

The Stories behind the Statistics for 2007

By Deborah Palman

On 7/17/07 in the town of New Gloucester, an 86 year old man with Alzheimer's disease left his summer home at 22:30 and did not return. The local police K-9 teams and wardens searched the area prior to the arrival of MESARD SAR Dog teams at 01:30 the next morning. The MESARD teams were briefed by wardens who were parked at the intersection of the camp driveway and the main road. The areas around the many summer camps were covered by searchers on foot, but areas between the camps and roads had deep gullies with thick vegetation. There was also a very steep embankment leading down to the water.

The MESARD team of Spencer Fuller and SAR Dog Gabe started from the Point Last Seen using scent discrimination tracking with a scent article while another MESARD team worked in the area in air scent mode. The tracking team worked the area around the house and then out the drive to the main road. Gabe was tracking strong when he hit the area where all the vehicles had been staged through the first part of the search. The vehicles were now gone. After sorting through the staging area, Gabe took off down the ditch on the right side of the road, went another 150 feet down the road, and over a steep embankment to find the missing man, who had been within 150 yards of the search CP all the time. The man was cold but OK. As is typical with many Alzheimer's patients, he would not call out for help.

On 8/31/07, shortly after midnight, the Maine Warden Service was notified by Orono Police that an 85 year old woman was missing from Dirigo Pines, a retirement community in Orono. The woman was supposed to meet a friend at 17:00 for dinner and never showed up. From 18:00 on, the staff and Orono PD spent much of the time talking to her friends, residents of the Pines and searching the building. Her purse, wallet, cell phone etc. were left in the room, and her son said that she never would have left for that period of time without having made arrangements for her cat to be fed.

Warden Service was told by the Orono officers that the woman was last seen in the front lobby at 2:30 and 4:30 pm on 8/30. Since all the residents were sleeping, these reports could not be directly confirmed by Wardens. Orono officers had walked around the grounds. The weather on 8/30 was humid, with a strong thunderstorm moving through the area at 19:30 pm that night with heavy soaking rains and lightning. By 02:30 am, four different law enforcement tracking dog teams, Investigator Dan Scott, Warden Brian Tripp and Spec. Deborah Palman and Deputy Jim Roy from Penboscot S.O., worked for an hour attempting to pick up the victim's scent outside the building, but had no luck. Wardens on foot checked areas around the building and roadsides.

By 04:00, the first air scent dog teams from MESARD, other than Specialist Palman, arrived. Since no warden planners were available, Specialist Palman put her dog up and assigned the available MESARD teams to search areas around the complex. After the teams were all assigned and started their areas, Investigator Dan Scott called Specialist Palman to say that a 90 year old man said that he was driving and had seen the woman walking on Kelly Road towards the Interstate at that time. The man said that he knew the victim and recognized her. He accurately described her clothing. He said he pulled over and watched in his rear view mirror as she crossed the road and went down a

small grassy road into the woods. When the man heard she was missing, he and some friends even went back up to the area in his car and drove around looking for her. This report conflicted with the times of the other reports in the lobby, and the facility director said that the 90 year old man may not be that reliable. However, his description was accurate, and when Investigator Scott tried to trip him up by asking about a walker the woman had, the man said that she had no walker.

Having that information, Spec. Palman assigned one of the next two teams to arrive (Irene Morey and Eiko) to an area south of the Kelly Road that was the best guess as to where the sighting had been, based on a sketchy location from Investigator Scott. The north side of the road was already covered well by MESARD teams.

At about 07:30, Irene Morey and SAR dog Eiko located the victim just outside their assigned area south of Kelly Road. The woman could be heard chattering in the background during Irene's transmission.

The woman told Irene that she had heard Irene call earlier, but Irene could not hear her, or the woman didn't call back. As the team gridded farther away from the road, the woman could hear the bird dog beeper that Eiko wears. Hearing that, she yelled back. Irene did not hear her yell, but Eiko did, because he stopped, alerted and ran off to find the woman, taking Irene some distance. Irene followed him to find him licking the missing woman's face and the woman happily talking to Eiko and petting him. The woman told Irene that she had been there since almost noon on the previous day. She admitted that she became disoriented and for some reason thought she was back at her son's house in Kansas and was walking down his back lawn. Apparently, she realized her error at some point and sat down in a stump in a clearing. She sat there all evening and night, through the bug bites and the thunderstorm, heavy rain and darkness. She thought that she may have injured her arm and she was getting cold when she was found. She was carried out. Later it was determined that she had broken her arm.

She was found about a quarter mile from Kelly Road and about a half mile from Dirigo Pines. It is interesting to hear from an older victim what actually happened so they got lost. It is rare that they can tell us what happened when they get lost, or they don't want to admit they made a mistake.

On 9/6/07, Specialist Deborah Palman and K-9 Alex, off duty, and three other MESARD cadaver dog teams, Michele Fleury and Alli, Spencer Fuller and Gabe, and Chip Wadsworth and Chilie, went to Belledune, New Brunswick to assist the RCMP with a search for a man missing since 7/22/07. The family requested the SAR dogs and provided housing and meals while the teams were there. The missing man, Allister Chalmers, was a valued member of the community, a volunteer fire fighter and member of a large extended family. He was suspected to have committed suicide. The RCMP, volunteer search and rescue groups, an RCMP patrol K-9 and many of the community and family members had looked for Allister for the previous 7 weeks. Every day since he went missing, the male members of his family would take time to walk in the woods to try to find his body.

The MESARD teams arrived about an hour before dark on 9/6 and each took a short walk with a family member to get an idea of the terrain and to hear that member's version of the search. The terrain was old farmland that was covered with thick brush and heavy softwood cover. Some of the old fields were covered with dogwood bushes so

thick that searchers described crawling on their hands and knees through them to be able to see the ground. The area was also described as being “infested” with bears since very few hunters hunted bear in the area.

Interviews with family members and search planners provided several clues that were not investigated fully enough by the planners: 1) a bloody paper tissue left in an ATV path about 1 mile from the man’s residence (the actual place last seen), 2) the smell of decomposition in the same general area as the tissue, and 3) a gun shot heard by a neighbor in the same general direction. Allister’s health had been failing, and his skin had become very fragile. He bled when he brushed up against branches in the woods, so he carried paper tissues to stop the bleeding. However, he was also known to be very careful not to litter anything, so the dropping of the tissue seemed to be a deliberate act.

Allister was wearing heavy rubber boots and heavy clothing, even though it was about the hottest day that summer, when he left home for the last time. Search areas that were beyond some streams that would require crossing in boots were mapped out in case they were his goal. Because of the anti-gun stance of the Canadian government, the local people don’t talk about owning guns, even though they will talk about hunting. All guns are supposed to be registered in Canada, but apparently some are not for various reasons. No one ever came out and said that Allister had taken a gun from the home, although his wife made a point of saying that he had been into the “ammunition cabinet.”

The thick cover in the area and lack of GPS and computer mapping by the RCMP and volunteer search teams made it impossible to tell what had been searched well and what had not been searched, although all involved felt that the area around the tissue had been thoroughly searched. The RCMP officer had dismissed the smell of decomposition as just “swamp gas,” but family members said that one of the people who smelled the odor was a New Brunswick Natural Resources officer who said it was definitely the odor of a decomposing body. The RCMP response to the odor had been to call in a RCMP dog team, which is not trained to locate cadaver and was not trained to work effectively in thick cover.

Starting the actual MESARD search on 9/7/07, Specialist Palman assigned the remaining MESARD teams to areas that had not been searched while she took K-9 Alex and a family member as a guide to the area of the tissue and previous “odor.” She intended to search and clear that area so they could work in other, more distant, areas. While the team was working grids beyond where the bloody tissue had been located, K-9 Alex began to drift to one side and began to signal to Specialist Palman that she should follow him. She broke off her grid line and began to follow Alex. Alex went about 100 yards and first located a jacket on the ground, then moved on another 50 yards to find what remained of Allister’s body. The bears had stripped what remained of the body of its clothing. Allister had committed suicide with a shotgun. He had dressed heavily in an apparent effort to preserve his body from the animals and elements. Unfortunately, he was not found soon enough, so the clothing and body parts were scattered over about 100 yards of brushy woods.

The total “search” time by MESARD was 1.5 hours. Although the confirmation of Allister’s death was sad, the community and family can now move on with the recovery of his body. The effort put in by the family requesting MESARD, providing support, searching, and collecting information over the duration of the search was a big factor in this success.

On 10/5/07, MESARD handler John Corriveau and his SAR dog, Jodie, responded after 21:00 hours to a search for a lost hunter north of Shin Pond on a remote logging road. The hunter, who had health issues, had been hunting birds and his shotgun had been found by searchers on a rough road. Relatives felt that the hunter would not leave the road for any reason and that he must be in trouble. Searchers had worked the area around where the shotgun was found and they concentrated on walking the road and the roadsides. Many of the searchers were working without flashlights.

After being briefed by wardens at the scene, John was told to search as he saw fit, since the wardens were not familiar with how his dog might work. The road was located on an esker with steep and brushy sides. Since the human searchers seemed to have the easy areas covered, John and Jodie spend considerable time working the steep sides of the esker near the shotgun. Jodie kept smelling the searchers and working her way back to them.

After working this area, John and Jodie returned to the hub of the search and found that a cup the hunter had been carrying had been found on the road about 400 yards from the shotgun. The wardens said that they had searched the area around the cup and had left that area, giving John and Jodie permission to search it again. Just after the dog team started searching, a person without a light walked up to the team in the dark. Since 50% of the searchers did not have flashlights, John didn't think too much of this until Jodie ran up to the person and back to John, giving her indication that she had found the victim. John even tried to call Jodie off, but Jodie was persistent in her indication. Asking questions, John soon understood that this was the lost person even though the man said he was not lost, he was just following a partridge. His words did not make sense and his speech was slurred. He seemed confused and wanted to keep walking. John had to hold on to him to keep him from walking away. He had the victim sit down and called other members of the search on the radio. The victim's family members responded immediately. When found, the victim was missing a shoe and in the early stages of hypothermia.