

# 15-MINUTES FROM DEATH

TRAINED IN AVALANCHE RESCUE,  
DOGS PROVE THEY REALLY ARE  
MAN'S BEST FRIEND  
BY VLADKA SLIVOVA





Handler and dog must work well together if they are to find avalanche victims in time; Left: Vladka and Jacques train to become an operational SAR dog team

Jacques's collar bites into my palm as the massive black Labrador pulls me forward, alternately whining and enthusiastically barking with hot breath steaming from his muzzle. As always, he can't wait to run knowing that somewhere in the snow is somebody or something he is supposed to find and help me dig out.

Finally I shout the desired command: "Seeeaaaarch!"

I quickly undo the collar brace and Jacques darts forward like a rocket. The slight breeze up here at The Remarkables is helpful, slowly gliding and rolling over the rocks, bringing the all important molecules of scent to the dog's nose. He moves fast in all directions, partly tracking partly air-scenting and not missing anything interesting.

I watch carefully as Jacques suddenly raises his nose up, changing the direction towards the air current and rushing to a 'suspicious' heap of uneven snow. I try to read the dog's body language to ensure this is not a false alarm. But his excited bark and digging is convincing enough to tell me he has a find.

"Good boy, get it! Dig it out!" I shout. I quickly follow him with my shovel and a probe to help him with his effort. After a while of concentrated digging, part of a blue jacket is revealed some 70cm under the freezing snow debris. Jacques keeps digging, even trying to pull the victim out of the hole by grabbing the jacket in his mouth.

Finally, the 'victim' is able to pull himself out. "Are you all right?" I ask.

"It's an experience to see the big black head so close to your face from that narrow space," our volunteer says, passing me his transceiver. "But yeah, all sweet."

I reward Jacques by giving him his toy – a beloved leather glove. Good one! The active part of this exercise has finished and we head off for our debriefing.

Two-year-old Jacques and I are a trainee team preparing for our first annual LandSAR Search (Avalanche) Dogs Operational Assessment, held at the end of August at Cardrona Snow Park. This assessment guarantees that all the dogs available for avalanche emergency situations within New Zealand are qualified and competent for any kind of

alpine search situation. Our team is called Search and Rescue Dogs Wakatipu (SRDW) – an active team operating in the Queenstown region which has superseded the New Zealand Alpine Search Dogs (established in Wanaka in 1988). Now the team has been incorporated under the umbrella of the Wakatipu branch of LandSAR. Similar teams we cooperate with are LandSAR Dogs Wanaka, Mt Cook, Canterbury and Ruapehu.

SARDW is a small group of dog handlers aiming to provide a volunteer search and rescue dog capability for various search situations. The team operates under New Zealand minimum standards and trains and evaluate to this level. Generally, SRDW has access to Search Dog Teams qualified in Avalanche, Bush/Wilderness (Area Search and Tracking) and Urban Search. The SARDW team currently has a total of five dogs. This includes three near operational bush/wilderness search dogs, one novice and two operational avalanche search dogs, one novice tracking dog and eight volunteer members (without dogs) training in search and rescue theory and practice.

Having this resource available 24 hours a day may be the difference between life and death for a missing person. Once on a search site, dogs have proven to be an extremely useful and effective search tool. Their noses are hundreds of times more sensitive to scent than a human's and they can cover large search areas more quickly and effectively than people.

Arriving at a site, the goal is to locate a person who has been buried by an avalanche as quickly as possible. Immediate response, thorough searching and the safety of the team are all important elements in the response to an avalanche accident. The sense of urgency during a search cannot be understated; survival statistics tell us that 90 per cent of slide victims are alive for the first 15-minutes. After 35-minutes, the survival rate drops to 30 per cent and then quickly plummets. The SARDW team aims to train with the same urgency that would be encountered in an actual search, including the various distractions that may be on hand during an operation.



After finding a 'victim' Jacques is rewarded with a treat - a favourite leather glove; Right: Handler Matt Gunn reports a find to the assessor, asking for a shovel team to dig the 'victim' out

### TENTIPS FOR AVALANCHE SAFETY

Penny Goddard, author of *Avalanche Awareness in the New Zealand backcountry*, offers her top 10 tips for being safe in avalanche country

1. Know your stuff – take an avalanche safety course.
2. Check [www.avalanche.net.nz](http://www.avalanche.net.nz) for backcountry avalanche conditions.
3. Always carry the big three – transceiver, shovel and probe – and know how to use them.
4. If it's snowing or blowing, stay out of avalanche terrain. Most avalanches occur during and within about 24 hours of a storm.
5. Choose your companions wisely: Do their goals and expectations match yours? Discuss your decisions as a group.
6. Summer or winter, avalanches can kill. Mountaineers need to prepare for avalanche conditions, too.
7. Back off if you encounter clear warning signs of avalanche danger such as fresh avalanche debris, shooting cracks or 'whumphing' (a sudden collapsing sound).
8. Plan your trip before you leave home, using maps, guidebooks, weather forecasts, and advice from experienced locals. Be prepared to adjust your plans to suit changing conditions.
9. Minimise your exposure to avalanches by travelling one at a time across slopes and by choosing ridge tops, wind stripped slopes and low-angled terrain.
10. Don't allow a powder frenzy or summit fever to blow your judgement. Aim to still be out playing in the mountains when you are 80 years old. Patience and tailoring your actions to suit current conditions will help get you there.

Two other members of SARDW I regularly train with are Robert Gibson, a guru of search dogs in New Zealand who has also operated in Switzerland, Austria, and Scotland and brought the first fully operational dog into this country, and Brent McDonald who has been heavily involved in this environment for many years and is often deployed in Wakatipu.

They were both involved at the very beginning with the official use of avalanche dogs in New Zealand.

"Numbers of operational dogs have grown through the years, with now a very strong group of experienced handlers being able to train up-and-coming dogs and handlers to the extent that most major ski areas have dogs on site or are able to call on them," explains Gibson. "This has been very rewarding for me when one looks back to the early days and the dream I had of establishing a network of avalanche dogs here in New Zealand for alpine SAR."

McDonald adds: "The quality of the courses in those days was second to none. In later years, the course quality suffered because of a lack of experienced handlers and time constraints due to work commitments. The aim for this year is to get the country's dog teams together as a cohesive group and run the assessment course consistently so we can continue moving forward." McDonald also sees the future of cooperation with other parts of LandSAR and other associated organisations involved in Alpine SAR as very positive. "Until now, the dog group has been operating as a specialist resource and to a degree working by themselves. We are seeing a change whereby dog teams are working more closely at a local level."

In a perfect world of unrestricted resources, McDonald and Gibson would like to be able to offer operational dogs and their handlers' employment on a professional basis with a network of dogs covering all of our alpine regions. "I would never want to see morals sacrificed as a result of professionalism," stresses McDonald. "I am involved with what I do as a passion to help others and if I could make a living from this then that would be my dream job."

There is lots of time and money involved in training an avalanche dog. "The time really is immeasurable," says McDonald "What is important is that what time has been spent in training is rewarded with the opportunity to put those skills to best use. The greatest cost is sustained by the families of those who train dogs. These people give more than they are recognised for. There is always a dollar cost that will be met by the handler as a result of getting equipment as it is needed."

Support from local retailers who offer discounts to search dog teams is a big help, as is access to charitable funds from trusts. "These generally are fraught with long-winded processes that require a charitable organisation number," explains McDonald.

Gibson says that sponsorship can be hard to come by: "Presently there is little sponsorship available for dog handlers, in the early days we were sponsored by a major dog food company which provided money for equipment and training costs, but the cost to a dog handler today to bring their dog to operational status could reach \$10,000 or more."

While New Zealand may not have the number of avalanches on ski fields that Europe or North America gets, there is still a reasonable danger and it's important to be prepared for that possibility. Robert, who has spent time operating in Europe, says New Zealand can learn from their European counterparts in terms of training and deployment systems. "In Europe, the use of avalanche dogs goes back to the time of the St Bernard's rescuing travellers lost in the snow on many of their alpine passes. Standards have evolved to a very high degree along with the way in which the dogs are logistically located for quick deployment. Here in New Zealand we are able to take a lot of the lessons learnt in Europe and apply them here as we evolve. We are always attempting to achieve these high standards set by the Europeans."



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On assessment: a handler explains his plan and strategy for searching the avalanche debris

## ROAD TO CERTIFICATION

To be certified as operational, handlers need to spend a large amount of time training their dogs and they must attend courses provided by their local NZLSAR group on search methods, first aid and other areas depending on their search specialty.

The standards document set by NZLSAR is designed to deliver a set of standards so that SAR organisations around the country can feel confident to call in and deploy operational dog teams.

Before starting any assessment to become operational, the handler must meet the NZLSAR minimum requirements. Some of these are:

- \* Handlers must be members of their local SAR organization
- \* Hold a current basic first aid certificate
- \* Have attended a Track and Clue course (for bush wilderness search)
- \* Have sufficient skills, knowledge and equipment to be able to sustain themselves, their dogs and a lost person for a minimum of 48 hours in the chosen search field
- \* Both dog and handler to be comfortable in all aspects of travel including being lifted or lowered by strop from a helicopter
- \* Handlers are expected to be able to liaise, plan and report aspects of the search to an incident controller or operations manager

There are vast alpine and wilderness areas for people to get out and enjoy in the Southern Lakes region. But with such a large area comes greater potential for people to get into difficulty. Experiences such as the avalanche on September 12, 2000 near Treble Cone, reinforce the notion that there is a need to maintain search dog capabilities at ski fields and in LandSAR.

With the increasing number of recreational backcountry skiers and mountaineers venturing into the mountains, Gibson and McDonald are keen to remind people to stay within their limits

“Don’t get your ambitions and abilities mixed up,” they say. “As good as it is to learn good rescue skills, it is more important to learn safe travel in the first instance. Have knowledge of the chosen environment by obtaining information regarding present conditions and be fully equipped and aware of its dangers.”

In late August, Jacques and I return from the Cardrona Snow Farm after three days of assessment that clearly showed where our abilities, and weaknesses, lie. We attained the novice level and are ready to work hard to obtain full operational status at the same assessment next year.

The event itself was a well organised and wonderful opportunity for all participants to exchange their knowledge, training methods, experience and other valuable information. It has also brought some great structural ideas and has formed a compact group working closely together to gain the best possible results in avalanche search and rescue.

To become a competent, confident and professional avalanche dog team puts high demands on the dog’s and handler’s time, performance, knowledge and experience. It is a long and tough journey to get there, but to be available to respond to emergencies at any time of day is a most satisfying mission. 🗡️