



United States Coast Guard
Seventeenth District

Semper Paratus



January 2007

alaska BEAR

The Seventeenth District
Online Magazine

SEADOGS

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It is a cold, dark Sunday morning in November. The ambient sounds of this still-sleeping Alaskan town are devoured by the blanket of soft white that covers every surface, like fragments of gutted clouds torn open by cruel mountain peaks. A small group of people dressed and equipped appropriately for the weather stand huddled together in Station Juneau's parking lot, talking idly, and tossing snowballs to four excited dogs. Except these aren't just any people, and those aren't just any dogs. These are SEADOGS.

Southeast Alaska Dogs Organized for Ground Search is a volunteer, non-profit search and rescue organization dedicated to training and handling search dogs in southeast Alaska. They are responsible to the



JUNEAU, Alaska (Nov. 18, 2006) Lt. Mara Booth-Miller prepares for a SEADOGS search drill. Photo by PA2 Thomas McKenzie.

Alaska State Troopers, and work alongside the U.S. Coast Guard, and Juneau Mountain Rescue.



JUNEAU, Alaska (Nov.18, 2006) Lt. Mara Booth-Miller searches for a lost hunter during a SEADOGS search drill. Photo by PA2 Thomas McKenzie.

“OK, this is about two deer hunters, and there’s not a whole lot known about them. One of them is Joe Baxter, his girlfriend called this in. He’s 24-years old, five-foot-seven-inches, approximately 160-lbs, carrying a .30-06-caliber hunting rifle, candy bars, donuts, and a hip flask of apricot brandy. He has no communications equipment whatsoever. He left the house at six a.m. yesterday, and should have been home yesterday at about three p.m. His girlfriend thinks he might be wearing camo, but he left before she woke up. He might be wearing leather hiking boots, but we don’t know the pattern.

Certified handlers are on 24-hour call, and available within 40-minutes or less of notification of a search. The team is comprised of a manager and current certified dog handlers.

SEADOGS team manager Bruce Bowler, who serves as coordinator and public relations manager, exits the station and approaches the group in the parking lot. “We got a call.”

Conversations end abruptly, and handlers give their dogs a non-verbal command to heel. Play time is over. Bowler leads them all inside for the brief.



JUNEAU, Alaska (Nov.18, 2006) Petty Officer 2nd Class Joe Baxter acts as a lost hunter during a SEADOGS search drill. Photo by PA2 Thomas McKenzie.

“He has no rain gear, and is probably wearing cotton clothes. He’s from San Diego; he’s only been here for a year. He has no map, no electronic position indicating radio beacon, no global positioning system, or any other equipment. The other hunter is Richard Colson, 25-years old, approximately five foot-seven-inches, approximately 180-pounds. The girlfriend knew nothing about him, except that he lives alone. That’s it. That’s all we’ve got.”

The handlers ask a number of other questions. “Are they smokers? What brand of candy bars? Are they both armed?” They are looking for anything that might be left behind on a trail, any clue or indication of the hunter’s habits, or their level of preparedness. But there is nothing. Things sound pretty grim for the hunters.

Fortunately for them, it’s just a drill.

The Exercise

For training purposes, Petty Officer Joe Baxter and Petty Officer Richard Colson, two well-prepared personnel from Station Juneau, have volunteered to get ‘lost’. Bowler led the ‘victims’ to the exercise site

earlier. They were deposited in the snowy woods at the edge of an abandoned mining town on neighboring Douglas Island just across the water from the station 30 minutes ago.

Petty Officer Joe Baxter has been in the Coast Guard for almost six and a half years, having spent six of them in Alaska. He has worked with SEADOGS several times during search and rescue cases in their area of responsibility.

“I was thoroughly impressed with both the qualified dogs and the dogs in training,” said Baxter, who started learning outdoor skills in Cub Scouts at a very young age. “They did exactly what I was told they would do. I was also very impressed by the dedication and commitment that their human counterparts demonstrated. I didn't realize how much training is involved in order to keep the dogs and the operation working properly. The entire crew is extremely professional.”

Baxter spent his first night in a snow cave at age five, and has been building shelters and spending nights outdoors since he was about eight years old (before his parents knew what he was doing). At the age of 16, he was teaching wilderness survival at Boy Scout camps. In 2001, Baxter attended cold weather survival training in Sitka, AK, which taught him even more. Over the past six months, he estimates he has spent over 45 nights in the outdoors, and not all of it by choice.

“A couple months ago, I took three friends hunting on Admiralty Island: two fellow Coasties and a roommate,” said Baxter. “They were new to Alaska and hadn't experienced the extreme weather and terrain. One Coastie was from Louisiana, had been stationed in Alaska for over a year and had attended the Coast Guard sponsored cold weather survival training. The other Coastie had recently transferred from Hawaii. My room mate was from Kentucky and had been in Alaska for about four months.

“Louisiana was wearing cotton long-johns under his un-insulated Gortex raingear; Hawaii was wearing a fleece bunny suit under his insulated Gortex raingear, while Kentucky and I were wearing layers of polypropylene under our Gortex raingear. My survival gear included extra food and water, hand warmers, fire-starting equipment, compass, whistle, head-lamp, flashlight, extra clothes, VHF radio, and a knife. Kentucky's gear was the same, with the exception of having only a lighter for fire-starting, and a cell phone instead of a VHF radio, and he had my GPS. The temperature was in the low 50s and it rained hard all day.

“After climbing to 3,770 feet, we split up and headed down the mountain, Kentucky, Hawaii, Louisiana and me. I shot a deer and was packing it out. We both dropped off of the ridge too early and ended up in the bottom of a steep valley that was extremely difficult to traverse in the dark. We were approximately three miles upstream from the beach. I had filed a float plan with the station that morning. At dark, I contacted them via VHF and told them that I was running late, but that I was fine and did not want assistance. A few hours later I called back to check in and discovered that the other group had called for assistance. I stopped once to build a fire and cook some food for Louisiana, who was exhausted and extremely cold.

“After resting for an hour,” continued Baxter, “we continued down the valley. Finally, after five hours of traveling in the dark, we decided that it would be safer to stop and wait until dark. I built another fire and communicated with both the Coast Guard boats and the SEADOGS to arrange for assistance. SEADOGS arrived on scene and gave us some energy bars, coffee, and emergency blankets. We tried to get some sleep and wait for daylight. In the morning, it took us 45 minutes to walk to the beach. The other party was not located until eight a.m. and was evacuated via an Air Station Sitka helicopter.

“Long story short,” concluded Baxter, “the SEADOGS came to our aid and assisted us down the mountain. Thankfully, no one was injured. I didn't think twice when I heard they were looking for volunteers to ‘get

lost'. The moral of the story is that you should personally ensure your people are thoroughly prepared before you leave for a trip.

Petty Officer Richard Colson has been in the Coast Guard for three a half years, having spent 11 months of that in Alaska. He learned about SEADOGS through previous Search and Rescue (SAR) cases and by 'breaking in', or becoming a qualified member of Station Juneau. Colson, who learned the majority of his outdoor skills from his father and the Boy Scouts, feels the most valuable piece of advice he's ever received was to always be prepared. "If you're not properly dressed for the weather and get lost out here, you're not going to survive very long. Take no cotton products with you, bring plenty of food and water, and always have fire-building tools."

As they prepared to hike in, Bowler pointed toward a chest high mountain of plowed snow, and an almost imperceptible path through the silent woods beyond. "We'd like to have you start in that way, so the dogs don't work into the wind. That would give them the advantage, because a human scent would be carried to them and they'd be able to solve the problem quicker. This way, the wind is blowing against them, so what the dog will have to do is work in a criss-cross pattern to intercept what scent there is."

"The dogs work either by following a fresh track," Bowler continued, "or by using what's called air scent, which accounts for 60 percent of all the searches we solve in southeast Alaska, because we don't have fresh tracks. The wind blows them away, or water coming down the hill destroys them, or snow covers them. So the handler and the dog have to make a decision as to what technique will be the most effective for them."

Bruce offered a few guidelines to the soon-to-be 'lost' Baxter and Colson. "Stomp it up, definitely," advised the team leader. "Leave some tracks, but I would be no more than say... 100 yards from this point." Baxter and Colson nod in understanding. After a final radio check with Bowler, Baxter shoulders his pack and disappears into the woods. Colson receives similar instructions, and performs a radio check of his own. He is soon swallowed by the trees.

The Candidate

Among the handlers waiting back at the station are Lt. Mara Booth-Miller, who served in the Air Force for five and a half years before enlisting in the Coast Guard in 1995, and her dog Sukhoi, a black male Labrador retriever. Together, they are SEADOGS newest candidate team.

"Search dogs were something I first became aware of when they were used to search the rubble after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City," said Booth-Miller. "Of course, search dogs proved their worth again in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. I have been reading about search dogs as a result of these two events and became increasingly interested trying to become a search dog handler. My assignment to the District Seventeen Command Center as a Search and Rescue controller allowed me the opportunity to meet members of the SEADOGS team and learn more about search dogs with the hope of training myself and Sukhoi as a dog and handler team."

"The training isn't difficult, because the subject is something I am very excited about, but there remains so much for me to learn," said Booth-Miller. "The training requires quite a commitment on the part of the candidate. I enjoy being outdoors with Sukhoi during the workouts and training in all kinds of weather and locations."

"I've gained many valuable outdoor skills as a result of my interaction with the SEADOGS team, she continued, "as well as an appreciation for the Alaskan terrain. The knowledge I have gained through my

training as a Search and Rescue controller has given me an understanding of some of the search theories that are also used in ground searches, such as search areas, search patterns and how the weather can potentially affect a search,” said Booth-Miller, who attended the International Search and Rescue School at Coast Guard Training Center Yorktown.

“I’m hoping to become a certified volunteer search dog handler,” Booth-Miller continued. “I’d like to be a part of ground searches in that capacity. When I transfer away from Alaska I hope to have already qualified as a search dog handler and have learned enough to be able to continue that work. I am hoping to be fortunate enough to be able to network with another team wherever I am stationed next and continue to train.

Booth-Miller got Sukhoi after moving to Juneau with the intention of attempting to become certified search dog handler. “Sukhoi was born here in Juneau. I brought him home the day he could leave the litter – a little more than two years ago. He is my first dog, and I am learning more every day about him and search dogs in general. I still have so much more to learn. My husband Lonnie and I are both civilian pilots. Sukhoi is a Russian company that manufactures aerobatic aircraft, among other types of aircraft. Lonnie and I are big fans of these aircraft, especially the Sukhoi Su-29. Since I got my puppy here in Alaska, I wanted to give him a Russian or Native Alaskan name. I finally settled on Sukhoi.”

SEADOGS has been in operation for 31 years and is recognized nationally as a search and rescue organization. Every year SEADOGS participates in up to 30 searches involving everything from lost hunters to suicide victims. While wilderness searching is the ‘bread and butter’, dogs may be trained in avalanche, water, disaster searching and other specialties. Teams have participated in rescue efforts from Ketchikan to Barrow, and during the Armenian earthquake.

The Results

The search for the victims was over almost before it had a chance to begin. Both ‘victims’ were safely located by the dogs, who approached each of them without making any contact, before darting back through the woods to notify their handlers.

Approximately 30 minutes after the start of the exercise, Colson was found among a stand of trees on a hill overlooking the entrance to the narrow valley. Baxter was found inside the snow cave he built while waiting to be ‘rescued’; his boots were off, and he was snug inside a down sleeping bag drinking hot tea and eating chocolate.

For Lt. Mara Booth-Miller, this was just another exercise, one that the SEADOGS participate in every week. “She continues to prepare Sukhoi for the obedience test, which is the first step in the progression toward certification,” said Bowler. “The next will be a field pre-test to make sure that both she and the dog are adequately prepared. She will petition the team when she thinks they’re ready, at which time the certified handlers will meet and decide whether she and the dog have demonstrated sufficient and consistent skills to justify it. That will probably happen in the spring.”

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