

Nothing **NEW**
under the sun

BY RIA HÖRTER | IMAGES COURTESY RIA HÖRTER

Avalanche rescue dogs ●●●

Dogs have been assisting people since early times, as companions during the hunt, flock herders and guardians, sled dogs, draft dogs and pack dogs. In dangerous situations, dogs can save lives.

When we speak of avalanches, we think of countries with high mountains – Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, northern Italy and the Scandinavian countries – and areas in North and South America. Roads and tunnels have been built in the mountains, but they did not exist in the times of, for example, Hannibal, Charlemagne and Napoleon, who travelled with their armies over the Alps between Switzerland and Italy in, respectively, 218 BC, 773 and 1800.

For centuries, armies, merchants, roamers and adventurers travelled in these snowy and dangerous mountain areas where they faced snowstorms, avalanches and freezing.

Shelter

In the 10th century, Bernhard von Menthon (923-1008), a Benedictine monk, founded a monastery on a pass between Switzerland and Italy. It became a shelter for Augustinian monks, but also a resting place for travellers, including the many French and German pilgrims travelling to Rome. The monks offered food and clothing, and a Christian burial if a pilgrim died.

Around 1650, the residents of the monastery began to train their dogs for rescue work. We all know the story of ‘Barry’ (1800-14), who – according to the administration of the mon-

astery – saved more than 40 people from freezing to death. There are testimonies about monastery dogs that could warn of an imminent snowstorm or avalanche, and numerous stories of people who were found deep in the snow, thanks to the intelligence, good sense of direction and excellent nose of the dogs. Between 1750 and 1940 the monastery dogs saved the lives of some 2,500 travellers.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the dogs were known as Alpine mastiffs, St. Bernhard mastiffs, monastery dogs or dogs of the Alps. The breed’s official name, Bernhardiner or St. Bernard, was adopted in 1880.

‘Lion’

In 1820, British artist Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-73) painted *Alpine Mastiffs Reanimating a Distressed Traveller*, a work full of drama. How is it possible that the artist could paint this scene so accurately? He never left Great Britain, but his travels to the Scottish Highlands likely inspired him.

Notice the handsome collar of the dog on the right. He is barking to inform the rescue squad of their location and that he has found something. The dog on the left carries the proverbial little barrel with brandy (based on fiction) around his



neck, and comforts the victim by licking his hand.

The dog at the right has been identified as ‘Lion,’ one of the first Alpine mastiffs to set foot on British soil, and the one on the left is considered to be his son ‘Caesar.’ Lion is wearing a red blanket with the initials “St.B” (St. Bernard). Landseer’s painting seems to be a Swiss picture, but it is pure English.

When roads and tunnels were built, and thanks to modern communication equipment, connections between the Alpine countries improved and the work of the hospice rescue dogs became less important. This began when the Simplon tunnel between Switzerland and Italy was opened in 1906.

Alsations and Labradors

In 2004, Vincent Fribault wrote: “Switzerland’s St. Bernard rescue dogs, known for centuries for saving avalanche victims from snowy Alpine graves, are to be sold by their monk owners as helicopters and heat sensors take over their work. At St. Bernard’s hospice, cradle of the breed, Augustinian monks want to devote more time to needy people and less to the 18 dogs.”

This does not imply that there was no future for rescue dogs in the snow. On the contrary, people skiing and climbing high snowy mountains get lost or killed. Hikers, skiers, snowboarders and victims of avalanches and plane crashes can still depend, apart from other rescue equipment, on rescue dogs. However, breeds such as German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers have replaced the St. Bernards, mainly because their size makes it impractical to use them in rescue operations.

Rescue dogs are in training all year round. When necessary,

1. A romantic depiction of St. Bernards by American painter Edward Herbert Miner (1886-1941)
2. A rescue operation ca. 1865. The dogs are types of Alpine mastiff.
3. *Alpine Mastiffs Reanimating a Distressed Traveller* (1820) by Sir Edwin Landseer, R.A. The dog on the right is barking to alert rescuers.

they fly with their handlers in a helicopter. Sometimes a cable is used for landing as close as possible to the victim(s). The dogs can also be transported in a cable car or chair lift.

Non-profit organization

Numerous groups in European countries train avalanche dogs. A successful training leads to three certificates: Avalanche Dog A, B and C. Internationally, the Alpine countries of France, Austria, Switzerland and Italy experience the greatest number



●●● 4. A rescue operation in the Bavarian Alps in 2008

of avalanches and loss of life annually. In the United States, Colorado, Alaska and Utah are the most deadly.

In Canada, the Canadian Avalanche Rescue Dog Association is a volunteer non-profit charitable organization whose goals are to train and maintain a network of highly efficient avalanche search and rescue teams across Canada.

In the 19th century, there was no objection to depicting victims as dramatically as possible. Photographs from the 21st century seldom show the victims in such circumstances, but modern avalanche dogs do the same work as the 17th-century monastery dogs. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.

A breeder/exhibitor/judge and retired bookseller and publisher, Ria Hörter also contributes to *Onze hond* (Netherlands) and *Canine Chronicle*.



dogsincanada.com/rescuers-in-training

Canadian Avalanche Rescue Dogs teams in training

dogsincanada.com/keno

A live avalanche rescue at Fernie, B.C.

dogsincanada.com/scenting-success

The amazing canine sense of smell