

The End of An Era.....
Search & Rescue Dog—Bracken
1995—2007



It is with great sadness that I have to report that “Bracken”, a long-standing member of the RAF Kinloss Mountain Rescue Team & the Search & Rescue Dog Association Scotland, has passed away after finally being overtaken by old age.

A familiar sight around both the station & within the local community he was known by many for his incredibly good nature, his infamous appearance on “Blue Peter” and more probably for his ability to consume his own body weight in food at one sitting!

The following article is dedicated to his memory.....

“As the night gets colder you fight to stay awake, knowing that to fall asleep could prove fatal. The thought of being stuck in this icy hell panics your mind but a renewed stab of searing pain from your broken leg reminds you harshly that you have no alternative.

Suddenly the sound of a bell drifts out of the darkness & your eyes strain to pick out an eerie green glow that is bouncing towards your position.. The next moment a dog appears at your side, the previous phenomenon being caused by the bells & chemical light stick attached firmly to its harness. The animal barks at you excitedly before racing off & disappearing into the darkness once more. Over the next minutes this bizarre dream repeats itself until eventually the dog is joined by another more human form; head torch piercing the night.....”

Whilst the above tale is purely fictional there remain a vast number of people within the UK who, having read it would be able to relate closely with its storyline. The one thing that they all have in common? They all owe their lives to the skill & ability of a Search & Rescue Dog.

The Search & Rescue Dog Association (SARDA) Scotland was set up in 1965 by the legendary Scottish mountaineer, Hamish McInnes. During the previous year McInnes had been invited by the Swiss Red Cross to attend an Avalanche dog assessment course & he was so impressed by what he had seen that he quickly instigated the formation of a Scottish equivalent.

Today, Search & Rescue Dogs have evolved from this humble beginning into highly specialised animals that can be utilised to carry out a wide variety of roles ranging from mountain or avalanche searches to locating a missing child within the local community.

My own involvement with SARDA began in 1995 when, having witnessed these incredible animals at work during operations with the RAF Kinloss MRT, I began training my own Labrador pup, Bracken. From the very outset he demonstrated a natural ability & enthusiasm for this task and following two years of intensive training finally achieved the status of "Search & Rescue Dog".



During this training we spent literally hundreds of hour's together, roaming hillsides or racing around the many local woods, searching for friends & family members who had foolishly volunteered to act as "casualties". It was also throughout this period that the close bond between us, that was to remain firm for the next 10 years, was forged as we shared both successes & frustrations.

During his operational life Bracken participated in countless call outs, often being deployed to incidents by SAR helicopters to ensure his arrival on scene in the shortest possible time. To recount all of them would take forever but two of the most memorable stay firmly in my mind.

The first was during a search for an elderly gentleman who had gone missing from a nursing home in a remote location. Bracken & I were tasked to complete a sweep of adjoining woodland which, as any MRT member will tell you, is a monumental task to achieve by manpower alone. However, with their highly developed sense of smell the difficulties presented by the dense forestry were of little worry to a SARDA dog.



An hour or so into our search Bracken indicated on human scent & led me to a small lochain. He proceeded to swim above a single spot in the loch, approximately 10m from the shore, pawing desperately at the surface (I should point out that SARDA dogs are not formally trained in water work so this behaviour was all new to me as a handler). However, his insistence left no doubt in my mind & the find was called in.

After initial scepticism, the casualty's body was unfortunately recovered from approximately 6m depth of water, directly underneath the spot that Bracken had indicated on.

The second incident again involved a woodland search for an elderly woman, suffering from dementia. This time Bracken successfully led me through over 800m of thick forestry to the old lady's location. The weather that night was bitterly cold & wet and, had he not located her when he did, there was little doubt in anyone's mind that the lady would not have survived.

Add to these the many occasions where Bracken's insistence whilst on the mountains alerted rescuers to unseen dangers, such as unstable avalanche slopes, and both myself & other MRT members can consider ourselves lucky to have been in such good company.



Bracken retired from active duty in March 2006 after reluctantly handing over the responsibility for looking after both myself & those less fortunate to my new SARDA dog, Aonach. From that time onwards he enjoyed a life of luxury in front of the fire, but would still wake instantly from the deepest sleep at the howl of my pager.

Unfortunately the years of service that he had selflessly provided had not been kind to him and shortly afterwards he began to suffer badly from chronic arthritis; a relic of endless years spent forcing through freezing blizzards & deep wet snow. His walks became shorter and his recovery time longer, until eventually even heading outside into the garden became a Herculean effort.

The most difficult decision I have ever had to make was to finally allow him to rest in peace with what dignity he had remaining. He was a loyal & dependable companion who gave so freely to save the lives of others and he will be sadly missed by all who knew him. RIP "Fat Dog"

Sgt Daz Steatham

RAF Kinloss MRT

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the staff and in particular Mr Ian Swann, of Millar & Swann Veterinary Practice Elgin, for their continued professionalism, care & support of SARDA.