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Wing is home to the only SAR dog in DOD

By Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

In 2010, Airmen from the Kentucky Air National Guard deployed to Port-au-Prince, the capital and most populous city of Haiti, in response to a magnitude 7 earthquake that impacted millions.

“With the destroyed airfields, it was difficult for many government organizations to land aircraft and provide assistance,” said Master Sgt. Rudy Parsons, a pararescuer with the Kentucky Air Guard’s 123rd Special Tactics Squadron.

The Airmen were able to get on the ground and assist in clearing the airfield thanks to their special capabilities, but they soon faced more complications.

“Local sources were telling people that there was a schoolhouse that had collapsed with about 40 children inside,” Parsons said. “A team of special tactics Airmen went over and started looking through the rubble, just carrying these rocks off, looking for these missing kids. A few days into the search, (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) was finally able to land. They brought a dog to the pile and were able to clear it in about 20 minutes. There was nobody in that pile.”

“It had been a couple days of wasted labor that could’ve been used to help save other lives,” Parsons continued. “It was at that time that we kind of realized the importance and the capability that dogs can bring to search and rescue. Every environment presents different difficulties, but it’s all restricted by our human limitations. Our current practice is: Hoping that we see or hear somebody.”

In response to scenarios like the Haitian earthquake, Parsons spearheaded a new approach, developing the squadron’s Search and Rescue canine program. The effort, launched in 2018, is designed to increase the capabilities of disaster response



Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton/KyANG

Tech. Sgt. Rudy Parsons, a pararescuer with the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron, and his search and rescue dog, Callie, exit a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter as part of Callie’s familiarization training at Boone National Guard Center in Frankfort, Ky., Nov. 29.

teams in locating and recovering personnel through the use of specially trained canines.

After several months of preparation, the unit acquired its newest member, Callie, a 26-month-old Dutch shepherd, making her the only search and rescue dog in the Department of Defense. She has now earned multiple qualifications to accommodate the specific skillset of the 123rd STS, including helicopter exfiltration and infiltration, mountain rescue (rappelling plus ice, snow and alpine maneuvers), static line and freefall parachute insertion.

“Callie is trained in live find,” Parsons said. “She goes into wilderness, collapsed-structure or disaster situations. She’s trained to detect living people, find them, and alert me when she’s located them. We react accordingly, mark the spot and begin the extraction of those people.”

“The unique function that we can provide

by developing Callie is that we can get her to places that nobody else can get to,” Parsons added. “That’s the biggest benefit that we really saw value in. In the situation like the earthquake in Haiti, we can get her in there, and those days in difference could be the difference in somebody’s life.”

Before Callie’s introduction to the unit, the method of search and rescue in urban settings involved probing and digging with drills and cameras. According to Parsons, this slow and sometimes unreliable method only added tools, weight and difficulty to the process.

“Our current method involves carrying around a bunch of extremely heavy equipment. Callie weighs 50 pounds, and she gets herself around. She beats any type of equipment or machine with just her

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capabilities, her nose and her intelligence. She's just really good at her job."

According to Chief Master Sgt. Karl Grugel, the squadron's chief enlisted manager, dogs are a "secondary requirement" for search and rescue on the civilian side.

"Pararescue is the only DOD asset dedicated to search and rescue, which is why Callie is such a mission-enhancing asset," Grugel said. "Search and rescue dogs have already been proven time and time again on the civilian side. They have such an immense capability. When they do side-by-side testing, there's nothing that even comes close to a canine."

According to Parsons, the dog's "stability and need to bond with her handler" makes the Guard uniquely suited to pioneer this initiative.

"It makes sense that the Guard would establish this because it's such an intensive program," Parsons said. "If you were to do this in an active duty squadron, you'd have personnel switching over all of the time. Her working life is anywhere from four to six years, so you could have multiple people go through and try to be her handler. In the Guard, we have people who are here for that whole time or longer."

The experience level of Guard Airmen also helps make it more suited for innovations like this.

"The Guard and Reserve own 70 percent of the seven levels of Total Force special tactics," Grugel said. "The Guard is more likely to lean forward on new innovations just because of the experience levels of its members."

Looking to the future, Parsons hopes the SAR K canine program will develop into a full-fledged military working dog program



Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton/KyANG

Master Sgt. Rudy Parsons, a pararescueman with the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron, and Callie, his search and rescue dog, land at Volk Field, Wis., July 17 as part of a domestic operations exercise.

that can regularly deploy with special tactics personnel recovery teams and global access teams.

"We're continuing just to develop her just so she can interact and function in every capability that the U.S. military could be in and there could be a need to save life," Parsons said.

Beyond increasing the capabilities of the unit, Callie is an important teammate for members of the 123rd STS.

"When she got here, one of the biggest things I wanted was for her to be a teammate," Parsons said. "She definitely does that. A lot of the guys think of her as family. Everybody looks forward to seeing her, and

she looks forward to seeing everybody else.

"We have a very strong connection," Parsons continued. "We spend 24/7 together and we're always training together. I have to be consistent with her because she is a very beautiful dog, and I have to remember that she's not a pet; she's definitely a working dog."

The 123rd SAR canine program was funded by the Air National Guard innovation program, meant to enable Airmen to make positive, meaningful change and drive a culture shift toward innovation.

To view more photos, visit www.123aw.ang.af.mil/News

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Wing Commander.....Col. David Mounkes
Joint Force HQ Chief of Public Affairs.....Lt. Col. Dale Greer
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Staff Writer.....Master Sgt. Philip Speck
Staff Writer.....Master Sgt. Vicky Spesard
Staff Writer.....Master Sgt. Austin Shaffner
Staff Writer.....Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton
Staff Writer.....Airman 1st Class Chloe Ochs

Phone: (502) 413-4089 • Email: allen.d.greer.mil@mail.mil

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