THE SEARCH

THE LIFE OF A MOUNTAIN RESCUE SEARCH DOG TEAM

PAUL BESLEY

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Paul Besley

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For Scout,
for finding me.

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scue

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,

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

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

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

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.