



THE SEARCH

The life of a mountain
rescue search dog team

PAUL BESLEY

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THE LIFE OF A MOUNTAIN RESCUE SEARCH
DOG TEAM

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CONTENTS

Prologue: On Chew Road	1
THE FALL	
2012	7
THE ANOMALY	
1959–2012	17
THE SEARCH	
2013	25
2016	28
2017	60
2018	81
Winter and spring 2019	121
THE FIND	
Summer and autumn 2019	135
2020	153
2021	173
THE RESCUE	
2022	191
Epilogue	203
Acknowledgments	207



*For Scout,
for finding me.*



THE SEARCH

2013

Twenty-four of us, nervous strangers, stand in a circle outside a lonely farmhouse in the Pennines, waiting to be interviewed, sifted and selected to train as a member of a mountain rescue team. By the time we are full team members, twelve months later, there will be three of us left standing.

Joining a Peak District mountain rescue team is a way of paying back for my rescue in the Lake District. Gratitude is something I think is important. Training was a daunting process, all those ropes, advanced first aid, fitness. With the shape of my body, I knew I would never be a crag rat plucking people off a rock face, or a fell runner in a snatch squad flying across the moors to rescue some damsel in distress. I was quite happy being a donkey, carrying gear up to a casualty location, carrying it back down, carrying a casualty on a stretcher, manning the radio. I was good at navigation; finding a location was never an issue, and I liked to set up exercises on the moor at night for others to practise their navigation skills. I slotted into my place and trudged up hills.

With my background in engineering I managed the team's buildings, making sure everything was up to scratch, fitting it out to make life easier. I took on the role of social media and press. With the number of call-outs rising, it was important that we raise the money to keep the team operational – pumping out stories of call-outs and training was the easiest way to reach as many people as possible.

Call-outs are the core of what any team member will do. Members are on call every minute of every day of every year and will attend if they are able to. The days of ringing round for volunteers are long gone, now a text message sends us out of the door to a road head where we are briefed,

THE SEARCH

tasked and deployed. We can be out for a few minutes – false alarms, the casualty found by the public. Or hours, sometimes days, no matter the weather or the terrain. Many call-outs come in the early hours before dawn. Partners wait, unsure whether to raise the alarm for people who have failed to return.

Training replicates call-outs, refining skills, familiarising with new equipment. They happen once a week for a few hours at night, sometimes a whole night, or day. It isn't testing, but training, learning what we can do and need to do better.

The testing of the core skills of crag rescue, search and navigation, required by all team members to stay on the call-out list, happens every year. Crag rescue and navigation seem to be the most feared. My favourite is the navigation test. The team will also add fitness in later years, the age profile of team members continuing to head north.

Team members are unpaid volunteers; bizarrely, we used to have to pay to be in a team. There are no expenses for fuel, vehicles or personal kit. With the lost evenings at home, the cancelled days out, the numerous dinners put in the oven or the dog, the work can put a huge strain on home life. Partners and family are the unsung heroes of mountain rescue, aiding a team member to help strangers in distress.

I've navigated for dog handlers on call-outs and find the relationships with their dogs and the work they do fascinating. There are two handlers in my own team who I gravitate to, seeing the intricacies of dog management: handler and dog working together away from the rest of the team, seeking out a casualty purely by scent. It's a dark art straight out of wizardry, and a role I'm becoming more and more attracted to.

I spend days being a dogsbody (body), hiding out on moors and mountains in all weathers for search dogs to find me in training exercises. I get to know handlers and other dogsbodies, noting who seems to know what they are doing. I observe which dogs are better at handling terrain and weather.

The most ubiquitous search dogs are Border collies, perfect for the work, especially if they come from sheep farming stock. Spaniels are favoured by those, it is fair to say, who are super fit or don't realise they have to be. Labradors and retrievers have their supporters, as do German shepherds, the original search dog that was introduced into British mountain rescue by Hamish MacInnes. I favour a Border collie; I like their nature, their joy on the hill, the character they show. All the good handlers I know have a Border collie.

Search dogs are trained separately to the team and more frequently, twice a week, and a whole weekend every month somewhere in Britain. As well as training with the team and attending non-dog call-outs it's a huge personal commitment, so the sponsorship of the team, and more importantly support from partner and family, are required. After two years as a donkey, my team – and Alison – give me the go ahead and I'm accepted to train to be a search dog handler.

All I need now is a dog.

2016

A dog handler has told me about a farmer in the Lake District who breeds working Border collies, many of whom have found their way into mountain rescue as air-scenting search dogs.

This brings us speeding across the Pennines, tyres thrumming on tarmac as we pass underneath the Pennine Way and punch out into the grey skies of Lancashire.

The air in the car is dense, trapping Alison and I between the windscreen and the seats. She chooses words carefully, keeping the conversation light, focusing on the excitement of a puppy coming into our home, being part of our family; her toes feel their way over the eggshells.

We come from different worlds. Me: corporate, industry, comprehensive, council house. Alison: the arts, public school, exotic places. It's why our relationship works. But I have so many hang-ups, such a thin skin, that some days Alison is an adult with a man-sized five-year-old. Anything can press my buttons and there's no consistency, except the days of silent sulks that always follow. At first it had drawn her down: fearing she'd be overwhelmed, she talked to friends, established her own terms for life and stayed. There was good, good that far outweighed the bad. *I knew*. Knew that I was capable of extreme kindnesses and unbelievable cruelties and knew how Alison saw that weighed on me.

When I talked about training to be a search dog handler, she'd asked, tentatively choosing her moment, would I be able to hold it all, or would it crush me? She'd used the word 'endeavour' – the word chosen long before in that curt letter from the search dog training committee. 'We wish you every success in your endeavour,' making it sound like some great adven-

ture of uncertain success. Alison thought the word wise. Someone had walked the path before.

She'd worried. Knew I didn't handle people well, had witnessed my volcanic outbursts, and tried to reach me. I'd spat words, lost in my own darkness, white flecks of spittle spattering from snarling lips. Eventually it would pass, the madness I called it, dissipating until quietness settled upon me, and at last, I would be able to tell her what had happened, how some perceived slight had sent me spiralling into the darkest corner of my mind. Maybe it was the fall, the crack on the head. Maybe it was other stuff long ago. The loving would follow, and we would begin again the cycle of our days, forever watchful of the broken eggs. None of this bode well, we both knew that.

I don't have a good framework for life. It's all I have, though I fight against it. In opening up to Alison, I realise I miss the mentors from the steel mill teaching me about life. That's what I need. I'm so lost in thought that I don't feel Alison reach out until she squeezes my hand, says all will be well, many have done this, relax and enjoy it. My shoulders drop and the grip on the wheel eases, rounded hills appear, I see and feel me and a dog walking across the tops. We slide off the motorway and head west winding through mountains holding the sky, the roads narrowing.

The farmhouse stands at a crossroads, the roads lined with oak and birch, a thin verge separating the tarmac from a drainage ditch. The corners of the house are red stone, in between a mix of flint and granite shards mixed with oatmeal mortar. Through the gate, a scree turning circle with a fountain in the centre, beyond, a large blue door under a stained-glass light. We drive in and wait, unsure if this is the right farm or the right entrance. Do people in the countryside use the front door or back? I get out to a cold wind trying not to look like a townie or be afraid of the barking on the other side of the door. Locks turn, the door wrenches open to reveal a flame-haired woman in a blue woolly jumper, jeans and purple wellingtons, the daughter. 'Entrance is round in the yard.' I start back to the car in embarrassment, but she calls us through. We pass down a hallway stuffed with paintings, mirrors and bric-a-brac into a large kitchen to face a piece of solid Victorian furniture with wispy sandy hair, a ruddy face and hands so large that I think he is wearing thick work gloves.

The daughter slips out and we sit with my nerves. The farmer runs through my credentials. What work do I do? My CV is met with ambivalence. Where do we live? A city. Northern. Near a national park. Minutes from it. I keep laying down facts in the hope that more really is more, but I sense my credibility and confidence ebbing during the interview. Do we

THE SEARCH

have dogs now? I sit up, having slumped under the weight of interrogation. Firmer ground now. Two Bedlington Lakeland terriers, I emphasise the Bedlington and overemphasise the Lakeland. Are they working dogs? Fingers stabbing upwards to clench shut around the answer. No, I reply softly. Fingers fold. The ground shifts again, my position edging towards precarious. Perhaps my honesty disarms him as he seems unsure of my suitability. Honest, yes. But a dog handler? I think about Dad. I sit and smile at the unsmiling face. We sit in silence.

The room fills with frigid air scouring the tiled floor, running round the room to meet the daughter in the doorway. In the palm of her hand a tiny bundle of black, white and tan. Alison gasps. A tricolour, not a black and white. I'd had visions of being out on the hill with a proper collie, like other handlers. The daughter retreats behind the farmer holding the puppy close. The farmer watches me. Another 'aw' from Alison. I can feel her wanting to hold the bundle, this pet. What must they be thinking? The daughter whispers soft words to the puppy, steps forward and places the dog in my lap.

He feels so soft. I gently stroke his paws, the pads bright pink and fleshy, the white socks pristine. He smells of puppy and hay. His nose is black, wet and twitching; deep brown eyes watch me. I whisper hello, place a kiss on the white flash in the centre of his forehead.

The daughter kneels before us and tickles the dog's chin. 'What will you call him?'

I whisper soft words, his fur tickling my nose, take a long look into his eyes. Then I fall.

'Scout. His name is Scout.'

One p.m. on April 28th and we're heading south for home, Scout nested in my lap swaddled in a soft shirt steeped in two days of my scent; a new world of smell, colour and sound rush by.

I'd had no shortage of advice from handlers – what dog to get, how to keep it, how to house train – advice as numerous and as diverse as there are breeds. One piece stuck. In the first six months I must ensure the dog bonds with me and only me.

I say to Alison, I don't think it is a good idea she interacts with him, no calling, no feeding and no petting. Her words are broken, pleading. A tear draws a line down her face; I set my face to the road ahead, the journey onwards passing in silence.

At home we introduce Scout to his new brothers, Bedlington twins. Monty, the stoic of the two, sniffs interest until Olly, who is not happy, not

happy at all, pulls him back into line. Scout, eight inches high, stands his ground. Olly growls, I growl, Monty drifts between the growls, Alison attempts to keep everything from spinning outwards.

I set up a wire crate in the basement, away from the bustle of the house and inquisitive Monty. It is cool and dark, the crate holding layers of soft bedding and toys, blankets over the outside of the cage to cocoon him in warmth and quiet. This will be his sleeping quarters much to the dismay of Alison who had envisaged a more homely family life. On the first night, after placing him in bed I sit close by peeping through the blankets to find Scout sitting upright, wide awake and waiting to see what happens next. After an hour with no sound, I slip away. As I reach the floor above a high-pitched sweeping wail fills the house and runs out into the street. I ignore it, needing to be firm. By 3 a.m. with not a single break the wail morphs into a tortuous scream. I stare at the ceiling while Alison sends out waves of 'I told you so.' After a week of banshee nights followed by days of glowering neighbours, I bring the crate into the kitchen, tacitly admit defeat and suggest to Alison that it may help if she shares some of the time with Scout, who, sensing Alison is the real centre of the family, plays the cute little puppy. I'm impressed.

During the day we play, getting Scout used to basic obedience work. Tiny treats underpin desired behaviour; sitting on command comes easily. Monty and Olly sense an easy win and join in, so I have three pairs of eyes fixed on my hand, tails wagging furiously, and Scout happy to be part of it all. It is tiring for Scout. He sleeps a lot curling up in his crate, a ball of fluff fast asleep in minutes. It gives us all a break to reflect on the challenges of parenthood. By the third week we're settled into a routine: food, ablutions, play, sleep, and repeat. At night I put him to sleep, and Alison and I sit close by talking softly until a light snore drifts out from the cocoon. We sleep too, Alison happy that she can finally love Scout and her family is whole.

Our mornings are a whirl of activity – Monty and Olly like spinning tops, toenails chattering around the kitchen floor pressuring me for their breakfast. Scout sits in his crate: feet firmly planted together, head high, back straight, still and watchful. I scoop him out with one hand; he feels warm and fat, his pink tummy spreading through my fingers, his pink tongue licking my hand, its roughness sanding away bits of my scent, my code. He wets his nose to transfer the scent while his eyes hold mine. I smile, press my nose into his coat, draw in that puppy aroma, softly repeat, 'Scout, Scout.'

Monty has always had most of the attention; having worked out Scout is staying he's increased efforts to stay in front, cuddles and treats becoming

THE SEARCH

his prime objectives for the day. Olly sits at the end of the kitchen watching, shooting looks at me.

I want Scout to have a firm routine. Building a framework to his day will help him settle as well as allowing me to concentrate on his training. Breakfast at 7 a.m. the first link in this daily chain. I feed him in his crate to prevent fights breaking out with Monty and Olly, getting him to sit before placing the food bowl, embedding in his psyche the reward system we will use for training and life. After a few days he gets the message and sits in anticipation when he sees me going to put food in his bowl; he learns quickly, we both do. I learn I can produce desired behaviour.

After breakfast we go into the garden. For the first two weeks until his inoculation period is complete Scout is confined to home. We work on routine and getting him used to his name and some basic obedience. We've had a warm start to spring – the garden is alive with colour and smell, the season of new beginnings drifting through the air, birds chatter and flit about carrying scraps into hedges. Scout sits on the doorstep unsure what to do. His nose twitches constantly as his senses are bombarded, his head moving sharply when a sound pulls his attention.

Monty and Olly are rooting around in the flower borders, identifying last night's visitors. Scout watches. I watch Scout. I tell him to go and pee. He looks at me, the gaze steady. I can't expect him to instantly understand commands, so I pick him up and take him into the yard, then walk into the garden calling him as I go, my eyes on him, his eyes on me, his body rock still. I crouch down, nearer his eye level, keeping my voice light and inviting. Up he gets and totters forward, the little legs pumping away, the pudgy behind swaying side to side. Everything is ungainly and haphazard, but I am filled with joy as he reaches me and praise him profusely, ruffling his hair, my voice slipping into baby talk. Monty, hearing all the attention, sidles over for his share. Olly sits way off, hackles raised. When Monty realises there are no treats, he wanders off to explore more of the garden. Scout watches him and glances at me. He wants to play with the other two, but he's not sure how. He looks at me, so I lead him in, making clucking noises until he follows, his attention drawn to what Monty and Olly are doing, but staying close to me; the thread that ties us short, his dependence on me total.

Scout pecks the air, his nose tracing the molecules of scent drifting around us. I try to smell what he is smelling: flowers, soil, stone; somewhere bacon is being cooked. There's a sweet, sticky smell wafting over the town from the doughnut factory, floating images of oozing jam and sticky fingers.

Scout takes an interest where Olly has left a calling card, so I guess sugar-coated confectionary isn't his thing.

Monty is amongst the flowers devouring blades of grass and giving Scout sideways glances. Olly is at his regular spot, sniffing where the hedgehog lives. The two have never met, so the scent fascinates him. It's also where our resident frog lives, layers and layers of scent oblivious to my nose but an extensive library to a dog. Olly takes his time to catalogue the scent, spending minutes at each scent pool, sharp breath drawing in the chemical base then stepping back to analyse and ponder, his head cocked to one side testing a hypothesis. Scout watches, his tiny nostrils flaring, his eyes firmly on Olly. Perhaps this is his first step in becoming an air-scenting search and rescue dog?

He meanders through the garden taking a wandering track that delivers him to Olly's scent pool, sticks his nose in here and there, then ambles over to Monty who turns and gives him a thorough inspection. Scout rolls over, feet in the air in submission; Monty pins him and begins to play, the sound of mewing drifting out of the lilies. A yelp stops everything; Olly, watching in agitation as his brother makes his displeasure known. Monty retreats into the flowerbed planting a calling card on the edge of the path. Scout goes over, tests the scent then adds his own details. The thread that binds me and Scout has lengthened. At ten weeks old, Scout is psychologically smart enough and sure enough for any opportunity, thinking through situations as they happen without any input from me.

It has been a good morning. I can see how Scout already works with scent. It must be an explosion of scent after all his time on the farm and it's interesting that the scents he smells are not interfered with by the human confections of doughnuts and bacon. It's clear he knows how to find a scent pool, and what to do with it.

I call his name and all three turn to look. It's just a sound now with no connection to a dog. I try again; this time only Scout turns, but still does not move. I hold out a treat and call; Monty and Olly bound over. Scout follows, his stubby legs and puppy fat tripping itself looking like he's trying to jump and run at the same time. He halts at the step out of the garden; I encourage him on, keeping Monty and Olly at bay with my hand. Finally, Scout tumbles off the step, his body crumpling into a heap of soft loveliness, then scrambles upright, gets his bearings and trots over for his reward. I keep saying his name, imprinting on his mind who he is. Olly growls and I tell him to stop. He sulks. As Scout crunches down on the treat I tell him how clever he is, what a good boy he is. His eyes stay fixed on mine. I give him

THE SEARCH

another treat to increase the pleasure value of the reward and slip a treat to Monty and Olly for being so understanding. 'We can do this,' I tell Scout.

Before acceptance on to the search dog training programme, handler and dog must demonstrate the ability to command and perform a set standard of obedience: walk to heel on and off the lead; perform a recall (return on command); perform a down stop on command; and perform a down stay for ten minutes including five minutes out of sight of the handler.

Following a successful completion of the above, the dog must undertake a field stock test with sheep to the following standard: the dog is recalled through the flock to the handler; the dog to retrieve a toy placed in the centre of the flock; and the dog to remain in a down stay while the flock is repeatedly run past at close range.

If at any time during the test the dog chases sheep the assessment is terminated and recorded as a fail.

On successful completion of these assessments the dog team can progress to the search dog training programme.

Three members from Peak District mountain rescue teams, including me, along with our dogs, begin obedience training today. I name us the First, Second and Third Man. Myself and the Second Man arrived last night. As yet, there is no sign of the Third Man.

The village hall noticeboard is papered with maps, hills and woodland outlined in thick red crayon. Below each, a list of names: dogs left, humans right. Above each listing are the classifications for each training area, stages one, two and three, and operational. At the bottom of the board is *Obedience Class*, no map just the word 'FIELD' in capitals. Scout is on this list, his first mention in orders. I read it over and over, silently forming his name. Opposite Scout, my name under the heading 'Handler.' Capital H.

In a short time, in a field, in a village in Yorkshire we begin our journey. The responsibility, excitement and trepidation layer through me, my mind tumbling through each then cycling back again. I must tell Scout I will not let him down.

He has slept all night in the van, his first time. His crate swaddled in blankets to form a cosy environment, a soft toy in the corner, a van window cracked for fresh air. I guess he can hear the comings and goings, dogs barking good morning to the world as they head for ablutions. Lifting him

out of his bed, his paw pads bright and pink reaching out, his coat warm, soft and silky, the smell of sleepy puppy lifting from his body, I stick my nose into all this happiness and murmur my allegiance to him, restate my promise, my eyes closing as the ache washes over me.

We join the procession of dogs and handlers. Scout has never seen so many, never had such a cacophony of new sights, sounds and smells. He zigzags on his lead, his short legs stumbling over the rough track as he tries to collect everything that is happening, me tap dancing around him in fear of treading on him. Handlers stop and coo at him, dogs sniff, the odd one bristles and gets a scolding. Soon we are surrounded by chatter; there are no pretences of being hard mountain people. All that is present is joy at a perfect little dog.

The authenticity test begins. 'Where is Scout from?' I mention the Lake District farmer and Scout's operational half-brother and his handler. A murmur of approval passes around, and the gateway opens for our journey onwards. Easing into their day handlers move on, green plastic bags daintily held by outstretched hands.

It's our first day in obedience class and Scout and I are loitering by the entrance to the field; he's exploring the scents around the gate while I hope I have the right field. We're waiting for our instructor, a woman who loves dogs and does not suffer fools, especially handlers. No one else is here. We're an hour early.

The handlers and dogs on the training programme have left for the hills and woodlands, leaving the village to slip back into its slumber. It's the place you'd want to move to: affluent, well kept. A stream babbles down the centre, tiny bridges cross it, a pub with hanging baskets. It's a long way from city life.

Scout has been studying the field through the bottom rail of the gate, his head darting left and right. I see small brown lumps bouncing along the grass – rabbits – new to Scout and an opportunity to introduce him to wildlife. We wander around the field, keeping the lead short, soft words of encouragement flowing down, small morsels of cocktail sausage offered as reward. His legs are so short his fat pink belly skims the grass. He keeps his eyes on mine and maintains a steady pace. We reach the end of the field, the rabbits now gone, Scout sniffing the ground. On our return a puppy appears out of the village hall, a tight lead pulling the Third Man. He's dressed head to toe in dazzlingly bright orange, heavy winter mountain boots, his face one huge smile of excitement and happiness. Scout and I stand enthralled by the vision, and the smile beaming out.

THE SEARCH

Others arrive and we exchange puppy names, puppy ages, puppy gender, puppy parentage. Dogs have travelled from all over England to spend three days training. No one asks any questions of the human at the other end of the lead. The Third Man instantly becomes the target for a stream of observations on his sartorial elegance and slips effortlessly into the pack.

Two handlers stand away, watching the growing mayhem of puppies trailing leads through human legs, and the rising waves of yelping as the giant knot gets tighter. They move away, calming their dogs with soft words and strokes of comfort. Today, after months of practice, they will be assessed on obedience. If they pass, they will take the field stock test, and if successful, join the training programme. In three years, they could be saving lives.

It's a big day.

The mood of the group becomes serious. Dogs brought to heel, frantic requests whispered for behaviour to be significantly modified; tension rises as nerves leach out along the line. Dogs become unsettled, sensing the handlers' nerves flowing down the lead into their psyche. Scout moves in closer to me, both of us at a loss to know what is happening.

A retriever lunges towards the end of the line and for the first time I notice the instructor, standing still, watching. The dog gets pulled back but lunges again, pulling the lead taut, the handler jerking forwards, the dog's tongue hanging and paws clawing up sods of grass, words from the handler increasingly ineffective the more desperate the scene becomes. We all step back to give a clear path.

'Down.'

The retriever drops instantly, its tail a blur of compliance, eyes blazing brightly at the instructor who calmly gives the dog a treat, says sweet words, strokes an ear, the dog rolling over in rapture.

'Some work still to do.'

The handler, ex-army, whispers 'Yes,' his eyes pleading forgiveness. All leads have shortened.

In the field we place traffic cones, hurdles, a see-saw, a long yellow tunnel. Now tied up, the dogs keep their eyes on their own handler as we gather in a circle, jostling for position. I make myself stay in line, in the middle of the circumference, and tick off character profiles: the joker, the statesman, the pro. We're all trying to have square shoulders and straight backs, the very image of strength and dependability, notwithstanding the cute puppy now chewing its leash and the odd paunch creeping over

the waistband. The only female stands calmly waiting, relaxed. I mark her down as competent and hard. And what am I?

We spend the morning getting Scout walking to heel, sitting on command and working on recall, keeping distances short so we don't strain his tender limbs and joints, the closeness helping cement our bond. Training is by encouragement and reward for both dog and handler; threat is never used. For every dog and hopefully handler, this process must be fun, and the rewards firmly associated with the desired behaviour. This imprinting is the foundation of the 'find sequence' which we will eventually use to help people in distress. Each time Scout gets something right he gets a morsel as a reward. By late morning he's beginning to get the hang of the game. He's worked out the food is kept in the chalk bag on my belt. When he performs a task correctly and gets praise, his eyes flick from mine to the bag of treats.

At midday we rest; the mental energy training requires is exhausting for both of us. Scout has a small meal before being put to bed, sleep coming seconds after his body has snuggled into its soft nest. I join the others, chat about training, call-outs, the usual conversations of any like-minded group. It's very relaxing and I feel myself beginning to be more at ease.

In the afternoon we continue while the more advanced dogs work out on the equipment. There is a mix of proficiency of handler and dog in the group. Some are within a month or two of taking the obedience test, some are grappling with the down stay for ten minutes – a conundrum for the dogs: should I stay or go and find the handler? Some dogs have not found the switch for work mode, spending their time wandering away to sleep off dinner. The two dogs hoping for assessment have spent the morning being closely watched and now are gone.

More dogs arrive overnight after handlers finish their working week. There is a mix of breeds, with the most suitable dog for the work often a heated debate. No one has turned up with a poodle or a chihuahua yet, but we all live in hope. The supreme champion is the Border collie bred from working stock. The breed is a relative newcomer. Old Hemp, a tricolour bred in the Northumberland border country in the 1890s, is the ancestor of all pure-bred Border collies like Scout. He was known for his quiet work ethic and ability to control stock. The breed is generally accepted as being the most intelligent of all dogs. Inhospitable terrain and weather are no obstacle for Border collies. Their ability to work consistently in difficult conditions and over prolonged periods of time, along with their ability to think through situations, has made the breed the pre-eminent dog in search and rescue.

THE SEARCH

Scout and I make good progress during the second day. He now knows his name when I say it and is very fixed on me. I'm more relaxed. Now I know what I am doing, what is expected of me.

On the final day, there is a meeting before everyone leaves for a few more hours of training, then the drive home. The two dogs under assessment have passed both the obedience test and the field stock test and join the search dog training programme. The handlers are presented with a hi-vis dog coat and a small lime-green dog tag, both emblazoned with the words *Trainee Mountain Rescue Search Dog*. People cheer and clap. The handlers, now one half of a trainee dog team, shift from foot to foot, their eyes fixed on those embossed words, fingers absorbing their meaning.

Scout is cute, drawing attention wherever we go. Those beautiful markings, a perfectly proportioned tiny body, his loving nature. Place him on some wheels and a child could happily pull him along. Each day brings new people to meet. He follows the conversation, his eyes tracking whoever is talking, his attention total – and he loves attention. He is magnetic. It's a useful skill to have for his first official team appearance.

Each year mountain rescue teams around the country must raise money to run their operation. It pays for kit. The equipment used is highly specialised and expensive to purchase and maintain. There are the vehicles – the Land Rovers, pickups, control vans – some teams have more than half a dozen. Stretchers, ropes, helmets, jackets, medical supplies, fuel – all must be sourced and paid for. A base from which to operate, store equipment, run training. As technology develops, items need upgrading, radios go from analogue to digital, computers need up-to-date systems. It's an expensive pastime.

Many people assume mountain rescue is funded by the government. This is not the case. Teams receive no support from the government, and many argue mountain rescue is the better for it. This independence comes at a cost though: volunteers have to constantly battle to raise funds to keep helping people in distress, each team having to annually raise up to £100,000, sometimes more.

Collection tins anywhere people gather are a source of funds, as are donations from fell runners, mountain bikers, climbers and walkers, both as individuals and clubs. It's a way of paying back and being responsible in making sure support is there when needed. It is this independence and self-reliance – everyone mucking in – that forms the DNA of mountain rescue. There are other sources of funds; companies and other charitable organisa-

tions all help, particularly with the big-ticket items. You can't just walk out of a showroom with a custom-built Land Rover, it's going to cost an arm and a leg.

The most visible and most enjoyable part of fundraising for team members and supporters is the bucket rattle. This is where Scout is going to help, spending the day at Sheffield train station, looking ridiculously cute and greeting travellers.

We are there by 6.30 a.m. to catch the morning rush. Walking on to the concourse, it's big and loud. People buying coffee and tickets, checking train times, meeting travellers, trains arriving and leaving, the heavenly voice booming down. I have Scout on a short lead to keep him clear of all those feet. His head swivels as he takes in the strange environment. We have only walked a few metres across the shiny floor when Scout attracts attention; people spin around and point out the gorgeous little puppy with the big red collar and bright, confident air. By the time we reach the rest of the team we have a small following trailing us.

Scout has a long day being stroked, kissed, petted, cuddled, photographed, kissed again. Businesspeople lie on the floor in fine clothes just to grab a selfie; even the British Transport Police join in. The team announce his presence on social media which brings people on special journeys to see him, visiting during breaks from work, some several times in the day. There are a lot of young women turning up just to spend time with him. Queues form; those waiting watch Scout's latest fan tickle his tummy, sounds of pleasure blocking out station announcements. Phones are passed around for the photo op, instructions given about the best profile, waiting for Scout to perform his latest iteration in cuteness, sticking his little pink tongue out. Social media brings more donations to be dropped into the buckets, a squeaky toy, more glamour shots. At the end of the day people are travelling home and deliriously happy to see Scout still at the station, emptying their pockets and purses of spare change. It makes a huge difference to the team, thousands of pounds donated from the good people who fell in love with Scout.

As we turn into Scout's first summer, we've attended a few weekend training camps and have got ourselves into a nice routine. He loves the weekends away, all the people, the games we play, the conveyor belt of treats for doing well. Camp is usually a bunkhouse, some grander than others. The dogs sleep in cars and vans, handlers clucking around them at bedtime tucking them in with a bedtime story. I spend the run up to the

THE SEARCH

weekends preparing our food, hill kit and sleeping gear. Being married to a vegetarian means when we are away, we indulge in steak and bacon.

I rise early at camp, easing slowly into the day. The older handlers are about, grunting good morning, minds working through the hours ahead. After breakfast, I walk with Scout. We chat about training, the things we did well yesterday. He has his breakfast while I pack my rucksack with food, water, dog bowl, and chat to handlers and dogsbodies. There's a briefing session – who goes where. People leave in convoy, those new clinging to the vehicle in front desperate not to be left behind.

In the evening, I talk to other handlers about our day, ask a few questions and sift through the advice I need and what I think I don't. I make notes of reflection, writing down weather conditions, who was present, what went well or what needs attention. These habits leave me free to concentrate on Scout. At bedtime, he gets a juicy carrot and I tell him how much he is loved. For me, bed by 9 p.m. with a chocolate Hobnob, or maybe two.

With days lengthening, Scout's limbs grow, and his body knits together. Longer walks raise the activity levels and lead to an increase in food. We hit the local pet store where Scout finds treasure in the sweepings underneath the bottom treat shelf, his time spent headfirst in the tight gap, his backside and legs sticking out and a tail happily polishing the floor.

Exercising Scout is something I am careful with. Border collies are prone to hip displacement, where the joints and surrounding tissue structures have not been allowed to grow slowly enough and consequently fail. The vet stipulates a walk of five minutes for every month of age. We take it easy; Scout will be eighteen months old before we take on a full day walk.

At home he pushes his explorations further afield. He's finally worked out the staircase. While still a little tentative, his growing body has given him the confidence to go up and down, opening the whole house to him and, with four floors and three flights of stairs, it's good hill repetition work. He's sleeping less and has more energy that we burn off with frequent walks around the streets and obedience work in the garden.

My usual mountain rescue team training continues. I begin brushing up my core skills for assessment later in the year, the team having added, removed or refined some of the requirements, adding another night of training. I need to make time for Alison, Monty, Olly and myself. We get out for a short walk on Sundays, taking the Trangia to cook breakfast, relax watching the clouds go by and talk over our days. Call-outs keep at a steady level:

people lost, mountain bikers crashing, injured walkers, the odd climber hitting the deck. With a major forest mountain bike track in our area, weekends are busy. Quick extraction to hospital is key. Feedback from A&E shows that many casualties have life-threatening internal injuries, the result of feeling wind rushing through the hair and trees flashing past, and at the last minute seeing the huge tree or boulder refusing to step aside.

The longest line of blackened gritstone on our patch is Wharncliffe Crags, overlooking a wide boulder field. While some teams close by will attend a crag rescue several times a week, for my team it is a sporadic event. The last crag rescue was in a storm – thunder, lightning and lashing rain making for an atmospheric rescue of a climber who had plummeted feet first down the crag face, their lower limbs splintering into shards. To add a little spice amidst the storm passing overhead, the safest way out was not across the boulder field, but along the top of the crag, below twitching powerlines.

Becoming a dog handler more than doubles this commitment. Search dogs and handlers, while part of a team, are also a national asset and can be deployed anywhere in the country, making them unique in the mountain search and rescue community.

Scout has had a growth spurt and we have run out of garden. We move to a large, grassed area in Hillsborough Park where twice each day we practise our routine of heel walks, down stay and recall. The park is full of distractions – dogs and people, lots of picnics, and children running around screaming and having a good time. I notice no one is using the tennis courts in the morning. The cage would be perfect for our work, the area large enough to do everything we need, so I begin using them and it works well. Being away from the bustle gives us a calm space and helps us both focus on the down stay without fear that Scout may wander away.

Our days run on tramlines. It's gentle and immersive; the more time we spend together the stronger our bond is forged.

'Turn.'

This is new. We didn't expect to be doing turns today. Heel walking is going well, we are both relaxed, having fun. There is a hedge looming toward us, and we've been told to turn rather than stop. I wheel us around, not quite dragging Scout, but there is little elegance in the manoeuvre. We make it round, walking triumphantly back to the instructor while other

THE SEARCH

handlers look on appreciatively. We stop. Scout sits and I give him a small piece of sausage.

'Is that it?'

I've no idea what I have done wrong.

'A bit of sausage. And that's it?' The final three words punched out leaving bruised holes in the air. Handlers fold their arms and settle back.

'How much time do you spend with Scout?' Scout, on hearing his name moves toward the instructor and is immediately commanded to sit. He sits instantly. A hand jabs me.

'Treat.'

I fumble.

'Treat.' This time with an edge.

I place a small piece of cocktail sausage in the hand. It looks small, cheap and pathetic. Scout snaffles it up as the air is suddenly filled with a high-pitched trill.

'Good boy.'

Scout slips into adoration mode, loving this new experience.

'Treat.'

I'm feeding the demanding hand as fast as I can while the titters from the other handlers begin rolling across the field that has become exceedingly small.

'Why are you rewarding Scout with cheap tasteless sausage? That's the best he deserves, is it?'

The instructor now has Scout's full attention.

'I thought ...'

'Thought! He needs praise, needs to know you are pleased. This is supposed to be rewarding.'

I'm not sure what to say, so stand rooted to the spot. The others grin. Another poke in the ribs snaps me back into the torture area.

'And put some life in your voice and movement. It's like watching an undertaker. You're not one of them, are you?'

'One of what?'

'An undertaker, for crying out loud.' Laughter booms across the field. I shake my head.

'Watch me.' The instructor takes the lead, Scout trots happily at the side, neither in front nor behind, enjoying all the attention. I watch, trying not to look like an undertaker. The instructor looks back.

'Well, come on. You won't learn back there.' The other handlers wave me on with little flicks of their hand, faces red with merriment.

Scout is loving it. The twitter of words, the constant feed from the

sausage machine holding him in place. His only purpose and desire is to comply with the instructor's command, the control plain to see. At the hedge they wheel round in a perfectly executed arc and smoothly return ending with a perfect sit. Everything simply perfect. I glance over at the others, heads shaking slowly.

'Loose lead.'

We hear those words many times in obedience class. A tight lead says poor control, the dog taking the handler for a walk. And perhaps, a commentary on the handler's approach to life. A person who has a loose lead on life is relaxed, content, in control of what matters. It sounds a little new age, but all that gentleness passes down the lead to a calm, confident dog.

I try to create a calm environment at home, no upheavals, no sudden sounds. The more I work at this the more the atmosphere becomes tense and forced, especially for Alison. She sits me down and explains how home feels. 'Unfriendly,' is the word she slowly, gently releases from her lips. 'You're losing sight of what is important,' she says, 'our happiness, all of us, the dogs' too, and yours.'

I try to make sense of what is happening, talk it through with some friends. One points out how angry I seem at the world. How unapproachable my face is, what she calls a 'fuck-off face'. I talk about what is happening in my life, how tense things have become, what I am trying to achieve, but at what cost to me and my loved ones at home? I take a well-worn path around the subject until, with nowhere else to go, I finally arrive at what is disturbing me. She listens in silence and watches me. She tells me some of her day, the recent past. We pass back and forth for a while. Finally, she says my troubles aren't the world's fault, or Alison's. 'Get some professional help,' she says, 'because what you are doing isn't sustainable.' It might even mean giving up Scout.

Team members drag themselves out of bed in the darkness of a winter night, peering into the blackness that hammers sleet against the windows. They set foot on a storm-ravaged hill to look for someone they do not know and will probably never meet. This is not the behaviour of normal people.

Well-being is an issue in mountain rescue. The need to be seen, to be in control, coping, is a powerful mask. Layering that with trauma, harsh conditions, and mixing in the daily life of family and work – it's a lot to

THE SEARCH

take on. Help in many forms is there: a chat over a pint, a curry with a few mates, dark humour after a trying call-out, a day on the hill, the love of those closest. Sometimes professional help is needed, and sometimes that need is ignored.

It takes me time to find help, to begin unpicking a life. Slowly, unknowingly, the search for me begins. I'm reminded to wear life like a loose jacket, and I think about the loose lead. I'm closer to a solution than I realise, a thread that I have teased for years, and like any journey off the map the way forward will come unexpectedly.

As summer eases into autumn, Scout and I have established a smooth routine. Twice a day we walk the neighbourhood, lead loose, enter the park, lead off. Scout walks to heel as I keep up a stream of encouragement and reward. We practise the 'sit' command, the recall, and repeat and repeat to imprint the habits. Obedience builds empirically, so we don't move on until we have solidified what is behind us. The most difficult command to master is the 'down stay for ten minutes'. It causes the most stress in handlers and consequently the dog. Many a handler has tensely waited, and prayed, for the ten minutes to be over, only to find at the end that the dog is nowhere to be seen.

The tennis courts are full, so we decamp to the large sports field. Around the edge are trees and low hedges that are perfect for watching Scout in position. It's still warm, the field full of young families picnicking, children running free, dogs chasing balls. Lots of distraction and noise. I figure if we can do it here the assessment will be a walk in the park.

Scout is all long limbs and sharp corners, and huge ears like sound mirrors. Road walking has thickened and blackened the soles of his pads. I'm getting to know his idiosyncrasies, paying closer attention to how he responds to my voice. Soft, calm and gentle has a significantly greater positive effect.

A big step has been changing the reward to roasted liver. Scout loves it, though it's created a major issue in our vegetarian home. Alison is disgusted. In fairness, she has a point. The house is like a tannery. I am exiled to a spot on Loxley Common, cooking in a charcoal barbecue tray. The smoke gives the liver even more pungency, enticing the Common's dogs, their red-faced owners breaking out of bushes, trousers ripped, hands bloodied. I offer a convoluted explanation, aware it's completely mad. In the end, I cook at night, producing batches that last two weeks. Local wildlife is my only company; the local youth give me a wide berth. I chop the liver into

a plastic box then clear away the bottles of cider and silver nox canisters the kids have left. Then home and a shower.

The down stay progresses well. I begin by laying him down, facing me, head up, remaining like this for a minute to settle. Then I back away, repeating 'stay'. Then I go back and reward with lots of liver and some high-pitched praise that draws attention we ignore. We keep doing this until I can stand fifty metres away from his prone body. Once we have that cemented, I begin scribing a widening arc left and right, eventually drawing a full circle around him. Over weeks we hone this until we can confidently do it for more than ten minutes, even with children playing nearby and the odd dog coming up to Scout for a natter.

The next step is to build the out-of-sight imprint. I move away from Scout after five minutes of him staying down. Gradually. A few seconds then a minute at a time. Sometimes Scout's face appears around the tree I'm hiding behind, so we reset and go again. Every time it goes right, he gets a reward and praise. We get beyond ten minutes – we only need five, but I want to be doubly sure.

At half-term, the park is full of mums and dads with their children playing ball games, eating ice cream, having a happy time. Hiding behind a bush to watch Scout doesn't seem like a good idea. I stick to a tree, nonchalantly leaning against it out of sight of Scout, who is a hundred metres away in the middle of the field. The park attendant asks what I'm doing.

'Training my dog.'

'What dog?'

'The one sat in the middle of the field. I hope.'

'Hiding behind a tree by the ice cream van.'

'I'm just trying to train my dog for mountain work.'

'In a park! You need to find somewhere else.'

My watch says it's been seventeen minutes since I left Scout. Sticking my head around the tree, he's still there – head, ears, eyes alert. I whistle him over and he bounds across the grass to a huge hug, squeals of praise and a handful of liver. We leave. But not before Scout gets a large Mr. Whippy.

At the next weekend camp, I ask if we can take the test; the other two local dogs have already passed obedience. We're told no. We're not ready. So, we continue.

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