

## Mounted SAR: The Next Generation

by Jorene Downs

Photo: Clifford Schulz

MSAR Rider: Terry Nowacki

The concept of Mounted Search and Rescue (MSAR) has existed informally since the first time someone rode an equine to search for a missing person. In the American Old West the locals would organize cowboys and others to perform a search while riding. In the early 1940s organizations like a Mounted Sheriff's Posse started forming with members participating in anything from a local parade to a search. In the 1990s many MSAR teams had written requirements focused primarily on the safety issues related to the equine. The next generation of Mounted SAR is emerging in the USA with higher expectations and capabilities, coupled with awareness for increased versatility as a resource.



Mounted SAR as an effective disaster resource

What is emerging nationwide in the Mounted SAR community includes: national standards to create minimum consistency for MSAR; management and teams seeking more effective use of mounted resources; interest in putting the "R" back into Mounted SAR; joint training with other SAR resources is being pursued as advantageous for all; and cross-training for MSAR disaster response is encouraged to increase versatility as a SAR resource and increase the number of trained resources available to respond to a disaster in that region. A strong influence for change is from the federal level where there is an increasing expectation for resources to have appropriate and consistent minimum training, but some of this change is being driven from within the Mounted SAR community by a desire to improve.

### MSAR Standards

Minimum standards for the Mounted SAR resource are currently under development through ASTM ([www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org)) with substantial interest from the MSAR community. The standards in progress are addressing the rider's minimum SAR knowledge, skills and abilities while mounted or dismounted, and the safety issues related to the equine in the SAR environment. The successful development of these standards will be the first step in establishing minimum consistency across the country for MSAR. While only members of ASTM can vote, anyone can join discussion regarding the MSAR standards under development on <http://lists.ibiblio.org/mailman/listinfo/msar-astm>.

Once these standards are established, NASAR - and perhaps others - will develop programs based on the standards, and realistic Mutual Aid Typing can be developed at the national level for the MSAR resource. Other standards for MSAR are under consideration for development.

### Changing Expectations

Mounted SAR teams across the country currently range from the well prepared to the poorly trained, but the next generation of MSAR will establish minimum expectations as authorities and teams choose to meet national standards. The MSAR community is also searching for ways to improve. This includes: seeking better ways to partner with SAR Dogs, ATV, ground SAR, technical rescue, etc., by participating in joint training; and developing skills that were common in the Old West and applying them to contemporary MSAR. This may include mounted tracking, mounted evacuation or transport, using the mount to pull or drag, packing skills, etc. Management is also learning more about MSAR and their capabilities by communicating more directly with that resource instead of making assumptions based on historic use.

Also, in a landmark event in 2004, field detection experiments sponsored by the U.S. National SAR Committee (NSARC) were conducted in several locations across the United States. In California, Mounted SAR resources were invited to participate. The researchers made several interesting observations regarding the benefits of MSAR resources. For example, although small clues may be difficult to see from the saddle and riding in rough terrain may distract the rider from the search, the higher and longer view from the saddle combined with a faster search speed offer benefits that most human searchers cannot match. At the very least, the experiments provided the first opportunity to measure and record how MSAR resources compare to humans in terms of clue detection. Such information has the potential to benefit every Incident Commander and planner involved in a search incident, and similar local research will provide input regarding local capabilities and training needs. For a copy of the full detection experiment report, visit NSARC's "Items of Interest" page ([www.uscg.mil/hq/g-o/g-opr/nsarc/interest\\_items.htm](http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-o/g-opr/nsarc/interest_items.htm)) and click on "Sweep Width Estimation for Ground Search and Rescue."

### Mounted Disaster Response

The SAR community is expressing interest in a new specialty, Disaster SAR. (See [www.tk-cert.org/natlsar](http://www.tk-cert.org/natlsar)) Many in SAR already have cross-training and perform disaster response. Some MSAR riders have skills very suitable for disaster response or

are trained in CERT (Community Emergency Response Team), which provides them with additional skills useful in both SAR and disasters. Many of the MSAR capabilities that make the mounted personnel an effective resource for SAR are also very applicable in disaster response. Riders can often access where vehicles or ground personnel would have difficulty. MSAR can perform reconnaissance, drag obstacles to clear a path, work a perimeter, perform traffic or crowd control, provide mounted evacuation or transport, etc. Tow vehicles and horse trailers can be useful for logistics. Also, some in MSAR have chosen to train and equip to provide equine evacuation or rescue operations.

### **Scent-Detecting Mounted SAR**

An additional capability that some riders are already pursuing may well be the most exciting “next generation” option as a specialty for Mounted SAR: equine scent detection. The horse (or mule) as a prey animal routinely performs air scenting, complete with scent discrimination ability, and riders should be able to “read” basic input from the mount. But the equine can also be trained to intentionally use that nose and provide an alert, creating a “SAR Dog” you can ride. Equine olfactory capabilities are similar to a SAR Dog, but with a nose that can be raised notably higher off the ground to detect the airborne scent. This has obvious advantages.

Veteran MSAR rider and experienced horse trainer Terry Nowacki has successfully demonstrated riding an air scenting horse during SAR, using the mount for cadaver detection, and training to alert for marijuana and meth labs which could be perceived as a safety issue for SAR in many search areas. (See [www.airscentinghorse.com](http://www.airscentinghorse.com))

Scent-related equine training has only emerged in recent years and has potential to be expanded for other types of trained equine scent detection. In some areas there are already management discussions regarding when to send out the SAR Dog, and when it is more advantageous to send the scent-detecting horse. This contemporary option has potential to greatly impact the evolution of Mounted SAR as an even more versatile, more effective resource in coming years.

*Jorene Downs is the Chair the NASAR Mounted SAR SIG, and is a Program Coordinator for the Tulare-Kings CERT program spanning two counties in California. She lives in Tulare County, where she is a Paint horse breeder and active in SAR, and is active at the national level for SAR / MSAR and CERT.*