

Virginia Task Force Two dog handlers are ready to roll at a moment's notice. When the team deploys on a disaster mission, totally self-sufficient for three days.



Photo by Susie Audibert

dog food, her gear, and her "Rottie" into her truck with 218,000 miles on the odometer, kiss her husband and kids goodbye with no idea how long she'll be gone, and drive to Virginia Beach.

There she will join the 70 or so other team members of Virginia Task Force Two, a team with whom she has been training for a dozen years or more. She will be given a physical exam, a pregnancy test (of all things), and will have blood pulled for a DNA record in case she doesn't come back. She will be briefed and will take an oath of allegiance, and she and the team will be "wheels-up" six hours from when the call went out.

A mobilization for a disaster is something to behold. "For hurricanes, it's usually a bus...a 20-hour bus ride. We try to get down there ahead of the hurricane and someplace slightly out of the way, and then we sit and wait for the hurricane to blow through and then we get in there as quickly as we can."

Most team members are firemen. The Virginia Beach guys are famous for their structural analysts and the work they do shoring up unstable rubble and partially collapsed buildings. "We have a pretty good team. It's a pretty laid back team. They're very serious when they're working, but they can all relax when they're not working," she smiles knowingly.

A typical deployment will include four search dogs and their handlers. They even have a veterinarian, who doubles as a truck driver. The unit is three days totally self-sufficient "a whole little city, tents and food and water and tools and medical."

Most recently, Lisa and Gabe went to Hurricane Wilma, but "there really wasn't enough



Lisa Berry has been involved with search and rescue dogs since 1990. The Unionville resident has responded to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon, plus hurricanes and wilderness searches too numerous to mention.

Photo by Susie Audibert

damage for the FEMA team to work," she says with a hint of disappointment. "These dogs are designed for earthquakes. The hurricanes, they're not really designed for because usually the people are out," she explains.

Lisa was unable to go to Katrina, but her fellow dog handlers who did, reported "they went for miles walking on rubble, wooden rubble, stick homes mostly. And the first mile from the Gulf, there was nothing. It was clean. Then you were walking on squashed flat structures and mud."

Disaster dogs are also "designed" to find people who are alive. "In this country particularly, we also want our family members who are deceased to be found and to be out of there. But FEMA, that's not their mission," explains Lisa in clipped tones. "Their mission is to find live. So the dog stays and barks until somebody pinpoints the

location and calls him off. If there's a body there, they're supposed to ignore that."

Dogs are particularly good at this job because of their highly superior sense of smell... so superior that they can delineate the difference between a living, breathing human being and a dead one, or a living, breathing human being and a tennis shoe, or a living, breathing animal.

But Lisa cautions, scent travels, up through voids, or pools in low places, depending on the weather and the rubble pile. Where the dog barks may not be the exact location of the victim; it's the exact location of the victim's scent exiting the rubble pile. "That's all they can do is tell you what their nose said."

And so that's what keeps Lisa Berry sane and focused and free of nightmares when she's on one of these missions of horror...working that dog, watching him do what he was trained to do and hopefully save lives in the process.

She tells two Katrina stories she heard from her teammates.

"FEMA was there," she corrects the common misunderstanding, "they just weren't there with the food and water." Disaster teams including Virginia Task Force Two were pre-positioned in Texas and Alabama. As soon as the wind died down they went in. An equivalent team from Massachusetts went into the storied Ninth Ward in New Orleans. Their rescue vehicle was attacked by stick-wielding hurricane victims, "because people were desperate, and desperate people do desperate things," she says quietly.

Her own team was deployed to Mississippi. They set up a "BOO," which stands for Base of Operations, in a parking lot. They were sleeping on the pavement. All they had to eat were MRE's (meals ready to eat) and bottled water. No ice. A distribution point was set up across the road, and the locals were wheeling shopping carts down the road every day to pick up free supplies, including two bags of ice each. An elderly woman stopped to talk to a Task Force Team member. And when she learned they didn't have any ice, she insisted on giving them one of hers. The firefighter refused, saying "I can't take your ice."

Lisa smiles at the retelling of the story. "And she took it out of the shopping cart and threw it down on the ground and said, 'well it's going to melt right here on the asphalt,' and walked off and left. So there were some really good stories." She pauses a beat. "Good comes out in people too."

Lisa Berry with her trained urban search and rescue dog, Gabe, just after they passed their basic certification national test in 2003. Since then, Gabe has recertified as the only Level One Rottweiler in the nation.

Contributed photo



Good comes out in people too

There was a point in the Pentagon where I just wanted to get out into fresh air. It was dark, smoky, and it smelled of jet fuel, and it was not a good feeling to be in there and see where the floor just ended in front of you."

Lisa Berry, sitting in her living room in Unionville, relives that fateful day in September 2001.

"You walk into an office and it is in disarray and then the floor ends and goes down

into this nothing--a hole." She remembers seeing a glass bowl of Tootsie Rolls sitting undisturbed atop a filing cabinet at the very edge of the abyss.

"You knew there were people who were working there and had families and there were pictures on the wall and awards, family pictures, and those people were just gone. It was sad." She pauses and adds softly, "Sort of like Oklahoma...sitting in that parking garage there was that one little section, 'Ten

"If they'd picked any other 10 minutes to come to the Credit Union, ANY OTHER 10 minutes in their day to come here, they would still be alive."

--Search dog handler Lisa Berry referencing the April 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City

Minute Parking,' with cars parked in there. And you think if they'd picked any other 10 minutes to come to the Credit Union, ANY OTHER 10 minutes in their day to come here, they would still be alive."

Lisa Berry has seen some stuff... bad stuff done by bad people. But she's a firm believer that "good comes out in people too." Ask her if she has nightmares, she shakes her head no and adds, "Somehow I think if I weren't working a dog, it would be much worse."

Her trained disaster search dog, a Rottweiler named Gabe, shovels her hand with his nose, asking to be petted. She obliges affectionately. "It's almost like you go into training mode," she says adding that it was worse in Oklahoma City when they were off duty after their 12-hour all-night shift. "They put TV's in the area where we were eating and they just kept flashing the faces and the names of the missing people and the missing children."

She pauses again, thinking back. "I did have a hard time..." she takes a deep breath... "we were at the front of the building moving

rubble by hand...we were actually picking the rocks up off the ground and handing them down a chain of people....and I got to the point I could not pick up another rock. They told us we were over the day care center, and I did not want to pick up another rock." Then she brightens and says, "So I just went to the back of the line, and I was okay."

That was almost 11 years ago when

her son Josh was five; her daughter Kelly two. Picking through rubble over that day care center just brought it a little too close to home.

Now the kids are 15 and 12 and busy with soccer, and horseback riding, and Boy Scouts, and choir and marching band and attending OCHS and Locust Grove Middle School, and helping tend two Rottweilers, a Beagle, two Labs, and three Border Terriers.

And although Lisa has backed off from wilderness search and rescue, she is a fully qualified urban search dog handler for the FEMA disaster team Virginia Task Force Two. Gabe, her seven-year-old "doofy" search dog is the only Level One certified Rottweiler in the nation. Gabe is short for Gabriel. Her first search dog, Zeke was short for Ezekiel. "You never know when you'll need an angel," she remarks wisely.

"It's amazing how fast things happen and you just don't know... so you better be prepared," she cautions. There's no question she's prepared. "One of these days there will be the great big earthquake," she predicts with somber confidence. That's when her beeper will go off. Like all the times before, such as Oklahoma City, the Pentagon and most recently Hurricane Wilma, she will throw three days worth of

Lisa and her old Rottweiler Zeke at a ceremony honoring search and rescue volunteers who worked the rubble of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

Contributed photo



At left, Lisa and Dave Berry's son, Josh, 15, and daughter, Kelly, 12, have been helping train search and rescue dogs, such as Gabe, since they were toddlers. Josh attends Orange County High School and Kelly goes to Locust Grove Middle School.

Right, Lori Tocki gets ready to send her dog, Win, as team member, Bill Dotson of Greene County looks on and Laurie Neimeier of Fauquier gets ready to hide as the "victim" during a recent rescue dog training session.

Below, "Ace," an Australian Shepherd belonging to Karen Meadows of Spotsylvania County, make the find. Disaster dogs are trained to stay and bark at the live victim.

Photos by Susie Audibert



It's all about the training

Gabe rolls onto his back as Kelly scratches his tummy, a look of sheer bliss on his massive head.

How could this dog be vicious if he's saving your life?

Lisa Berry is no stranger to search and rescue dogs. From 1990 to 1998, she was a member of Dogs East, a volunteer search and rescue dog organization that still focuses on wilderness searches for lost people.

They also trained dogs to find dead people. And they even traveled to Tennessee to work at the infamous "body farm," a fenced and wooded hillside within sight of downtown Nashville where forensic scientists systematically study the decomposition of donated or unidentified human bodies.

One time Lisa and some other teammates were coming home from a training trip at the "body farm." In the car with them was a human foot and leg that they had been given to take home for training. As they traveled up Interstate-81 they joked that if they were involved in a horrible car accident, the State Police would be perplexed to find an extra leg and foot in the wreckage.

Gallows humor runs strong with search and rescue people...otherwise they'd go nuts. But the real point here is that it takes a lot to qualify a search and rescue dog.

Lisa's focus now is strictly finding disaster victims who

are alive. To qualify a dog for this takes an amazing amount of practice and training. "The word T-E-S-T has a huge stress level for me," says Lisa, who has a way of speaking faster and faster the more stressed she becomes.

She's referring to the recently ramped-up national disaster dog certification exam.

The old test is now used more as a screening tool, but it is no slouch itself. Dogs had to demonstrate "agility, ladder climbing, walking a plank, walking on unstable surfaces, going through tunnels, doing directionals." They call it "baseball," where the handler must be able to send the dog to a specific spot or "base." They also had to search one rubble pile "to simulate a real disaster."

Now they must search three piles, all at least ten feet tall and up to 6,000 square feet in area. Hidden in each pile are zero to three victims...six total. A search dog team must find five of the six within a certain time limit.

There's more. There are distractions such as food and caged animals scattered about. Once you've cleared a pile you can't go back. And one pile, the handler has to stay inside a box and direct the dog by remote control....baseball.



And so, every Thursday, Lisa Berry and her local dog handler teammates gather to train, because it's a three-hour, one-way trip to the practice rubble piles in Virginia Beach. "Orange County has been really good to us," says Lisa gratefully. "Fire services has let us use the burn building to train and the landfill, when they had the construction rubble from the courthouse, they had a very large pile of concrete debris, and they were really good to us." She points to Gabe, "he wouldn't be certified if it weren't for the Orange County Landfill letting us go up there."

When training search dogs, "victims" are needed to scrunch down in a hole or up in a closet to let themselves be "found" by the search dog. Lisa's children have served as victims ever since they were toddlers. "They always find me," says Josh smiling. "I've been in different places all the time. I enjoy it." Once the dog has found the victim and barks, it is the victim's responsibility to reward the search dog, in Gabe's case "anything soft and squeaky that tugs." Recently Gabe towed Kelly out of a closet, down the hall and through their vaulted living room. "He's crazy for a squeaky toy," says Lisa, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. Kelly giggles.

Gabe is Lisa's second Rottweiler to be a search and rescue dog. Her first dog, Zeke went with her to Oklahoma City and to more wilderness search and rescue missions than she can remember. "He really liked people. He worked because he liked the interaction with the 'victim.'" Zeke died in 1999, and since then, she has not done wilderness search anymore. Nor does she go to overseas disasters, although she did go to Turkey to help certify dog handlers after a disastrous earthquake there four years ago.

In that case, one of Lisa's teammates, Bill Dodson of Greene County, went to area animal shelters and found four dogs to donate to the Turks. One of the dogs was a Pit Bull. "And that pound puppy, he was a joy to watch," says Lisa excitedly. "He could cover a rubble pile in probably two or three minutes and find two people. He was agile and enjoyed his work."

Pit Bulls have a bad reputation. So do Rottweilers. And Lisa is worried about some localities enacting "vicious breed laws as opposed to vicious dog laws...vicious breed, in that all dogs of that breed are unacceptable in some localities." Lisa admits to a streak of stubbornness. "There was so much bad press about Rotties. I wanted to prove that Rotties can do something right for a change. And I know there are bad Rotties out there, but there are good Rotties too," she says determinedly.

Gabe rolls onto his back as Kelly scratches his tummy, a look of sheer bliss on his massive head. How could this dog be vicious if he's saving your life?