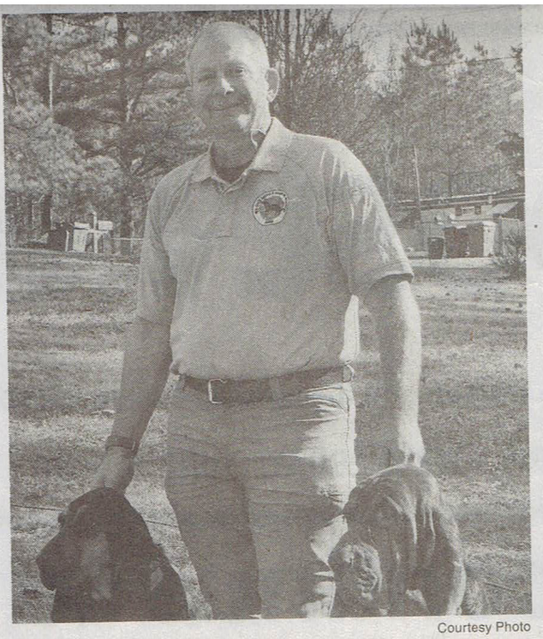
# MSSARDA certifies search and rescue dog teams



Courtesy Photo

Billy Miller with his search and rescue certified dogs Reba and Gus.



Courtesy Photo

Jennifer Cast with her search and rescue certified dog Willow.



Courtesy Photo

Mike Guice with his search and rescue certified dog Raylan.

By BOB BAKKEN
Editor

The Holly Springs-based Mid-South Search & Rescue Dog Association (MSSARDA) has announced that four individual search dog teams achieved mission-ready certifications during the fall of 2025, bolstering the non-profit organization's capacity to resolve missing person cases across Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas.

The newly certified handlers shared the distinct motivations and specialized training that prepared them and their canine partners for active fieldwork.

Billy Miller of Corinth achieved the rare feat of certifying separately with two trailing bloodhounds. Miller, an active Alcorn County community member who operates an HVAC business and manages the Robert Sibley Airport in nearby Selmer, Tennessee, was drawn to community service alongside his wife, Pam, after being introduced to bloodhound puppies.

The Millers were deeply moved by several highly publicized cases where missing children were found too late, prompting them to dedicate their dogs to search and rescue operations.

Their eight-year-old veteran bloodhound Gus recertified last October after a career that already includes assisting law enforcement on more than 15 cases. Joining him was Reba, a nearly two-year-old kennelmate whose training was severely delayed by an accident that required the amputation of one of her hind legs. Following intensive therapy, her surgeon cleared her for active duty.

Today, the two bloodhounds form a relay team: Reba quickly identifies the trace scent and direction of a trail, while Gus utilizes his superior strength and endurance to track the scent over longer distances.

"Working with a search dog isn't like Hollywood portrays it," Miller said. "It's a lifestyle change. You spend a lot of time developing a bond that helps you get inside your dog's head".

For Jennifer Cast, a native of Odessa, Texas who relocated to the Mid-South to work as a principal quality engineer for Medtronic in Memphis, joining MSSARDA provided a deeply personal mission. While training her German Shepherd Willow, Cast's mother began showing signs of memory loss and went missing on multiple occasions. Living eight hours away, Cast was unable to assist in those moments, which fueled her commitment to succeed.

Cast began her journey with MSSARDA in 2023 with a rescued German Shepherd that died just four months into training. Undeterred, she acquired Willow, who was running puppy trails at six months old and completed her certification at two-and-a-half years old.

MSSARDA Training Coordinator Judy Otto praised Cast for her "true grit" in mastering the wilderness survival, navigation, and first aid skills required to become a certified SAR Tech II handler. Cast now uses those skills to educate new candidates in the organization.

"Becoming a SAR Tech II was a major step outside of my boundaries," Cast said. "That experience helped me become stronger and more knowledgeable".

Mike Guice of Horn Lake, a Marine Corps veteran and retired law enforcement officer with 32 years of service, turned to search and rescue to maintain his lifelong involvement with working dogs. Guice, who works professionally as an explosive and narcotics canine trainer, selected Raylan, a four-year-old Deutsch Drahthaar bred from high-drive hunting dogs in North Carolina.

Guice and Raylan have trained together since the dog was four months old, merging Raylan's high energy with Guice's professional background in canine scent science.

"The decision to work in K9 SAR is very rewarding," Guice said. "You get to help your community while working with a dog."

The teams earned their official credentials following rigorous autumn evaluations. Miller's bloodhounds and Cast's German Shepherd secured their National Association for Search & Rescue (NASAR) Mantrailing certifications during testing in Crossville, Tennessee. Guice and Raylan earned an Area Search certification through the American Mantrailing, Police & Work Dog Association (AMPWDA) in Oklahoma.

MSSARDA is a non-profit organization that deploys volunteer teams to assist emergency and law enforcement agencies across multiple states.