

The Tactical Search

By Doug Roller

The title of this article ponders many questions and opinions to be sure. They mean different things to many of us, as it should be. So let's narrow down the title to be a bit more specific. How about the urban tactical search. Of course tactics are tactics but different environments do offer varying challenges to be sure. The urban search usually starts with, yes you guessed it some kind of perimeter or containment. For the success of any K9 operation a proper containment is first and foremost and it is imperative that your agency has some standard protocols for establishing one. This magazine has produced many fine articles on perimeters and containments so feel free to revisit them if needed. The real challenge of course is to make sure your patrol personnel are on the same sheet of music - they are your bread and butter and it would serve you well to realize that from the onset. They are the ones that are beating the bushes and supplying you with needed "bad guys."

So now that your containment has been established and you arrive it's time to gather pertinent information needed for the search. Here is where some of us have gone off the story board. You must access the needed and I quote needed information you need to start your K9 search. Location of the Command Post, who is in charge, authority to authorize the search, suspect description, last seen location, the environment you are searching, friends or foes in the area and so on. Last but not least a search plan (a schematic of the area is usually very helpful) and personnel for the search team. All this is important but when do we start? This has sometimes become the problem. I have observed that on occasion we are so worried about getting all the information that we forget it is vitally important to start the search. Here is a fact - a K9 search is dynamic in nature that is to say that even with a two block perimeter established or a building surrounded the suspect is not really contained in a large area like this. The suspect can still move about and cause a public or officer safety concern. He can even escape if your containment is weak or officers become complacent. So it is imperative to kick off the search as soon as practicable.

When possible I use to always take the opportunity to interview suspects about the incident. It was always in my team's best interest to get on the suspects good side after a K9 contact occurred and I had to conduct interviews. Suspects will sometimes tell you some really interesting things during the interview if you just ask. They will speak openly about things they observed and mistakes they observed officers make during the initial containment and K9 search. All you have to do sometimes is ask. The military has a directive and that is the 70 % rule. What that means is make every attempt to get 70 % of the needed information to start operations. You will never ever get 100 % of the information. This is because information is fleeting in nature and always changing. I have seen inexperienced high ranking personnel on containments trying to accomplish this before we were given the OK to search. They simply drove themselves into a frustrated state as information continued to change. A good leader realizes this and avoids this dilemma. So now that you have muddled through these stages it is time to implement a plan. Depending on your agency size this can be problematic but here are some ideas. If you arrive at a large containment with multiple K9 teams, than it would be wise to have a couple of experienced team leaders to gather needed information. If six K9 teams arrive at the Command Post and all six are being briefed by the involved officers it will surely be a long brief. Better to have one trusted and experience K9 team to approach the involved officers and be briefed. It involves trust of course that this team will access all the needed information but the benefits of doing it this way far out way the other. Six teams all talking

to the involved officers can be very frustrating for all involved. This team can then break down the briefing into K9 needs and move on quickly. I would also advise an initial briefing with the involved officers to be absent of Supervision. Why is this you ask - the simple fact of the matter officers sometimes make mistakes during foot pursuits and may embellish circumstances when faced with Supervision? It is important that the information you receive is factual and correct. It could mean the difference between locating and not locating the suspect. You get my meaning. I am not talking about misconduct issues here so let's not go there but minor points that are pertinent to information you need to capture the suspect and stay alive. One more point here, be respectful to your patrol folks I cannot stress this enough. Do not insult or Monday morning quarterback them - they surely will know if they made a blunder and it is not the time nor your place to single those concerns out. Stay on point and get started.

You ask why a push to start the search. A good question deserves a good answer. The quicker you can get boots on the ground and start the search the sooner you apply pressure and stress on the suspect. By pressing on to the search it will often force the suspect to make mistakes. Instead of giving the suspect time to access and adapt you would be wise to continue pressing him. Once you have a plan make sure you run it by the Command Post (specifically to person (s) in charge). This will serve you well should the you know what "hits the fan".

Briefing Your Team

I have had occasions to oversee other agencies during actual tactical events and many agencies are weak in this area. Do not assume anything when it comes to briefing folks on your team. Most patrol personnel have never been on a K9 search before and have no idea how to operate tactically. If you are benefited by a large agency with a good size K9 unit you may have your own personnel, however, this is not the norm. Even if you do have this advantage a complete briefing reminds team members of your job, your canine's abilities, and what is expected of them during the search, if the suspect is located, and what follows after the search. I could right an entire article on search team briefings, just make sure it is complete and given exactly the same each time. I would advise new handlers to carry a card with all vital information and bullet points to hit during this briefing. A team member may not be able to experience all that you have, but they will at least draw from your briefing, if it is stated clearly. Even after your briefing you find yourself reminding them of their job during the search as it begins to set in. I think we have all forgotten how many times we have reminded members to not watch the dog but focus on your assigned area. Last but not least make sure everyone on the team is not afraid of your canine - this is a simple question and one that is often not asked.

Here are some points to hit on during the briefing -

- My canine works on or on or off lead (whichever)
- Do not independently search - if your concerned about an area let me know and we will check after my canine checks (one team covers one team contacts)
- If you see the suspect and he does not see us - snap your fingers and let the team know - you will allow canine to get into scent cone before ordering suspect out
- Point guards job is to cover suspect and not make commends - I will or another search team member will do this

- Explain in detail how you will take the suspect into custody if there is a K9 contact. This subject can be one of contention - I prefer to recall the canine to a position of advantage, unless situation dictates otherwise. This should be clear to your team.
- Identify team members who will have less lethal weapons (if any) as well as cutting and breaching tools.
- Identify a tactical channel for the incident and keep this channel clear for tactical operations only
- There are other points to be sure but these are often overlooked.

The Search (Off Lead)

I am going to focus this article on my beliefs and that is a tactical K9 search should be completed off lead. I am not talking about tracking and trailing but an off lead area and building search. Off course this means the canine should be E-collar trained to accommodate this. There are many types of search formations and I have heard many of them. I like to term the one we teach as the "Diamond Formation." It basically consists of K9 handler, point guard (left or right side) and two rear guards. I realize that some agencies may not be afforded the needed man power for every search so you will have to adapt. The bare minimum should be one point and one rear guard. High Risk searches of course will have larger formations but try and limit this. To many team members can often get in the way of the search, especially in crowded environments. It can also cause problems for the canine when working the scent cone to its source.

Your canine should be able to work far out ahead of you during the search. This requires training to gain and maintain control. It requires a balance, enabling the canine to work well ahead of the team, while trying to maintain a visual whenever possible. Many handlers will cut their partner loose and allow them to search way ahead out of sight for long periods of time. I do not believe in this. The search should be tactical and if your canine is out of your view you cannot control him and more importantly you will miss an alert. Any seasoned handler will tell you that alert may be nothing more than a head snap as the scent is often diminished. If you can read that head snap it will allow you to work the area and discover scent issues that only you (the expert) can ascertain. Remember it is your canine's job to discover scent it is your job to get him there, you are the brains of the outfit. I always want canines that are trained to complete the forward or tactical down during off lead work. It allows the canine to work ahead and then be placed on a forward down looking ahead of the team toward the threat. This also keeps the canine in the hunt, eliminating the never ending recalls that need to be utilized when the canine gets too far ahead of the team.

When a canine becomes accustomed to working off lead he will be independent but you will be control as a balance is struck. He should be able to run the containment perimeter as you then bisect the area and clean up the nooks and crannies. Some areas may become complicated during the search. You may have to request additional personnel to post off sections so as not to get "back doored" by the suspect. As suspects will often tell you they can hear you coming from a distance and will try and adjust and move whenever possible. If you are using multiple team make sure you communicate with your other search teams to coordinate the systematic clearing of areas. Once again suspects have played this cat and mouse game, alluding capture.

Leave No Stone Unturned

Of course you must trust your canine to be obedient to odour but do not assume the "scent picture" is always a good one. It may not be. We have seen canines not locate suspects in many locations that we assumed were a great scent picture for the canine. We then mimicked the same search with another canine and discovered there was in fact no scent available - it happens. We also tell our search team members that "everyone is on the hunt." The canine is an apprehension tool off course but he primarily is a locating tool. We use canines because of his enhanced olfactory and hunting abilities. This being said though every team member should be hunting for the suspect and not become complacent. You often find areas during searches that you just cannot get your canine into. These areas should be marked by the Command Post and not forgotten. Have CP personnel post officers at the location and hand clear them later if necessary. Remember that if you leave an area that was assigned to you and the suspect is located later - you will be the one that is blamed so make sure CP personnel note these areas that have to be hand cleared.

If during the search an abandoned building or structure is located it is imperative that you advise the CP for obvious officer safety issues. You may have an officer involved shooting and no one knows where you or your team is. You should also give periodic updates of the search. Working countless CP's over the years can be frankly boring as large contained areas are searched. Keep folks at the CP advised periodically.

Updates on Intelligence

This is often overlooked. The CP plays an important roll to be sure. CP personnel should be there for search teams and their needs. One of their responsibilities is updates on intelligence. With tactical operations being run on an assigned tactical frequency it is imperative for CP personnel to monitor base frequencies. Over the years I have lost count how many times we have located suspects by witnesses and concerned citizens. Be careful to vet the information carefully so your team is not chasing ghosts all night but also take it seriously. To add to this - if you are searching and a citizen reports of a possible suspect five houses down, it does not mean you have to rush over to that location. Better to stay the course and continue toward that location and clear up to it. If you continue to leave your systematic search you will at some point miss locations and the suspect will back door you. Make sure you disseminate and use information carefully.

As your searching look for evidence and do not discount anything. You must be vigilant during a canine search. I once had a search, it was 0230 hours in the morning and we came to a yard where a person was watering his front yard. As we approached I recalled my canine and one of my search team members started to order the person back into the house. I immediately interrupted, as this person became very nervous. I moved search team members around him and with my canine ready to apprehend as I ordered the person to the ground. Well you got it - it was the suspect trying to act "cool" while watering the lawn in the early morning hours. Suspects will be very creative when being hunted. They will call cabs while in the containment, break into residences, hide in trunks of cars, you name it.

It's a Team Effort

This title speaks for itself. From the initial containment to planning the search and hopefully the apprehension requires team work. Your perimeter is only as good as your team members. Searches can be long and boring but team members must stay the course. Containment units should be out of the vehicle and in a safe position, behind concealment and cover if possible. We have seen many suspects try and break the perimeter and have done so when officers were texting on their cell phone during this time. The CP can and should remind containment units of this from time to time during the search.

If the suspect is contained and everyone does their job most suspects are captured. Let's face it some suspect's do allude us but this should not be the norm. If we work as a team and perform the search tactically not only will we be successful in our search, more importantly we will go home at night. Doug Roller is the retired Chief Trainer for LAPD K9 Platoon and CEO of Tactical K9 - he can be reached via his web site at www.tacticalk-9.com.