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In a battered Japan, dogs search for human survivors

By Christie Keith, Special to SF Gate

Snow and freezing rain fall on Riley as he noses through the rubble of what was once a residential neighborhood in Ofunato, a city in northeastern Japan.

The Labrador retriever isn't a pet searching for scraps to eat in the tsunami-ravaged remains of his home; he's an American search dog specially trained to locate survivors trapped beneath the debris and rubble left behind when disaster strikes.

Riley and his human handler, Eric Gray of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department, are one of six canine disaster search teams trained by the Ojai, Calif., Search Dog Foundation (SDF) that are currently deployed to Japan.



Riley, a disaster search dog trained by the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in Ojai, searching for survivors in the wreckage left by the massive earthquake and tsunami in Ofunato, Japan.

PHOTO COURTESY USAID



Eric Gray of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department and his disaster search dog, Riley, arrive in Japan to begin the search for survivors.

PHOTO COURTESY USAID

The others -- Captain Ron Horetski of the Los Angeles County Fire Department and Pearl, firefighter/paramedic Jasmine Segura and Cadillac, fire captain Bill Monahan and Hunter, civilian handler Linda Tacconelli and Joe, and firefighter Gary Durian and his golden retriever, Baxter -- are currently sharing a school gymnasium with their dogs, using space heaters to keep out the winter chill between search shifts.

Although communications from Japan are sketchy right now, Durian was able to get a report out Tuesday night, describing the rescue effort and conditions on the ground in the Ofunato area.

"The devastation from the tsunami is just unbelievable," he said. "It rained Tuesday, snowed all night, and is still snowing ...

Hunter and Joe are out searching now. When they finish, Cadillac, Baxter, and Riley will take their place."

The sixth dog, Pearl, was resting.

"We are 'delaying' an area," Durian said. "Task force members remove a layer of debris after it is searched and then we work the next layer."

The dogs are trained to give a bark alert if they find someone, conscious or not, in need of rescue. Even if no one is found, the process enables human searchers to determine that the area is clear, so they can continue the search elsewhere. Without the dogs, it's often difficult to know for sure if they're leaving a survivor behind.



SDF teams getting settled at the gymnasium in Ofunato City.
PHOTO COURTESY CA TASK FORCE 2

As of Tuesday night, Durian said the dogs hadn't found any survivors, though the search continues because victims can survive for days trapped in the rubble after a natural disaster.

Survivors, including children, were located by search dogs in Haiti up to 14 days after it was struck last year by a 7.0 earthquake.

The SDF-trained teams, known as California Task Force 2, aren't the only American search dogs in Japan. The West Coast rescuers are partnered with Virginia Task Force 1, with whom they traveled to Japan.

They are, however, the only canine teams made up primarily of dogs from shelters and pet adoption organizations. That's because the SDF recruits rescued dogs and partners them with first responders to locate people trapped in wreckage after disasters. The dogs are placed at no cost, primarily with firefighters.

The morning after the disaster in Japan, SDF founder Wilma Melville woke up and turned on the news. "My first thought was for the people suffering from this terrible tragedy," she said. "My next was, 'Are they going to need us?'"

They did. Within hours, California Task Force 2, which had recently returned from a mission in New Zealand, was put on alert.

"That means the team members have to stay by the phone, make sure their gear is in order, and get their dogs to the veterinarian for a health check," Melville said.

After that, the human team members received their medical exams and assembled for transport.

"The third stage is deployment, when the task force gets the go-ahead and begins the transport process," she said. "Late that same night, they were bused to LAX where they met up with the Virginia team before leaving for Japan."

There's one danger searchers on this particular mission haven't faced before: radiation from Japan's nuclear power plants, severely damaged by the tsunami.

"There has been quite a bit of discussion about the nuclear risks," Melville said. "The task force is trained in dealing with weapons of mass destruction, and has the ability to know the amount of pollution from radioactivity. But for the present, they feel comfortable with the distance

they are away from that risk."

Watching the devastation in Japan on the news over the last few days, it seems like it took the dog teams quite a while to reach the stricken areas -- a delay that must have cost many trapped victims their lives.

"I'm afraid this is a normal amount of time for a mission that far away," Melville said. "The alert came early, and we moved as fast as possible. But there's no fool-proof way anyone can be prepared for something of this magnitude. It's huge beyond belief."

Melville wanted residents of the Bay Area to know that, even though some of the SDF-trained teams are in Japan, they still have teams in California that could respond to a disaster at home.

"We take care of California first," she said. "Not only that, but because this is such an earthquake-prone area, we're adding six new teams in the Bay Area by the end of this year."

While the expense of sending the California and Virginia search dog teams to Japan is paid for by the federal government, each handler is responsible for his or her own gear, and the dog's equipment, too.

Additionally, the SDF is working to increase the number of teams in California -- more than half are SDF teams -- from 62 to 96, to provide for a comprehensive disaster response program for the state.

"When this deployment is over," Melville said, "our focus will shift to building a training center. "We intend to bring the nation's canine search teams there, one group at a time, and make it a real mecca for canine disaster services."