

A big hug for Bono the rescue dog

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THEY say a dog is a man's best friend. This is never truer than in the case of a search and rescue dog and its handler. With a sense of smell far more powerful than any human and an ability to probe into nooks and crannies these dogs can save lives and bring huge comfort to the friends and families of those who go missing.

When a person goes missing SARDA are often the first team to be sent out. They work in all types of weather, day and night and all the work they do is voluntary.

Mick Grant and his dog Bono, from Mooncoin, Co Kilkenny have been with SARDA (Search and Rescue Dog Association - Ireland) for the past four years.

Bono underwent three years of intensive training to qualify as a search and rescue dog. "He's an air-scenting dog," explains Mick. "That means he can pick up the scent of anyone in the area. He works better than a tracking dog because a track can wear out quite quickly but a person's scent can remain for up to a week," he says.

When Bono finds a person he barks at them and then comes back and barks at his handler, Mick. He then shuttles in and out between the two of them until he leads him to the missing person.

Not just any old dog can become a SARDA dog. Requirements include trainability, agility, endurance and the ability to get along with other dogs and people. A search dog is a member of his handler's family and regards people as his friends. "He has to want to find the per-

son," explains Mick. "There is a lot of training involved and at the end of the day he has to be 100% right," he says.

The dogs have to learn to use their noses to follow traces of human air scent so a lot of practical training is required to get them to that level. 'Dogs bodies' are a valuable element in that training.

These people are aptly named as they go out in all types of weather and lie on the sides of mountains, in ditches, in hedgerows and even in trees for hours on end so that the dogs can practice finding them. "You really find out who your friends are then," laughs Mick.

"If you go on a full day's training with a few dogs it's not too bad. They give you a billy bag and you can bring a cup of tea and a good book. It's only ruined by having dogs coming and jumping on top of you," jokes Mick's 'dogs body' for the day, Terry Brophy.

SARDA work closely with the gardai, Civil Defence and the Coast Guard but as Mick explains they have to be prepared for anything. "I have advanced first aid training and I have also been with SEMRA (South East Mountain Rescue Team) for the past 20 years so I have been involved in a lot of searches," he says. "You learn to stay focused on the task in hand and remember that you always have back-up."

Mick enjoys the work also. "If you don't you won't stay at it," he says as he gives Bono a huge big hug. "And yes - at the end of the day he is my best friend," he smiles.

To find out more about SARDA check out www.sardaireland.com or to make a donation contact their PRO at prosardaireland.com.



Mick Grant and his dog Bono

Picture: Vicky Dempsey