

Rocky Mountain Rescue Dogs, Inc. **Specialized Operational Avalanche Test**

Purpose

The specialized operational avalanche test demonstrates the ability of a handler and their canine partner to locate hidden subjects buried in an avalanche situation. This test shall demonstrate the ability of the team to navigate conditions to the search area, locate multiple buried subjects, to perform a trained final response and for the handler to correctly read the behavior of their canine partner.

Prerequisites

1. Operational handler in good standing
2. Request to test avalanche form approved by the governing board
3. Attendance at a minimum of four (4) searches
4. Training logs for avalanche searches consistent with the level of training necessary to pass the test.
5. Completed necessary checklist
6. Haz-Mat awareness class (NFPA 472/CFR 29/910.120 Part Q or equivalent)
7. Bloodborne pathogens class (29CFR1910 or equivalent)
8. Crime scene preservation class (2 hour minimum course taught by law enforcement, crime scene technicians or equivalent).
9. Proof of successful completion of one of the following Avalanche Awareness course (40 hour course): American Avalanche Association Level I or II; National Ski Patrol Avalanche Level I or II; American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) Level I or II, or equivalent.
10. Take avalanche awareness refresher course every 3 years after passing above. Refresher course shall include beacon search drills, probe line search method, back country travel, route selection, hasty snow pit evaluation, mountain weather and the effects on avalanche conditions.
11. Pass RMRD Avalanche Transceiver (Beacon) test annually.
12. Show basic proficiency in some type of winter travel (snowshoes or skis).

Test Criteria

1. The test consists of a one (1) acre area, approximately 70 yards x 70 yards. The corners shall be marked by flagging. There shall be 2 subjects buried 3 to 5 feet under the snow.
2. Where possible, the team must complete a .25 mile navigation to the search site on skis, snowshoes, or by foot.
3. The team has twenty (20) minutes to complete the test and find all the subjects.

4. The team shall be evaluated on handler and dog endurance, strategy and navigational skills. The evaluator shall not know the location of the subjects (double blind).
5. The handler shall describe their dog's alerts, indications and trained final response prior to the start of the test. The canine must locate and alert/indicate on the subjects independent of direction from the handler.
6. Upon interpreting the dog's final response, the handler shall advise the evaluator and mark the location with a flag. Any identified (flagged and/or GPS marked) final response that is incorrect shall constitute a fail. The test can be repeated once in a different location if conditions and time permit. If the team fails a second time, the test must be repeated at a later date after proof of the completion of more training to remedy the problem.

General Guidelines

1. The handler shall be responsible for formulating and articulating their search strategy and providing the evaluator with a description of their dog's final response. Changes in search strategy are permissible, however the handler must communicate their reasoning to the evaluator. Once the dog locates the subject, the dog shall demonstrate its final response.
2. The evaluator shall conduct a briefing in which the handler shall be given pertinent information about the search scenario and shall answer questions that the handler may have.
3. The entire area shall be uniformly disturbed and provide no visual cues to the testing team. Distractions such as rescue equipment, shovels, probes, etc., may be left in the search area but must be visible – no completely buried items. No more than 3 teams shall test with subjects in the same holes. Once subjects have been removed from the tubes/caves, those holes shall remain open for the following tests.
4. All handlers being evaluated are required to wear snowshoes or skis while in the test area. They must also wear avalanche beacons but may not use them to look for their subjects. They may not probe for the subjects.
5. At the conclusion of the test, the evaluator shall be responsible to complete the appropriate evaluation form and debrief the handler on their performance.
6. All tests shall be conducted in accordance with the Avalanche Safety Guidelines in this document.

7. The subjects must not be someone that the dog has repeatedly trained on in any live-find discipline (trailing, area or avalanche); nor someone that regularly associates with the dog (i.e. family etc.); nor someone who has recently (within 90 days) been used as a training subject for the dog. The subjects should preferably be someone that the dog has never trained on before.

Evaluation Criteria

1. Team is adequately attired and has adequate supplies, equipment (avalanche probe, beacon, snow shoes or skis, shovel) and water for the team.
2. The handler plans and executes a good search strategy based on a correct analysis of the situation, the conditions and the detection capabilities of the canine.
3. The handler and canine demonstrate good working stamina for the complete duration of the test.
4. The handler recognizes and correctly interprets the behavior of the canine.
5. The canine demonstrates the ability to detect human scent and the persistence to work the scent from the point of detection to the scent source (the subject).
6. The canine demonstrates good focus on the task at hand. The canine avoids wildlife interaction, responds to the handler's corrections/commands and readily returns to work after distractions.
7. The canine demonstrates an easily identifiable, trained indication of a find (e.g., bark alert or recall/refind).

Recertification

Recertification is required every two (2) years.

Avalanche Safety Guidelines

Handler, dogs and participants in avalanche rescue shall encounter inherent risks working on steep and difficult slopes in inclement weather. The training and testing may be conducted in part, on or near active avalanche paths, which involve the risk of being caught in avalanches. Fieldwork may be conducted outside of avalanche control areas, and may involve locations from which evacuation of injured participants would be long and difficult. RMRD members and candidates must accept the risk attendant with this fieldwork in

avalanche rescue. All aspects of snow cave construction, subject burial duration and shoveler responsibility shall be performed as designated below.

1. RMRD members and candidates must carry a shovel, radio, probe and working avalanche transceiver (beacon) when participating in any avalanche work, including practice or actual rescue missions.
2. Everyone participating in avalanche work shall pass the Avalanche Transceiver (Beacon) Test prior to beginning training and/or testing.
2. Two (2) shovelers with shovels shall be located at each burial site.
3. At the end of any testing/training exercise, the snow caves or avalanche tube holes must be collapsed and the area filled in and returned to a skiable or safe condition.
4. If at any time the buried volunteer feels uncomfortable or claustrophobic, the volunteer shall request extraction and shall be dug out immediately – without exception.
5. Any non-RMRD member is required to sign a release of liability consent form before participating in any avalanche related training/testing that is conducted by RMRD.
6. Testing site shall be in a low avalanche hazard area. Slopes of more than thirty (30) degrees shall not be used.
7. The volunteer to be buried shall not assist in digging the holes for the avalanche tubes. They shall be dressed warmly and shall lie on insulating material.
8. The volunteer shall have a tested two-way radio and an avalanche beacon set on transmit and shall be instructed in their use prior to entering the tube/cave. The volunteer should keep the radio and their hands close to their face.
9. The shoveler should maintain frequent radio contact with the volunteer until notified of the approach of the dog team. If for any reason the volunteer desires extrication before the test is completed, they shall request it by radio and they shall be dug out immediately.
10. The shovelers shall remain close to the avalanche tube/snow cave. They should be able to reach the tube/cave within ten (10) seconds. If the shoveler fails to get a response from the subject on the radio, they shall immediately try again. If no response is received after 3 calls on the radio, the shovelers shall immediately dig the volunteer out, unless verbal (radio or otherwise) contact is made prior to complete extraction.

11. No volunteer shall be buried for longer than 45 minutes.

Avalanche Transceiver (Beacon) Test

1. The Avalanche transceiver (beacon) test shall be conducted in a designated area, approximately 100 feet by 100 feet, uniformly disturbed and clearly designated by visible flagging.
2. An operational, activated beacon set on transmit or send shall be placed three (3) to four (4) feet below the surface of the snow. A two (2) foot by two (2) foot plywood board shall be placed over the beacon and the hole shall be backfilled.
3. The person testing has five (5) minutes to search for the transmitting beacon and strike the board with their probe pole.

Snow Cave Construction

If using a snow cave rather than an avalanche tube, these guidelines shall apply.

1. The cave should be constructed in snow that has been compacted by boot, ski or machine unless naturally compacted prior to digging the cave. The cave should be constructed with a curved (arched) roof for strength and should have a minimum of two and a half (2 ½) feet of snow on top of the roof.
2. An extra evaluator not conducting the test shall assess all caves for safety before anyone is allowed to enter. The cave must bear the weight of a person on skis or snowshoes walking across and standing on the roof. If the roof fails the safety test, the cave should be dug out as an open trench and covered with half-inch plywood or similar material and covered with no more than one and a half (1 ½) foot of snow. The safety test should be repeated. If the roof of the trench fails again, that location must be aborted and a new hole dug in a different area.
3. The cave may be constructed as a full body cave where the volunteer is free to move about or as a half cave where the cover snow is in contact with the volunteer's legs. In no event shall cover snow be in contact with the buried person at any point above the waist. Cave location must be marked with a small pine bow tree branch or other visual means (no shovels).