

PROOFING BUILDING AND AREA SEARCHES

ALERT AND SUSPECT ENCOUNTERS **PART 1**

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Teaching both the building search and the area search exercises is a staple of all patrol dog training. The building search consists of a “cold” start where you can roll up to any building and send your dog in for a search without any indication from the subject that he is in there (searches are conducted either on a long line or off leash), have the dog actively hunt for a man on command, and when locating him by either sight (out on the open) or smell (hidden), perform as he was trained either find and bite or find and bark. At that point of contact, if the dog is trained in a find and bite protocol, the dog will apprehend the subject who is out on the open, or if the subject is hidden the dog will first alert the handler to the location of the subject and then can be recalled to a cover position and the hidden subject verbally challenged.

This article assumes the dog has been trained in this basic sequence, depending on SOP, and will speak to the further training that must be done to proof this behavior for street deployments. For articles on component training the basic sequences of this behavior, equipment fixation, targeting, and recalls as referenced in what follows, see the media area of my website www.tarheelcanine.com. In this two part series, we will look at the building search and area search exercises, in reverse, from issues dealing with encountering the subject in this article back to the start of the exercise and hunting in the next article.





ENCOUNTERING THE SUBJECT AFTER A SUCCESSFUL SEARCH

VISIBLE DECOYS

About five years ago I was doing an advanced building search seminar. I had asked the K9 unit trainer to show me a typical training exercise with the dogs. The trainer hid a decoy in a hidden sleeve in a closet in a room in an old school building. We used a “half” hallway for the exercise, so I could see the dogs set up, search, and find the decoy. Their dogs searched off leash. The dogs did the search, found the hidden decoy and barked at the door well. The door was popped open and the dog given a bite. The dogs were very neutral to us moving with the handler as cover officers.

The next exercise I set up in a similar type area, put the decoy in a hidden sleeve, and instead of hiding the decoy in a room or closet, behind a closed door, the decoy was standing in the open in a classroom (empty of chairs and other furniture) and he was passive. The first dog began the search, entered the room, and completely ignored the decoy, checking door seams, and closet doors, cabinets, and searched past the passive decoy standing out in the open a number of times until leaving the room and going to the next room across the hall. I did the same exercise with a number of the dogs. The vast majority ignored the standing passive decoy completely out in the open.

The handlers were a little astounded. The issue here was context. Every time they set up training for building searches they set it up with hidden decoys. Their dogs searched well, and alerted properly.

Sometimes decoys had equipment, sometimes without, but always inside a room, closet, cabinet, or some enclosure. The dogs never had to make contact with a decoy out in the open because, the certification standard they were held to, always asked for a hidden decoy, and so that’s all they practiced. The dogs became contextualized: a person standing out in the open was not seen as an option. Their quarry was always hidden. During that seminar, we worked on passive biting in hidden equipment (sleeves and suits), with decoys in various positions, from standing to seated to prone and partially obscured. Now if I didn’t know that they only practiced building searches with hidden decoys, the handlers might have seen the failure to engage as something other than improper preparation. It’s not that the dogs didn’t want to bite, or were scared to engage, but rather in the building they thought they had to find someone hidden.

So when proofing suspect encounters in building and area searches, I always make sure to tell handlers not to forget placing decoys out in the open or partially hidden (under mattresses or tarps, with a leg hanging out, or an arm hanging out, around corners or doors, seated in chairs, under vehicles, and prone). Sometimes the “alert” can get over practiced and the dogs believe the ultimate quarry is always hidden, so anything not out of sight, is irrelevant. A balance must be struck between using eyes for a quick scan and encounter, and switching to nose for the possibility of a hidden subject if nothing is seen in the room. As dogs enter rooms, you want them to sweep doorways with their eyes, for someone waiting on either you or the dog. You cannot make the mistake of having the dog think that everyone out in the open is to be ignored for the real quarry, the hidden subject.

HIDDEN DECOYS

When the dog encounters the subject after a successful search of an area or building, there are a number of variables that we must address in training to proof the dog’s response. If the dog is used to encountering the decoy in training and the decoy wears a visible sleeve or suit or even a hidden sleeve to deliver the reward for the search, the dog will associate the odor of the equipment, when the decoy

is hidden, with proximity of the decoy. Then when the dog is deployed on a real search, the dog may not understand to alert on human odor alone, but rather human and sleeve or suit. Therefore on a real deployment the dog may not indicate strongly on the human odor of a hidden suspect. This confusion is also a training issue.

Therefore trainers will often hide a decoy with no equipment behind a door, or in a closet, out of reach of the dog, to make sure the dog alerts on the

suspect. In area searches a cage or small dog kennel will be placed out in the woods with a decoy inside and no equipment. The dog alerts on the human with no equipment odor in the vicinity and you can recall the dog to cover and arrest. This makes handlers feel good because it’s close to “real.”

There are a couple problems with this. In the area searches with the cage out in the woods, be sure to camouflage the metal kennel otherwise you will have a dog searching with his eyes for an object that



just doesn't belong in the woods. Further if the decoy is always hidden, you can have a problem with the dog over time learning that human odor alone results in no biting (no reward at source), so the dog can show hunting behavior strongly but when encountering the suspect, the dog will leave him after a while because the suspect is non-rewarding. Imagine doing detection training and the dog is never rewarded for finding the odor source once he learns the sequence of searching and locating source. Too many "no bites" in a row on successful finds can lead to an extinction burst of alert behavior, for a while, ultimately leading to an extinction of the behavior and the dog then leaving the suspect (see my article in K9 Cop Issue 41 on "A Simple Lure-Reward Training System" for an explanation of reward schedules).

There are some ways to combat this result. Inside the cage in the area search, after a time of passivity, when the dog is barking consistently and with focus the decoy must engage the dog with some civil agitation, to keep the dog's interest. This shift from the dog operating in prey (searching and finding the passive decoy) to a defensive encounter, will keep the dog's interest and raise the level of focus. I cannot stress enough that the dog must be variably rewarded with a bite on the suspect in the cage or behind the door. Sometimes pop the door open to give a bite on a hidden sleeve. This must be done on a variable reward basis. Low profile hidden sleeves with relatively new sweatshirts over them do not put off a lot of odor like jute on a bite sleeve, or an entire bite suit. Change the cover often, to get rid of the dog saliva on the sweatshirt. Keep the sleeve arm farther away from the door seam where the dog will find the odor of the subject. Thus varying finds where the dog alerts and is called to cover and verbal challenge is issued and the subject complies, is varied with rewarding the alert at source with a low profile hidden sleeve bite.

Another technique would be to extinct the response to equipment in general. In detection training we take great pain to work in a sterile training environment and teach the dog to ignore associated odors to narcotics such as plastic baggies, plastic gloves, dog saliva, and human odor. We put plastic bags and gloves out in search areas that are "known blank" so the handler can ensure the

dog does not alert on the odor of these items, but rather only when the drug odor is present. When placing out drug hides we place them out with gloves, and touch everything in the search area with our bare hands to make sure the human odor does not indicate the location of the drugs. The same can be done in building searches with equipment, place it behind doors, in closets, out in the open, and teach the dog to search for the man and ignore it. This process may have to start on the obedience field, teaching the dog to ignore dead equipment, heeling around it, downing next to it, sitting and holding stays around it, so that it loses its meaning when detached from the man. I will reference equipment fixation more below.

Another technique is to bridge the dog between the alert behavior and the bite reward. Here is an instance where I like searching on leash. When the dog makes contact with the decoy, with no equipment on, by smelling a door seam or under the door, and alerts by barking, you can pull the dog back off the alert by the long line, and have the decoy come out and in civilian clothes, agitate the dog in defense, present his arm and make the dog "clack" at his bare arm, then duck back in the door and let the dog return to the door and reestablish the barking. One of the times you pull the dog back, the decoy runs out of the room, down the hallway, and you let the dog chase when the decoy gets enough distance. You can keep tension on the line to slow the dog on the slick floors to give the decoy time to get ready. The decoy ducks into a room, and puts on a bite jacket quickly so when the dog locates him he can bite. Have a low profile bite jacket, overlaid with a XXL zip up hoodie to make a hidden suit top. Let the dog bite and take the decoy to the ground, really let the dog beat him up and let out all that frustration he built up from barking and being snatched away. Using the line gives us the ability to pull the dog away from its reward and use that frustration to keep the dog's focus and to slow the dog's entry and give the decoy time to gear up for the reward bite. It also makes the ground work much safer as you have complete positive control.

Finally we can discuss searching in muzzle. Muzzle work is a tricky subject. Without going into too much detail, teaching a dog to search in muzzle takes time and dedication. However, I think many trainers believe because the dog is in a muzzle and thus the decoy will have no equipment on, that this is a "no equipment" exercise. That isn't so true. If the dog has gone through extensive muzzle

conditioning work, where he no longer notices the apparatus at all, in obedience, being crated, holding long stays, searching in the muzzle, then it becomes like an everyday wear collar, part of life that is eventually ignored. The problem is that most handlers do not put in enough time to really make the dog muzzle neutral. If it goes on just sometimes, and the dog tries to get it off, or it interrupts his ability to concentrate on obedience or a simple search for a man, then it is still seen by the dog as equipment. If it is always put on before aggression work it will be a signal to the dog that when wearing it, aggression work happens. You might as well let

the decoy show the dog a sleeve. It still creates a context that will be gone when a real search happens. It is a signal, a cue to aggression, because when it goes on, encounters with decoys happen. Doing building searches in a muzzle requires a lot of work to be put in away from bite work training to make the dog completely neutral to the muzzle. Doing building and area searches in a muzzle also have a further consideration. No matter how well ventilated the muzzle, be careful not to over work the dog in the heat in muzzle. Extremely long searches in a muzzle can restrict the dog's ability to cool himself and make searching with his nose

less effective. Your dog also needs to be in top physical shape. Therefore I normally recommend shortening the search aspect of the exercise, to concentrate on the decoy encounter which is the real reason for the muzzle. If you have cold weather or an air conditioned building, you can lengthen the searching in a muzzle. But be careful and attentive. Dogs can overheat quickly.

If you are willing to do the extensive work needed to make the dog truly muzzle neutral, doing building and area searches in a muzzle allow the dog to find subjects with no equipment, and then the decoy can allow the dog to make contact by opening a door and having a muzzle fight. Here is another situation where I prefer the dog to be on a long line. Too much muzzle work will degrade the dog's bite targeting. The dog will learn that shots to the head and neck area will get the most "action" out of the decoy. I have too many videos saved on my phone from Facebook where dogs in muzzle migrate to the head if left to move around the decoy uncontrolled. The line allows the handler to control the encounter, keep the dog on his targets, and snatch the dog out periodically so the dog doesn't get bored with just punching the decoy and never getting the satisfaction that comes with the actual end of a natural prey sequence, a bite. The decoys used must be good at muzzle fights by using opposition reflex, pushing the dog away in quick sequences, and the handler using the line to allow the dog to reengage primary and secondary target areas.

Lastly do not take the muzzle off and then give the dog a bite on a piece of equipment. This only teaches the dog that the muzzle is something to be endured, and never be satisfied with, and that eventually you will take it off and allow the dog to have what he really wants. If the dog starts a scenario in a muzzle let him finish in it. Rotate through different methods of proofing the encounters described here and your chances of having successful deployments will be measurably improved.



ADDITIONAL EXERCISES THAT COMPLIMENT BUILDING SEARCH WORK

As mentioned earlier, teaching police dogs to see passivity as a signal to aggress in the context of apprehensions, building and area searches is critical. If your controlled aggression work starts with the decoy agitating and the dog reacting, you have it backwards. You must teach the dog to see passivity as a signal for aggression.

Additionally you must work on equipment fixation issues with your dog during controlled aggression encounters. In the March/April 2008 Issue of Police K9 Magazine I wrote an article describing step by step methods for "Focusing your Dog on Human Apprehension." Teaching your dog that the man is the ultimate prize in any controlled aggression encounter is imperative. That process was described in detail in that article, along with passive biting drills and teaching proper targeting habits so the dog doesn't have to even think about where to go on the human he encounters. The suggestions in this article on decoy encounters and proofing exercises should help you create a reliable and effective dog for building and area searches.

ADDITIONAL VARIABLES TO CONSIDER IN BUILDING SEARCH AND AREA SEARCH SCENARIOS

Just like detection work for drugs or explosives, height, depth, and permeation time of decoys hiding for you must be varied. This is why good training records that have a detailed narrative must be kept, so that you can make it a point to address these variables in training. In area searches, tree stands, or elevated hunting blinds can add height outdoors. In buildings, setting up a gauntlet of distractions the dog must push through, such as hanging tarps, cardboard boxes, going underneath desks, pushing through cracked doors and not settling for barking at a cracked door seam are all things we can set up in training. Have your decoys run a couple hundred yards then go hide, putting off sweat and heat as they permeate to simulate a subject running from you.

When proofing searches, remember that in the teaching phase of these exercises, long hallways with multiple opposing doors like schools make great training grounds, but also out buildings, barns, garages, storage buildings, and car lots, are all places where a suspect might end up hiding. Teaching your dog through experience to navigate these combination building/area searches so that they aren't foreign contexts is critical. You don't want your dog thinking only of institutional buildings for building searches, and woods for area searches. This is why it is so important to vary training areas.

Practice these searches at night and indoors in the dark, so you can work on light discipline, noise discipline, and give your dog the experience of working in low light conditions. Encountering a passive decoy in the open in a dark room is a lot different from doing the same in a well-lit area. The darkness will make your dog more naturally defensive and also make him rely more on his nose. You will see in your young dogs, if you have left any holes in the training. Fundamental defense work, civil aggression, and drive channeling work that was not done properly in the foundation will show itself. When you begin working in the dark in buildings and your dog may encounter someone standing there in a room, do it on line first, set him up for success so he isn't startled unnecessarily.

Finally, use proper methodology to systematically desensitize your dog to gunfire indoors in case a shooting erupts inside. No matter how neutral your dog is outdoors to gunfire, a dog's hearing is extremely sensitive, and gunfire in enclosed spaces must be desensitized patiently and slowly. Be able to execute an emergency recall to get your dog back to you at a cover position if all hell breaks loose. Don't think of your recall as a once a year necessity, only for certification, because in fact the ability to recall your dog under heavy agitation/distraction may save your dog's life. But that is the subject of another article for the future.

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