

# The Golden Retrievers of Ground Zero



By Rue Chagoll,  
GRC of Central New York



## In the aftermath of September 11

At the end of their 12-hour shift, members of Pennsylvania's Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 1 used a high line and "Stokes Basket" to hoist Golden Retriever Riley above other crews searching in a canyon of wreckage 50 feet below. Workers paused and stared upward as the canine rescuer, spotlighted in afternoon sun against the stark remains of the World Trade Center complex, passed stoically overhead.

The scene was captured by U.S. Naval photographer Preston Keres, who told *GRNews*, "I will never forget that moment." Keres had stood by earlier as the body of a New York fireman was retrieved via the same basket. Search activity ceased momentarily in silent tribute. Then came Riley, and onlookers once again paused to admire the canine who had likely been instrumental in locating the fallen FDNY hero. "The work of those dogs was so inspiring," said Keres. "We need to remember the contribution they made."

The photograph poignantly defines the moment. Riley and his handler, Chris Selfridge, were among the first to be called to action on September 11, and had been in New York nearly four days. They were now faced with the grim realization that what had begun as a mission to rescue survivors was instead to be one of recovering victims' remains. Nevertheless, they, along with dozens of other Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) canine teams, won our much-deserved respect and admiration for their courage, skill and perseverance in a mission well executed.

**Top left and cover:** Riley is captured in a sobering moment from the first days at Ground Zero. **Cover:** An exhausted Riley sleeps on the metal tread of a piece of heavy construction equipment. **Photo Credit:** Journalist 1st Class Preston Keres, United States Navy.

**Top right:** Denise Corliss and Bretagne wait for search deployment from an advance post adjacent to Ground Zero. Corliss is also a member of the Gr. Houston GRC. **Photo credit:** TX-TF1.

**Bottom right:** Keres was in NYC photographing rescue efforts for the Navy's *All Hands* magazine. He captured two of the more memorable Golden search and rescue photos, both of Riley. On being put in contact with Riley's handler Chris Selfridge, was pleased to furnish him poster-sized prints of both photos.

For the photo buffs the following was also provided. Riley on High Line (this page) – Nikon D1X w/ Nikon AF-S 80-200/2.8 @155mm; ISO 200, f4.0, 1/640th. Riley Sleeping (cover) – Nikon D1X w/Nikon AF-1 300/2.8; ISO 200, f4.0, 1/400th.



**Left:** Amy Rising and Louie on night shift at Ground Zero, dwarfed by the remains of a WTC tower and huge pile of metal debris. **Photo credit:** Lincoln Nebraska Fire & Rescue, NE-TF1

**Below top:** Thunder gets a bath after coming off duty. Second from right is handler Kent Olson. Fourth from right is volunteer veterinary technician Jodi Witte of VMAT-1, who developed a special fondness for the USAR Golden Retrievers. **Photo credit:** Marie Suthers-McCabe, DVM –Veterinary Medical Assistance Team

**Below middle:** Orion and handler Bob Macaulay pause at the veterinary aid station. **Photo credit:** Mary Ann McBride, DVM (VMAT3)

**Below bottom:** Woody stands in the back of a pickup truck adjacent to the WTC ready to go to work with handler, Terry Trepanier. **Photo credit:** FEMA News Photo; Michael Rieger.



In the wake of attacks in New York and Washington, all but three of FEMA's 28 urban search and rescue task forces were eventually called into service from home bases around the nation. Attached to each of the 62-member self-supporting rescue teams are disaster-search canines, many of them Golden Retrievers. Related here are the experiences of a few of those Golden teams, in an effort to portray the character and deeds of them all. Some were experienced and others on their very first deployment. Nevertheless, *all* were trained and tested to a high degree of skill in the challenging task of searching for people trapped in collapsed structures.

And search they did, in conditions even the most rigorously seasoned rescuer could not imagine. The huge piles of debris, some estimated taller than eight stories, were unstable and continually shifting. Fires burned both on the surface and below, creating countless seen and unseen hot spots. On their approach to Ground Zero, the canine handlers were surprised to find that the solid debris was almost all metal. "There was no concrete anywhere," several remarked.

"Every floor in each tower was approximately an acre of concrete," handler Randy Gross of California Task Force 7 explained. He calculated that with the collapse of both towers more than 200 acres of concrete had plummeted to the street and further below. "But when we searched," he continued, "and Dusty and I searched extensively both above and below ground, we found no concrete rubble. Nor did we find any remains of the office furnishings – desks, computers and so forth – that had been on those floors."

Everything had been pulverized when the towers collapsed, leaving a mountain of twisted, jagged steel in the midst of a huge heap of dust. This was the environment in which dogs and handlers would climb, traverse, tunnel and crawl. The dust was insidious. Not only did it complicate footing and obscure hidden objects, but it quickly invaded the eyes and respiratory tracts of dogs working the area. Protective gear could not be used for dogs that needed their noses to work. Dry or wet, the dust and bare metal made for hazardous footing. Yet none of the interviewed handlers used protective booties for their Golden Retrievers when working. Why? Footing would have been even more treacherous. In the FEMA requirements related to canines, dogs must learn to spread their toes and not attempt digging their nails into surfaces. This, combined with their advanced agility skills, apparently served them well. Although some dogs suffered minor cuts and burns, emergency veterinary personnel were aware of no FEMA Golden seriously injured in a slip-and-fall incident. Less thoroughly prepared canines seemed more prone to injury.



**Left and inset:** Kent Olson of WATF1 and Thunder search amid the debris. Photo credit: FEMA News Photo, Andrea Booher.

**Below top:** Other rescuers frequently took a "therapeutic break," spending time with USAR dogs. Here, a FDNY Chief stoops to meet Denise Corliss' Bretagne, (TX-TF1) who promptly rolls over to offer her tennis ball. Photo credit: TX-TF1.

**Below bottom:** Golden Louie, and Labrador Max, wait to be called for search duty at Ground Zero. Seen heaped in the background are some of the thousands of plastic pails used to remove dust and small debris from the World Trade Center wreckage. Photo credit: Lincoln Nebraska Fire & Rescue, NE-TF1



Then there were the extensive subterranean and high-above-street-level searches. Rick Lee and Randy Gross, with their Golden Ana and Dusty of California Task Force 7, were among the first teams dispatched to New York. They were assigned to search "voids" in the multiple levels of office, shopping and mass transit station spaces extending eight or nine stories below street level. In some spaces, a handler could stand and watch his dog work. Other times, both handler and dog had to crawl through small openings to access very small voids. In many instances, the Golden Retrievers were required to work out of the handler's view. "Many times I had to lower my dog or hoist her over my head into a search space," Lee recounted. Kent Olson of Washington Task Force 1, who searched with his Golden, Thunder, said, "In one particular void, I recall four consecutive times having to first climb down myself, then lower Thunder to continue our search. Finally, we were able to crawl together to reach the portion of the void where we were needed."

Hazardous conditions had all handlers constantly concerned for the safety of their Golden partners. Denise Corliss and her Golden, Bretagne, were on their first-ever deployment with Texas Task Force 1. Denise explained, "While crawling through close quarters, I remembered from our training to always precede my dog. That way I could protect her from unexpected dangers such as hazardous substances or a sudden sharp precipice." And there were plenty of both at Ground Zero. In one subway tunnel, despite caution exercised, Randy suddenly saw Dusty *swimming* through water blanketed in a thick slick of oil. On the way to decontamination, Dusty then rolled in jet-black residual soot from one of the many fires. By then she was so thoroughly covered in soot and oil that veterinary technician Jodi Witte mistook her for a Flat-Coated Retriever! Witte, from Georgia, is a member of the Veterinary Medical Assistance Team and had been sent to NYC to care for the FEMA animals.

Handlers have only the highest praise for the veterinary support their dogs received in New York. Veterinary medical assistance teams (volunteers deployed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and the Long Island Veterinary Association provided round-the-clock care at the well-furnished Suffolk County Long Island SPCA mobile facility just blocks from Ground Zero. Dogs were bathed and eyes and nasal passages irrigated and re-hydrated at the end of each working shift. Minor injuries, such as cut



foot pads, were treated immediately on-site. Those requiring more extensive care were taken by ambulance to an uptown veterinary hospital.

Bob Macaulay and his Golden, Orion, arrived September 29 from California with Task Force 4, and this would be the last FEMA team to leave New York on October 6. CA-TF4 members knew there would be no searching for survivors, only continuing efforts to reclaim the dead. Still, there was plenty of hazardous searching to be done.

According to Macaulay, "Our most significant work was on the Merrill Lynch building. There was a roof 10 floors up where a lot of air conditioning equipment was located, along with a huge amount of broken glass and other building material. We searched in this area for two hours one

evening, and three hours the next day. The ledge was 20- to 30-foot wide, with a two-foot concrete curb and low metal railing along the edge. Because of the height above ground, the scent coming up the side of the building and the inadequate railing, I was pretty tense working this area. I kept Orion under close control." Macaulay, by the way, was in Oklahoma City with a prior Golden search partner, Quasar, in 1995.

There was a haunting eeriness to it all. Kent Olson will always remember the subway station platforms, littered with purses and briefcases that had been abandoned by fleeing commuters. He couldn't help wondering how many had escaped to safety, realizing some likely had not.

Rick Lee recalled his very first approach to Ground Zero, when turning a corner he suddenly came face-to-face with a towering seven-story pile of metal debris – leaning at a precipitous thirty-degree angle. He also described a surge of anxiety as he and other firefighters were tasked to search the rubble that had once been the initial emergency response command post. It now entombed so many from FDNY and NYPD. Lee, Olson and others told themselves to approach working at Ground Zero as "just another training mission," lest emotions inhibit their abilities to do a good job.

Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) is a specialty unto itself. Information offered by the National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR) describes a variety of sub-disciplines. There are those who specialize in mountain rescue, wilderness rescue, water rescue and so forth. Canines are selected and trained for the particular nature of each task, such as air scenting, ground tracking, scenting in water or even locating cadavers. USAR canines are trained to search the highly unnatural setting of a collapsed structure, under the close control of a handler. In the early 1990s, FEMA projected a need for 300 advance-certified USAR dogs to be employed in the aftermath of tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and other disasters. Ironically, it has not been natural disasters nor even man-attributable accidents, but rather monumental acts of terror – beginning with Oklahoma City in 1995 – that have thrust these elite canines into the limelight. Despite the clearly understood and accepted need for their skills, FEMA's decade-old recruitment goal remains not even one-third realized.

### The Making of an Urban Search and Rescue Team

FEMA's canine certification requirements highlight the reasons Golden Retrievers excel at this demanding work. Think of a dog who is capable of Utility-level obedience, Senior Hunter in the field and Open agility work, and you have a basic comparison to a FEMA Level 1 (advanced) certified USAR canine.

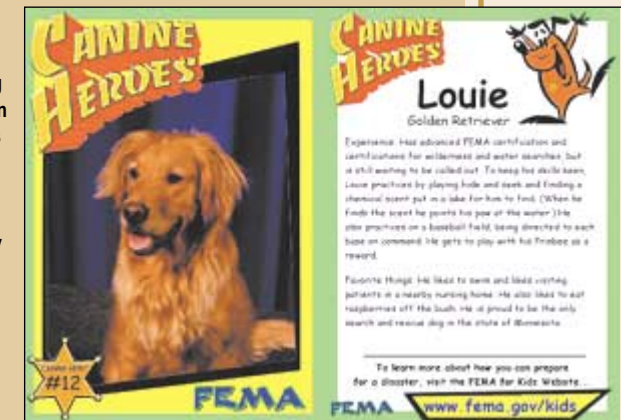
In terms of temperament, the most preliminary FEMA "knockout factor" is the exhibition of any aggressive behavior toward either humans or other dogs. In search conditions, they will be working in the company of both other people and dogs. USAR dogs must also have incredibly high drive balanced with biddability. They must have the mental stamina to sustain hours of long, arduous searches and be willing to do so under a handler's control at all times in highly hazardous conditions. Are you beginning to read G-o-l-d-e-n R-e-t-r-i-e-v-e-r between the lines of this job description? Finally, they must be physically sound

and well conditioned to minimize the risk of injury.

Search and rescue canines have historically been acquired, trained and maintained in readiness by, and at the personal expense of, their volunteer handlers. By acquiring dogs from breeders known for quality performance lines, then working in small regional groups in their available time, many dedicated handlers have successfully trained dogs to FEMA certification. Bruce Spear of Kirkland, Washington, a USAR volunteer and also chairman of FEMA's Canine Advisory Committee, estimates volunteer handlers annually spend upwards of \$3,000 to train and care for their own dogs, in addition to time spent traveling to training, testing and actual disaster sites.

In recent years, as more local fire departments and rescue organizations have sought to develop an ongoing disaster-response capability, funds have become more available and these agencies have sought their own canines.

**Right:** FEMA produces trading cards for children to collect. This is Louie's card.



**Middle:** Woody and Terry Trepanier, fully garbed in rescue gear, prepare to go on night shift search. Photo credit: Terry Trepanier, OH TF1.



**Bottom:** Training the USAR canine involves advanced obedience, handling and agility skills. Here we see a Golden navigating the "Wobbly Walk," an obstacle specially designed to be unstable as the dog descends the ladder. Dogs learn to spread toes for improved traction and develop a keen sense of balance. Photo credit: NDSDF

