

AMERICA'S SPIRIT

K-9 Rescuers

For highly trained dogs, a hazardous, frustrating assignment at Ground Zero

In the wreckage of the World Trade Center, a man and his dog play tug-of-war with a white pull toy. But it's not really a game. "When Ronnie finds something, he'll sit down," explains Dave Lee, 45, a retired Philadelphia police officer, of his partner, a German shepherd. "Then I'll reward him."

Sadly, Ronnie, who is primarily trained to search for survivors, has been finding only bodies. Working 12-hour shifts, Ronnie and some 300 other K-9 rescuers—including Bella, a Border collie who came from L.A. with her handler, firefighter-paramedic Deresa Teller, 47—pad over hot rubble, leading to injuries, dehydration and exhaustion. "The dogs are coming in covered with ash," says Andy Rose, one of 10 veterinarians staffing the tent set up to treat the canines with everything from antibiotics to IV drips. "They are stressed out and irritable." Vets are seeing fewer paw cuts, however, thanks to thousands of donated heavy-duty dog booties. (Some 1,500 of these were sewn since Sept. 11 by ex-nurse Louise Russell, 48, and helpers in Duluth, Minn.)

So far one dog has plummeted 40 feet, another 20 (both survived). Some suffer a sort of canine depression. The animals start getting discouraged, says Teller, if they don't find anyone. To prevent this, handlers take turns hiding for each other's animals so that the dogs experience some success. "Doing a live find," she says, "helps build a dog's confidence." As for Lee, his determination remains. When it comes to a rescue, he says, "there's always hope."

"They'll go through a couple of sets per day per dog," says bootie maker Russell.



KERI PICKETT



"You never give up looking for survivors," says Lee (with Ronnie on Sept. 16). "Anything's possible."