

Messenger Dog Badge Training

Terms used:

Base Camp is whatever you want to serve as a location for the dog to focus on and return to for a reward. You will want a strong motivator for the dog which s/he only gets at that location and from the searching handler (owner).

Outpost is the location the auxiliary handler and dog arrive at when they determine they need to send an urgent message back to the base camp. This location is discreetly marked at least 200 yards from the base camp.

Searching Handler (Owner) is the person that the dog will be interacting with and responding to while returning to their auxiliary handler.

Auxiliary Handler is the person with whom the dog will be with at the outpost and will have to want to find later after they return from base camp with the searching handler (owner). If it is not someone the dog knows then let them spend time getting to like and respond to them.

History: This badge is based on the activities of military dogs who, during wars, could be used to quickly get a message back to the base camp if the patrol teams needed help or reinforcements. The dog, after returning to camp with the message, would then lead a second handler to the last known location of the patrol team. If the patrol team had to move, the dog could track the team to the new location. This would often involve distances of several miles. For the badge, your dog will only need to return 200 yards to base camp and track an additional 100 yards from the original outpost.

The general scenario is that a scout and dog are on patrol at a designated outpost when the scout hears some suspicious activity in the distance. He sends a message with the dog back to the base camp asking for reinforcements. Once the dog is safely on its way, the scout goes to reconnoiter the area and to wait for help. The dog will arrive at base camp and find its searching handler (owner) to deliver the message. The searching handler (owner) will assemble help (theoretically), then direct the dog to lead them back to the outpost and then to track the scout (auxiliary handler) to their new observation post.

Training: Any dog trying for this badge should be trusted to come when called and not to wander off while off leash. If you are not sure, start in an enclosed area or on a long line. As with some of the other badges this badge may not be suitable for all dogs, like easily distracted dogs likely to take off on their own. It is also highly recommended that the dog has earned the tracking badge or has equivalent training, but this is not a required.

Back chaining is the easiest way to train this so remember that the motivator/reward is VERY IMPORTANT. Both handlers should reward lavishly at the locations the dog should associate them with – searching handler (owner) at base camp and auxiliary handler away from base camp and eventually at the outpost or new location.

Begin by having the auxiliary handler move away from base camp a little bit with the dog on-leash, but not out of view of the searching handler. Send the dog to the searching handler who will deliver the dog's favorite rewards and lavish praise before putting the dog back on a leash (each handler needs to have a leash). The searching handler can show the dog the reward as the dog is leaving to entice his interest and help him want to return. When released by the auxiliary handler, the dog should move

quickly and directly to the searching handler. If he doesn't, then the reward being used needs to be something the dog wants more.

Once the dog is back on-leash, encourage the dog to return to the auxiliary handler who will reward the dog with his favorite reward and use lavish praise as the searching handler returns to base camp with one of the leashes. Repeat the above step, gradually increasing the distance the dog needs to go between handlers. Add in a corner that puts the handlers out of sight of each other. If you add distance slowly, the dog will get really good at this fun recall game! This is one time when it's ok for the dog to pull on leash (getting back to the auxiliary handler) so you should use a harness. Remember the dog is doing a lot of running, so watch the dog to make sure you don't over-do it, especially if the weather is warm.

When you know the dog is very likely to do the behavior correctly, you can add the cues. You'll want a cue that means "return to base camp and find the searching handler (owner)" and a cue that means "find the auxiliary handler". A separate cue can be used for the tracking portion if desired.

Teach the dog to have a message tube, small wallet, or something that can hold a note attached to collar or harness. Some dogs don't even notice this, others are bothered by the container moving as they run. Any container that can hold a note can be used. But the searching handler should be able to quickly and easily retrieve the note.

Once the dog is going the required distance of 200 yards, he will need to start the tracking portion. Separate from this messenger dog training, you'll want to teach the dog to track (see Tracking Badge Instructions) for a distance of 100 yards. The auxiliary handler will leave an article of clothing or other scent article at the outpost which the searching handler (owner) will use to give the dog the scent to track. The leash may be moved from the collar to a tracking harness (or a harness put on) at the scent article if desired. Make sure the auxiliary handler always has a great toy or treats so they are worth finding!!

Then put the pieces together. If the dog gets confused, go back to a previous step where the dog was successful and build up the distance/difficulty more slowly.

Do's and Don'ts:

The handlers may use rewards for the final test; but should only deliver them when the dog first reaches them, not during the trip back to the primary handler or during the searching portion.

Neither handler may help the dog while he is searching. The searching handler (owner) might not even know where the auxiliary handler is located (the evaluator should know). If the dog gets confused or lost without regaining the correct track quickly, the entire test will need to be done again.

Be careful about contaminating your scent trail for the searching portion. Vehicle exhaust can deaden a dog's sense of smell and other people's scent could confuse a dog new to tracking.

The dog should be out of either handler's sight for most of the 200 yard return to base camp. The 2nd location of the auxiliary handler should not be visible from the outpost location. The dog must use his nose, not his eyes or ears to find the auxiliary handler.

Getting the badge by video:

If you are trying to get the badge by video, you will need an additional person to record the entire exercise. The video must show the dog the entire time. Keep the dog and handler in the frame in a way that the evaluator can use the video to see the dog's behavior/body language to determine if the dog is showing signs that he is on a scent trail. A side view of the dog's path would be ideal. If not possible, the camera will need to be positioned so that the handler is visible, but not blocking the camera's view of the dog. Follow the dog all the way to the end of the exercise when the dog finds the auxiliary handler.