

Topper's Story

By Pat Grant, DVM

The following are copies of a series of e-mails sent out through the "Belg-L" list after Topper and I returned from searching the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Barbara Mair was simply one of many who were recipients. Please enjoy them, but do not take them. They are copyrighted by me, Pat Grant, DVM. Also visit [Monterey Bay Dogs](#).

I have been asked to tell about the mission to Oklahoma City (OKC) and the work at the Murrah Building. So, there will be a short series for those of you who have asked.

I am a veterinarian and am fortunate that Topper goes to work with me every day. My van is always loaded and ready for us to immediately respond to a search. I am too far away from the task forces to be able to go home and pack. To make all this possible, Topper sleeps in my office 6-10 hours a day.

Wednesday, April 19 I saw the morning news. Since it was "just one building" I didn't think it likely that we'd be asked to go. On the way to work, I heard on the radio that there was a suspected 2nd bomb. When I got to work I said cleverly to my staff, "Boy, I'm glad I work a search dog and not an explosives dog. Who would want to be in a place like that?" Two hours later the call came. My technician stuck her head in the exam room and said "they" were on the phone, and "yes, it is an emergency". Fortunately, I had no anesthetized or critical patients. I made phone calls to other practices, as did my staff, to get the pets we were expecting that day set up to be seen by colleagues and in 45 minutes I was on my way to Travis AFB. The 2 ½ hour trip took 1 ½ hours.

I met with the chief of California OES (Office of Emergency Services) and the other dog handlers and we waited for the task force to arrive. Topper and I were being deployed with Sacramento, CA-TF 7 (California Task Force 7, one of twenty six federal disaster response task forces). We had never met the TF 7 folks because we train with a nearer task force in Menlo Park, CA TF 3.

During the 2-hour wait, the media people covering the mobilization of California resources to assist Oklahoma were brought to our assembly area. We still had our vehicles with us, so the dogs were relaxing in the comfort of their own cars. With the van wide open

Topper was happy to be charming and smile for the cameras. Once the task force arrived, we joined them on buses to the C-141. We then sat on the airstrip for an hour while they loaded the 5 pallets of equipment we travel with. (The dogs are only a small part of the 61-member task force; Most of it is devoted to heavy rescue).

The dogs had a small bit of weeds to pee on, but still just had to cool their heels (sort of like being benched).

The ramp into the C-141 is a tall, metal ladder, which these dogs handled fine. This is in fact a small part of their basic training.

The dogs ride with us when on missions. The C-141 is horribly, horribly noisy. The people all wear ear plugs. The dogs just slept. Topper only looked up when he was sliding across the metal floor during takeoff. He recognizes travel time as sleep time. I wish I were so adaptable. On arrival at Tinker AFB in OK, we were bused to downtown OKC. We began to appreciate what had happened as we approached the scene, which was illuminated as bright as daytime here at midnight. The debris and evidence of those first rescues, just 18 hours before, was all about us.

The dogs were put on downs in the noisy, windy parking garage that was to hold our equipment cache, while we helped to unload the trucks of our pallets. Finally, at 3am we took our stuff to Southwestern Bell's Corporate Headquarters, 2 blocks away, which was to be our BOO (Base of operations). (Some abbreviations are more fun than others.) We each had a crate for use at the BOO and made our little camping corners in empty offices. Topper and I shared an office with Shirley and Spice (Dobe) and Bob and Quasar (Golden Retriever). I fed Topper, got 2 hours sleep, and they called us at 5 am to report for briefing in 10 minutes. Since the dogs had to be "aired", breakfast was literally on the run. My heart was pounding. This was it.

Topper was up, because I was up. As we turned to go back in, Harry Smith and his camera crew from the CBS morning show yelled at us. He politely asked if we had time to give an interview. Topper loved their fuzzy covered microphone, but I wasn't about to be late to my first briefing. So, we hurried back into our BOO and the first instructions for the mission

After the morning briefing, we walked in a very tidy column by twos to our equipment cache. Our first chance to do the very challenging searches and rescues of multi-storied, damaged buildings was finally here. We received helmets, lights, kneepads, building markers, radios...and then walked the last block to the federal building. Check in through this inner control point (we were "living" inside the control area) went slowly as our identification was verified by weapon wielding soldiers.

As we finally walked past the crush of officers of every type, there it was. Nine fractured stories, illuminated brighter than daylight (it was barely dawn), by stadium size lights.

Nine stories of crumbling rubble, swaying strips and bits of debris, and dangling chunks of concrete and rebar. The air was still suffused with the smell of concrete dust.

Our glimpse was only long enough to register a little shock (so much for my thought that it is "just" one building) and we were marched into the attached parking garage. The parking garage had a pass way into the first floor of the building. That had initially nearly filled with debris. It was the location of the first clearing and stabilization of the building to allow rescue of the last live victim, the girl whose foot was amputated to save her. This area continued to be cleared, and one of our rescue squads supported this work, looking for victims, shoring, and recovery.

Our search squad had an hour before our first assignment so we did a "reality check" with the dogs, Topper, Spice (a Dobe), and Quasar (a Golden). We had one of our other team members conceal himself in the only enclosed area we could find in the garage. Each dog located the person in the ventilation tube and barked with enthusiasm. We no sooner finished than we were taken to the front of the building, for our assignment, the rubble pile in the center.

When Topper finds the scent of a person in rubble, his head goes up, he independently works the scent, whines, wags his tail when he knows he nearly has it, and then barks when he has pinpointed the person's location. He and the other dogs are proofed on distracting scents during training, such as clothing, food, animals and other "stuff". He is only rewarded for live people.

As we came around the front, Topper, refused to walk at heel. He lunged in anticipation at the rubble when we got to it. Topper was allowed the search area first. He quickly worked up as high as he could get, head up, sniffing, and then turned to me. I sent him to the far side, he went, again sniffing here and there, but rather than bark, he turned again and just looked at me. I sent him to the near side. He stopped, sniffed one spot, went on over, carefully and patiently sniffed another, and stared at me. No whine. No wag. Just a focused stare. I resent him 3 times. Same response. No response.

No problem, we sent the other dogs, same response. A little interest but no exploration or penetration.

We reported our results and went to our next assignment. We began to check voids. At the first void, the dogs went in and out without even showing interest. No interest. No victims. The second void was hard to get into for the dogs, lots of rebar. When Topper finally got through, his head went up. He was interested. I encouraged him with a soft, "Search" and he was gone.

After an absolutely endless period in which I suspect the life detector could have easily heard MY heart over the machinery, Topper appeared just enough to make eye contact with me. He had no interest in coming out, he just looked at me. I repeated "search" and he went back in. No sound. No whine. No bark. We repeated this one more time, and then when he appeared the third time, he came straight out and was ready to go to his next search area.

After about an hour and a half of this, with all the dogs, we began to learn the terrible truth of this explosion. The same thing was happening inside the building with our other two search dog teams. Yes, there was a lot of scent, yes there were a lot of people, but they weren't alive. Not one of them.

We were identifying body locations. While this is important, this was not what we were there for.

Phoenix and Sacramento were the first task forces in. We were supposed to find live people and rescue them. The task forces that came later arrived knowing that live finds were not expected. We didn't know that yet. We were learning it hour by hour and it was impossible, in the short run, to accept.

Our first shift lasted 20 hours. There were lots of interruptions. Lots of reasons for interruptions in the work.

The most common was that the building was trying to finish falling down, and the task forces kept propping it back up so that the work could continue.

During one of the breaks we were to be sent 3 blocks away to be federally badged. We decided it would be a good chance to get the dogs away from the excitement of the search area and walked them back to the BOO. As we exited the inner control area, impatient media leaped their barriers and approached the nearest team member. "How is it going in there and what are you bringing out?" was the hurried question from the reporter who had zeroed in on Topper and me. A bit flustered I was at a loss for how to delicately describe the contents of the bag that I had just cleaned up after Topper with, so I just waited for the police to rein in the media crowd and continued along the glass littered street.

Both the Murrah Building and our BOO were within the taped off area. Going for badging was our first time outside the control area and the damage was surprising and extensive. Every window was broken, and lots of unreinforced masonry lay on the sidewalks. Special photo badges were being made for everyone that was to be allowed within the "crime scene/disaster site.

While waiting for everyone to complete badging the first of the OKC magic occurred. A stake bed truck pulled up and the people within called to the crowd of task force people; sheriffs, volunteers and you name it to grab a Dairy Queen ice cream sundae.

They were giving them away to the workers for free. This seemed nice and was veritably fun. A refreshing break both food wise and an emotional break.

After badging, we walked back to the BOO. Being from CA, we've been taught a thing or two about building damage, and many of us commented on all the unreinforced masonry (brick) buildings we were seeing, and all the cracks in their walls.

Sure enough, the next day, we heard that one of these buildings, 2 blocks from the Murrah, collapsed. The people within escaped. The explosion at the Murrah Building was a big explosion. More than one building was affected. More than 300 people were affected, and we were in the heart of it all.

So, we were properly badged, physically and mentally refreshed and they told us to get our stuff. They had finished the latest shoring, and we had assignments.

The dogs were rested, they had been napping at the BOO. When I got dressed Topper was up. This time, not just silly, but he knew where we were going. We went downstairs, and he refused to heel again and was headed for the site.

We had a short assignment and then the waiting again. The dogs were impatient (so were we) so we sat out on the big crane's tread and watched them clear away more debris, and bodies.

Parts of the site were strangely beautiful in the morning light. All the shattered glass had areas of the site glittering like new snow. It was weird to have these thoughts while waiting for assignments.

After one of the big slabs had been cleared off, Topper was sent to check the voids that had been exposed. At one void, he eagerly dug and tore at the material that was in his way. He paused, dug for a moment more, and then walked away. No whine, no wag, no bark. He declined to pursue it any further when directed back to it. We sent one of the cross-trained cadaver dogs. She was on a live find command. Though she checked it out, and walked on without barking, she did reach down for her bringsel, which she would have taken had she been wearing it to indicate the location of a body. Our enthusiasm that had been rekindled began to fade again. The dog's desire for more search opportunities however stayed high.

Access to one of the newly stabilized areas was finally approved, and one dog after another was worked through. This time, Topper was the last dog sent. We couldn't see the other teams working, but he knew they were up there. After he had waited too long in his opinion, he began to bark at the building. I shared his frustration. When he was finally called for, this time he was the confirmation dog.

It was a very difficult area to get into. Unlike other areas with lots of beams and rubble piles to walk across, in this area the rubble was mostly at least a story below us.

Our access was across with a honeycomb of pipes, ceiling, wall and window frames. Topper was solid in his agility across it all. I was less than graceful. Searchers and rescuers were scattered all about the area.

He worked his way between them all casting for scent in the closed in space. Finally, he began to dig through some ceiling tiles and other debris. He paused, and was fooling with stuff in the debris, which was apparently an abandoned lunch sack. For a moment I assumed he was just fooling about with the food debris. A colleague stopped me from interfering as he shoved it out of his way, and continued to work the debris. I was humbled by his focus. As you've already figured out, we of course didn't get the live find bark. And once again, after intense focus and pursuit of the human scent, he walked away. Our squad identified another "area of interest" which we were forced to turn over to the task force from NY to be further explored when our shift came to an end.

Except that our shift didn't end. At midnight, when we were supposed to end our 18-hour immersion, we were directed to "clear" one of the buildings across from the Murrah. Topper was thrilled.

He loves building searches, and even though the ceilings were down, the floors were cracked, the back wall was gone, the furniture was chaotically mixed, the glass block panels had shattered, and blood was splattered all over, he "dominated" his two floors. He "knew" someone was hiding there and he was determined to find them. He had to be pacified with his toy, when I told him we were going back to the BOO.

Reluctantly, Topper ate his dinner at 2 am, and we settled for a rest period.

Despite 48 hours of only naps, when the sun came up on Friday morning through our preciously intact windows on the North face of the Southwestern Bell State headquarters, we were awake. No point in fighting it, so we got up, aired the dogs, and the magic set in once again.

When I went up to let Topper relieve himself, there was a guard who knew Topper's name, asked how we were doing, and checked with us gently, as people would call to us for a word, to see if I wanted help. While the sidewalks were full of what appeared to be the curious, they were also the concerned, the caring and the helpful. While, yes, they wished to have a word about what was going on at the federal building, they were absolutely gentle and caring in their requests. Topper showed absolutely no suspicion. He behaved like he would at a dog show. He was eager to meet and visit. And the people were drawn to him. They all wanted to wish him well, and extend to us both a constant stream of thanks for coming to their community to help them out of this tragedy.

Returning downstairs, the entire entry way was full of supplies, food, hot/cold, fresh/packaged, and medicines! (even prescription), water, milk, fruit, sunscreen, you get the idea.

These supplies were backed up by wide-eyed, attentive volunteers. You have never been cared for as well as we were.

The rest of the community was largely intact. But emotionally, everyone wanted to help solve this problem.

So, they were there, being as solicitous as a concierge at the fanciest hotel.

I asked for dry cereal, they asked me what I wanted, I replied bran flakes. They handed me Raisin Bran. The next morning, a large box of Bran Flakes was there. I at first felt guilty, but they were so obviously made happy by their ability to support the workers that we began to see that it was part of their process of recovering from the assault.

It is easy to see the THINGS that were provided, but how do I describe what the people were conveying with their looks, expressions, and never ending hugs, clasps, touches and thanks. Thanks, thank you so much, we are so appreciative, we are so grateful, we are thankful and on and on. The gentle folk shared unending expressions of support for our work at this terrorist act. Over and over again, "thank you for coming to our community and helping us". As we walked back into the building, the entrance had boxes of dog biscuits waiting for the team dogs.

As we emerged from the glass elevator, there were boxes of personal items, toothbrushes, toothpaste, towels, soap. Coffee, sodas, fruit, snacks, once again, you get the idea.

We were awash in support. A funny thing happened, since I was too tired to think, I automatically went along with the love and support. The frustration and feelings of failure went onto the back burner. We were here to help these people, and we had a role to fill to do that in the community, not just work to do at the building.

For some of our own team members, Topper and the other search dogs were a small piece of home and sanity.

During transition periods the dogs could be found patiently sharing a long hug or quiet confidence with a rescue worker. They did it with that unconditional acceptance that only dogs can do.

And the task force members were watching and caring for each other. Towards the end of our deployment, two different task force members came up to me and asked me how I was doing. They encouraged me a bit to take advantage of the counselors that had begun arriving at the recovery operation or to remember this and take advantage of any counseling I had access to. Then they shared what they were thinking. They were my age, and this mission brought back memories of only one thing. It reminded them of their tours in Viet Nam. Viet Nam! What was I in the middle of? At the time I was so overwhelmed by sleep deprivation that I couldn't sort out how I felt, but their expressions of concern stuck with me.

The task force members seemed to be restoring the community and the community was helping us to help them. So, I tried to get some rest, let the community love act as a salve over my raw emotions, share what I could, and prepare for our first routine shift that would begin at midnight on Friday night/ Saturday morning.

After our 20-hour shift and a real break, we had our first official 12-hour shift. According to the FOG (field operations guide - the feds do know how to come up with abbreviations), the task forces are supposed to work 12 hours on and 12 hours off. Reality and the FOG don't necessarily match for the first team in.

So, there we were, midnight, Saturday morning, ready to give it one more try to find a survivor. The only great performance however was turned in by the weather. A full scale, Oklahoma fireworks display. An awe inspiring sky buster. With a 10 story crane standing in front of the site, we were perhaps not as appreciative of the finer points of the 6 hour display as we might have been under other circumstances.

Some work continued inside the building, but those of us assigned to the front just endured the 40+mph gusts and major wind-chill. The building swayed in interesting ways. But, we in fact had it good. About 1 hour before dawn, I left Topper napping with the rest of the team and made my way to the porta potties. On my way back, I hoped to locate a hot cup of anything. There, directly in front of the site, where the burned out cars were, were a couple of tables, and a young, Salvation Army worker. She had been assigned to maintain this station, just freshly stocked with McDonald's sausage biscuits and coffee. She was not dressed for a major storm; in fact she could barely hold anything with her frozen hands. I begged her to join us in the shelter only across the street. She would have no part of that. She needed to maintain that station, and even if her hands were no longer working, she was going to do it. I wished we could get on with our job too.

Finally, with the dawn, we were sent to clear the newly exposed layers. These were small areas, and Topper made it clear that he was ready to do more.

Before this shift our task force leaders had given us permission to speak with the media. More to the point, they told us what to say. The standard instruction is to point anyone with a pencil or a microphone to the public information officer. But, the media was going nuts, and they told us to go for it if we were up to it. Well, I was ready to tell the world about how wonderful the people of OK are and that the world was going to be okay. Topper liked the microphones and to rub his nose on the ends of camera lenses.

During one of our interviews, another task force member came along and loaned me his TF 7 cap. I was wearing a TF 3 cap and this was going back to Sacramento. It was nice of him.

The only thing that I didn't like about one of the interviews was that they wanted to film Topper and I walking from the site.

His foot pads were thin by now, and he was walking a little tender footed. I had a sudden sense of panic that someone would see him bouncing along a bit unevenly and scream dog abuse. Frankly, the reason his feet were tender was because he wouldn't walk quietly to and from working, and when we played with his toy after he completed each of his assignments, he gave his exercise breaks his absolute all.

He was very sensible at work. But, I feared that I would stimulate "bad press" and cut off the interview.

The break period after this work session was a real refresher. I had 2 hours of "guard duty", watching over our equipment. But, when I got back to the BOO, dinner from Red Lobster restaurants was waiting with more cheese biscuits than even I could eat. Yes, it was possible to ignore what we were doing and just revel in how wonderful people can be.

Life is a lot more complicated than we think it's gonna be.

Our last work period turned out to not be a work period.

We arrived at the site at midnight once again, but things had changed. Site support services had been moved into the parking garage at the back of the building. The parking garage was undamaged, and its entrance into the Murrah Building was one of the major work areas. We were not only surprised to see the tables full of water, but there was a fellow set up in a corner with blankets, lights and what was this, veterinary supplies? I was delighted to see a colleague, (I am a veterinarian on my regular days) so went up to introduce myself and the dogs on our squad. When I introduced Topper to him imagine my surprise when he said, yes, he knew of Topper, since his wife bred Tervuren! This was Linda Newsome's hubby. Fortunately we didn't need his professional services.

But he was able to make this shift more pleasant by getting some crates brought in for the doggies to nap in while in the middle of operations. Even little things are important.

We had heard that this was to be our last shift and that no new areas were being considered as likely sites for live finds. So, not only had we failed to find any survivors, for which we were feeling like failures, but now we weren't needed. It was emotionally a very difficult time. The decision to demobilize the first task forces 3 days early was probably a good one. Being the people to discover that there were no survivors had been rough.

It would take a while to heal from this.

But, the dogs were on site, and they expected to work. So, we set up our most ambitious proofing problem of the mission. The main floor still had a great many recoveries occurring. These victims were partially exposed so their locations were readily identifiable. We hid the task force member in a difficult to scent area and worked each dog. It was very rewarding to see each dog acknowledge the location of each victim, and then explode with enthusiasm when they caught the scent of the live person. Even after 5 days of dust, noise, and distractions the dogs were all still enthusiastically committed to the task. Truly special beasts.

Once we completed our training problem, we were given the official word that we would be doing no searching that day, and were instead invited to make a tour of the entire site to see all that had been accomplished. When we had arrived on Thursday morning, it was difficult to even get into the different floors. Now, 4 days later, the stairwells were open, the freight elevator was working on auxiliary power, and we were taken through the areas that we had cleared. At first it was a good feeling to see that yes, work had progressed with amazing speed. But, I have to plead that I am a weenie.

This was my first deployment and I had been rather consumed with the task and making sure that Topper was at his best. Topper was snuggly napping in a crate, with a veterinarian watching over him, and I began to relax. That was my mistake. As we walked through, I began to look at the building for the first time like a normal, rational person. My legs began to shake, and my respiratory rate increased. I was frightened. Yes, every time I had walked into this area, yes, I had noticed that the columns had come down inches more, but the rescue squads kept adding shoring, so I just went on. Now, it was chillingly apparent to my brain that was no longer consumed with how to find people, that this building really was falling down, and I was in it.

And worse, I had been working in it with Topper for 3 days. My amazing partner had gone deeper into damaged areas than they had allowed even me to go and never shown a moment of concern. What risks he had taken to "play his favorite game". I was shaken. I was ready to go!

We didn't have to wait long. Once again the three blasts indicating evacuation were sounded, and for the last time, we collected the dogs and our packs and returned to the dawn outside. We were greeted by our task force's final accomplishment. All that morning our rescue squads had been clearing overhanging debris from the edge of the roof. This debris had been coming off continuously in small chunks that could kill once they had traveled 9 stories. The building was now a safer site for those who would continue with the recovery work. Nothing, except final demolition would stop the continuing collapse, but it was a help.

Until the building was finally brought down, weeks after I had gone home, I continued to feel ill at ease, and sleep poorly. Part of the reason was because I knew people working the disaster up to the end. And part of it was that in the end the building really frightened me like some big monster.

To my frazzled mind it was the gaping mouth of hell. The people who finally brought it down gave me my first good night's sleep.

We were demobilized. That meant no more site work. That was replaced with 36 hours of cleaning and repackaging 5 pallets of equipment. We brought lots of heavy stuff! Amazingly, it all fit.

We also were feted by Southwestern Bell who provided us a steak dinner and custom made t-shirts to express their thanks for our help.

At our last dinner at the BOO, Governor Keating's wife joined us for a debriefing and again to express thanks for our efforts. She also gave us little cloisonné pins with the Oklahoma flag, and Indian headdress pins for the dogs.

Various people gave us blue, gold and pink ribbons to honor victims of the explosion. Others brought us commemorative t-shirts and pins. My cap was covered in memorabilia.

On the one hand it was crass, people had died. On the other hand it is how people reach out to others and define an event. It was little things like this that allowed me to truly make the shift from feeling like I had failed to feeling like I had done something of value.

Tuesday morning we loaded onto busses and road back to Tinker AFB. While waiting to load onto our C-141 for home, some played softball, some talked. I played catch with Topper for a while. An airman joined us and started telling me about how much he knew about working dogs, and that he had seen search dogs at the Murrah Building and they didn't seem very well trained. He came to this conclusion because they wouldn't do what he said. At this point, Topper joined us and offered him his toy. He threw it one time, and for whatever reason, Topper would not bring it back to him again.

Topper, my obnoxious boy who wants everyone to be a part of his world commenced a classic demonstration of Belgian aloofness. That guy was no longer there. I smiled, excused us, and rejoined the others.

The flight back was just as noisy as the flight out. You can't really talk.

You just wait with your own thoughts.

When we landed, the crowd of media, as big as our task force, respected the instruction to only talk to those who came to them. For many of us, myself included, it was not possible to discuss the week without tears overwhelming us.

But, before we were permitted to go to our cars and disperse to our homes we were sent to a critical incident stress debriefing. This was an eye opener. We were given a list of things to expect for the next few weeks. For example, outbursts of anger or emotion were to be expected. Poor sleep and eating patterns were typical of people who had been through severe stresses. This was sounding pretty serious.

Sitting there in the debriefing it all began to seem pretty serious. The counselors then told us how things were going to be even more complicated than we might realize. For one thing, task force member's families in the Sacramento area had been brought in for a counseling session of their own the day of our arrival. You know what they were feeling? Ready? Anger. Lots of anger. How dare their husband/ wife/ father, put themselves in such a scary place? Even though most of the task force members are firefighters, their families had never before spent a week watching their loved ones on TV in a scary place. And they didn't like it. Despite being safe at home, they were suffering the effects of this tragedy just as the people in OKC were.

How about some more complications? We had spent a week working at an unnatural pitch. Having people waiting on our every need so that we could work, work, work. Now we were returning to the mundane world. No one would be waiting on us. We were no longer heroes. We needed to put the cap on the toothpaste and fix our own coffee. Though we all wanted to go back to our homes and our families they were preparing us for the strange things that human beings go through after tough times. We might actually miss the pitch of life at a disaster. Hard to believe, but with the warning, we could recognize the possible complications of getting back to normal.

For me, there was no family at the family debriefing. My husband didn't even know I was coming home, because he didn't know I was gone. Rick had begun hiking the Appalachian Trail on April 1 and knew nothing of the bombing. The morning paper doesn't get delivered at trailside, nor is there a TV in his pack. I arrived home about 7pm Tuesday night. The answering machine was full of messages. Two of them were from Rick. He apologized for not calling me that weekend, and would try me again that afternoon. The second message said that he was sorry he had missed me at lunch and would try again that evening. No further messages. Could that mean that he was calling me today? The day I got in? I was excited!

I began unloading the van and the phone rang. It was a phone solicitor. I screamed into the phone. I have never screamed at anyone on the phone ever before in my whole life. "Outbursts of anger or emotion are to be expected".

I hung up the phone, and tried to regain some composure. I told myself that it didn't matter if I didn't talk to Rick for a few days.

I would be fine with Topper and Dusty. The phone rang again, and there was the best voice in the world. Rick talked along about how many miles he had put in that day, his knees were better and he

had had a big dinner. When he paused, I told him, "Well Rick, I've been out of town" and began an hour and a half of the best phone call I have ever had. It did matter that I talk to him. I was home and I needed to have him welcome me, even if by long distance. I was gonna be ok.

Over the next few weeks I received numerous greetings and good wishes. Many by e-mail, many by snail mail. The local paper ran a piece on us which led many to drop a note because they were from OKC and were pleased that a neighbor had helped the people of their hometown.

Our regular routine of training resumed so that every couple of weeks I met with friends who had also gone to OKC. We talked, and talked and still talk. Though the night after the building was brought down, I slept for 10 hours and thought that it was all finally behind me, each time I meet with someone else who went, I find some new part of the experience that I haven't settled. I suspect this is part of getting through it.

The letters and good wishes that I received prompted me to do something I have never done. I sent thank you notes to those who supported the effort. I have come to see the experience in a clearer way. I did help survivors. They were not in the rubble, but they were survivors and Topper and I helped their recovery.

One letter was profoundly touching. On the 5th floor of the Murrah Building was the Oklahoma Dept of Health. Many people in that office died the morning of the bombing. The director of the office was Dr Espe, the man who was brought down from the building on the fire ladder. They sent out a health survey for the dogs two weeks ago. At the end of the survey, someone had added, "You and your partners searched for our people, thank you". You're welcome.

Pat

This article is Copyright © 1995, Pat Grant . All rights reserved.
Displayed on this website with the permission of the copyright
owner

Topper's AKC registered name is Snowflower Maine Topper, CDX. He also holds the title of FEMA Type 1, Wilderness SAR. Topper was awarded the ABTC President's Award, and the American Kennel Club Award for Canine Excellence in Search and Rescue in 2002. Topper was bred by Carmen Helgesen.

In December 2002, the American Kennel Club published the following announcement of the ACE for Topper's work at Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center, and other, less publicized, disasters.



Topper, bred by Carmen Helgesen, of Snowflower Kennels, has competed in the breed ring and has earned an Open obedience title. But AKC competition is merely a sideline for Topper, one of America's most experienced and dependable search-and-rescue dogs.

The 11-year-old Terv joined the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Task Force as a Type-1 disaster dog in 1993. Topper began his US&R career at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, being the first FEMA dog deployed on the rubble of the Murrah Building. His special skills were also invaluable at a very different sort of disaster site, the massive Yosemite rock fall of 1996. Topper's most recent US&R assignment was Ground Zero at the World Trade Center site in New York. His owner, Pat Grant, says, "As one of the most experienced FEMA dogs responding, Topper again gave generously of his mature confidence and enthusiasm to help bring closure to a terrible tragedy." On site, it's not unusual to see dispirited firefighters and rescuers being comforted by this gentle and majestic co-worker.

Topper is a certified wilderness-search dog and has participated in many local manhunts and missing-persons rescues. Between assignments, the hard-working Terv has logged hundreds of hours in training for what Grant calls "Topper's great game: finding the 'hiding' person."

The American Belgian Tervuren Club has recognized this magnificent representative of the breed by including his picture in the "Personality and Temperament" section of their judges' education Web pages.

Despite his relatively advanced age, Topper is still on the job. "Whether or not he continues as one of the oldest FEMA dogs ever," says Grant, "Topper will remain my best-ever working partner and friend."

Redisplayed by permission of copyright owner, © 2002 American Kennel Club, Inc