubble piles to test in a limited access and full access environment to simulate a disaster.

“We recently changed our piles to offer the canines a search area offering more options to hide live human scent (people) in different scenarios,” **NYPD Detective and NY-TF1 Canine Team Manager Scott Mateyaschuk** said. “This process takes approximately 2 to 3 months with heavy equipment. During the certification exam, the canine team has 20 minutes to conduct a search one pile at a time, with a 10-minute travel and break before the next search. The handlers have no idea of the amount of victims buried in the pile so the evaluators can give a blind assessment.”

Limited Access vs Full Access sites

The limited access site tests the canine's ability to work independently – outside the view of the handler. The handler can only access a limited access site after the canine indicates it has located the first victim. The signal – the canine must bark at least three times, making sure to stay with the victim until the handler arrives. Once the handler finds the victim, they reward the canine, mark the victim location with a piece of tape, and then deploys the canine in search of more victims. During a full access site test, the handler and canine are working together to locate victims. Once the canine indicates the presence of live human scent, the handler rewards, marks the location, and deploys the canine in search of additional victims. The NY-TF1 canine team trains continually. FEMA mandates that all certified canine teams train 16 hours per month, and NY-TF1 travels the country to practice on different rubble piles and disaster environments. During the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season, NY-TF1 deployed for search and rescue efforts in Texas and Puerto Rico. Their extensive training prepares them for their work in any environment.

“Our motto is: don’t let the first time be the first time,” **Mateyaschuk** said. “I am very fortunate to have a group of dedicated men, women, and canines who share the same passion for this work that I do. I could not do this without them.”

Diesel darts toward the middle of the pile, abruptly stopping on top of a gargantuan block of concrete. He slowly circles his spot, strategically sniffing with each step. He halts again, this time standing erect, letting out four loud barks in the direction of Neal, his handler. Neal meets him on the pile, “good boy, good boy,” he cheers, while rubbing Diesel’s chin and stomach. Neal takes a piece of red tape from his pocket, marking the spot where the victim was located. He then sends Diesel back off into the rubble, in a race against time, knowing that one day, Diesel wouldn’t be chasing a certification – he would be racing to save a life.

Bio:

Omar Bourne is the Deputy Press Secretary at the New York City Emergency Management Department. Omar has responded to various disasters and emergencies in New York City, including the East Village building collapse 2015, a number of winter storms, and preparations for Hurricanes Joaquin and Matthew. He recently deployed to assist in the response efforts in Puerto Rico. As Deputy Press Secretary, Omar assists the press secretary in day-to-day press operations and serves as one of the agency’s spokespersons, helping to develop and distribute information to the news media. Omar has spearheaded the creation of New York City’s emergency management podcast “Prep Talk” and serves as a writer and co-host for the show. Prior to joining NYC Emergency Management, Omar worked as an Assignment Editor at Fox 5 News WNYW.



Photo 1:

NY-TF1 canine searches for live victims during a recent certification examination at the NY-TF1 US&R Canine Training Facility in Staten Island, New York.



Photo 2:

NY-TF1 Canine/handler team search for live victims during a recent certification examination at the NY-TF1 US&R Canine Training Facility in Staten Island, New York.



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