

Quasar on the job

by Robert R. Macaulay, Vacaville, CA

This version of my experiences in Oklahoma City is written for publication in the GOLDEN RETRIEVER NEWS. Different versions of this article may be published under other titles and may be tailored to individual audiences.

For me, as for almost everyone else in America, April 19 started off as a normal day. I took my dog for a walk, ate breakfast, and went to work. Several hundred ordinary people who worked in the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City did pretty much the same thing that morning. None of us had any idea that a massive truck bomb would go off just after 9 a.m. that day, bringing my life into sudden contact with theirs.

Most everyone in America wanted to help the victims of the bombing in some way. The reason I was able to actually do so was the dog I took for a walk. My Golden Retriever, "Quasar," is a trained and certified disaster search dog, and we are a volunteer part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Urban Search and Rescue (FEMA - USAR) program. I was one of five dog and handler teams deployed with the Sacramento USAR Task Force to search for and rescue people trapped in the remains of the Murrah Federal Building.

TRAINING AND PREPARATION

The USAR system was set up in response to several events, including the Mexico City and Loma Prieta earthquakes, and Hurricane Andrew in Florida.

FEMA decided there was a need for several task forces to respond to major disasters where people were trapped in collapsed buildings. The 26 USAR task forces are scattered throughout the nation, with eight of them in California. Each task force is able to conduct both search and rescue operations, largely independent of any outside assistance. Most task force members are profes-

sional firefighters. Other task force members include structural engineers, medical support — and the canine search specialists, such as myself. One of the assumptions of the USAR system is that, by the time the USAR task forces arrive, all of the easily accessible victims will have been rescued. By the time we get to the disaster site, the people still trapped will be out of sight and probably unable to call attention to themselves. We also assume that many of the buildings we work in will be so unstable that rescuers will only be sent in if there is a near certainty a live person is trapped inside.

In a disaster, every trip across the rubble increases the chance of further collapse, endangering the dog and the trapped people. The dogs are the best way to search in a situation like this. They are light, agile, and can use their incredible sense of smell to locate people. The dog may be out of sight of the handler, or anyone else, when it finds the buried person. By staying focused at where the victim's scent is coming from and barking to alert the handler and other team members to what they have found, the dog is telling us that it is worth the risk of sending more people into that building.

The vast majority of the search dogs are selected for this work as puppies and trained for nothing but searching for human scent. A mature, fully trained and certified USAR dog will be able to work over large areas of rubble, independently of the handler if need be, sniff out the source of live human scent while ignoring all other scents, and bark long and loud at the source of the scent. It is this "focused bark to indicate live human scent" that tells the handler and the rescue teams where to begin digging. Getting a dog to the point where it can independently and reliably locate trapped people takes a lot of training. Typically, the individual components of the search game are taught separately, then melded together in advanced training work. I call the dog's search work a "game" because it needs to be fun and rewarding for them, but I've also found that the dogs that are really good at this type of work recognize that searching is more than just a game, and they are serious about the tasks that are set for them.

Another aspect of the search is that the dogs should



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generally not give a hard alert to the location of the dead. They may stop and sniff, maybe dig a little bit, but they should not bark, and they should move on without prompting from the handler. Retrieval of the dead is important, both from an emotional and a public health perspective, but rescue of the living is more important, and time is against the trapped victim. By focusing only on the single most important aspect of the search and rescue task to the near exclusion of all other aspects, we increase the chances of locating living victims. Some of the choices made in urban search and rescue are unpleasant, but that does not make them any less valid.

The team I was deployed with had five dogs, each of a different breed. We had a Golden Retriever, a German Shepherd, a Boxer, a Doberman Pinscher and a Belgian Tervuren. Other breeds used in disaster work include Australian Cattle Dogs, black Labradors and Border Collies. All the breeds did well, but if I had to start over again I would select another Golden without hesitation. When I originally purchased Quasar from Dee Dee Anderson in Redwood City, California, I was looking for a happy, hard-working, easily trained dog. I have found Goldens in general, and Quasar in particular, to be all those things. Quasar is very energetic and never met a person he didn't immediately fall in love with, and in most cases the feeling was mutual. The Goldens I have seen in search and rescue work have by and large turned out to be a very intelligent, happy, hard-working group.

DEPLOYMENT

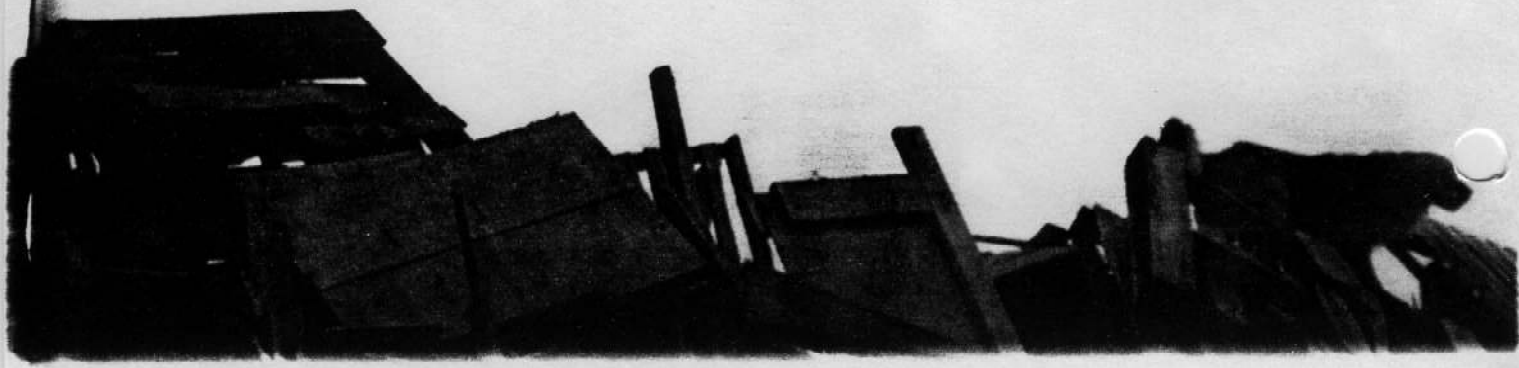
The first inkling I had of the bombing was a call from my brother, a firefighter in Sparks, Nevada, asking if I had heard about the incident. I had not, but the initial reports sounded pretty bad. On the chance that the USAR teams might be activated, I took an "early lunch hour" to go home and pack for a possible deployment. I would not be back at work for a week. By the time I got home, the official deployment order had been received, and I was to be packed, ready to go and at the front gate of Travis Air Force Base by 12:30. I was the first person to arrive at Travis, but soon the other dog handlers pulled up. We were packed up and driven to the flight

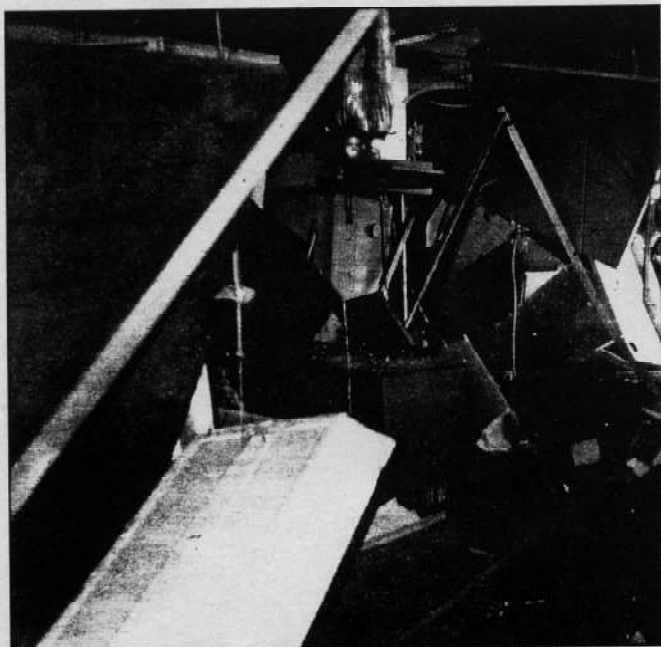
line at Travis — where we waited for more than an hour before we got the final go-ahead to leave for Oklahoma. During this time, we were interviewed several times by the media representatives who would fly out with us. At most searches the dogs are camera magnets, and that was especially true here.

We left Travis at about 6:30 p.m. on a C-141 transport plane. We arrived at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City just before midnight, local time. During the flight the dogs rode on the floor next to us. They did not seem to be too bothered by the noise of the engines or hydraulics, but they were unused to the conditions, so they did not sleep much. Neither did I. The plane was not designed for a comfortable ride, and I knew what we were getting into, so I was a bit tense and could not sleep. The dogs, of course, picked up on this, making them just a bit more restless.

From Tinker, we were taken by bus to downtown Oklahoma City. Long before we could see the Murrah Building we saw evidence of the bomb blast: Closed roads, police everywhere, and broken glass scattered across most of the streets. When we first saw the Murrah Building, it was brightly lit by the emergency work lights. It took a moment for me to take in the size of the building, and to realize that I was looking at the light shining through holes in the building itself. As we got to a better angle, we could see cranes and other equipment operating on the north side of the building, where the bomb had gone off. It was a surrealistic sight and very eye catching; no matter where you were or what you were doing, your attention was drawn back to this blaze of lights and to the face of a building that looked like it had been fed through a buzz saw.

The first order of business was to unload all our gear and to take our personal gear, such as sleeping bags, to our accommodations. As a search dog handler, I had actually expected to go straight to work, but the scene managers decided to deploy the task force as a unit rather than in a piecemeal fashion. We were to stay in the headquarters of Southwestern Bell, about three blocks north of the blast site. This home



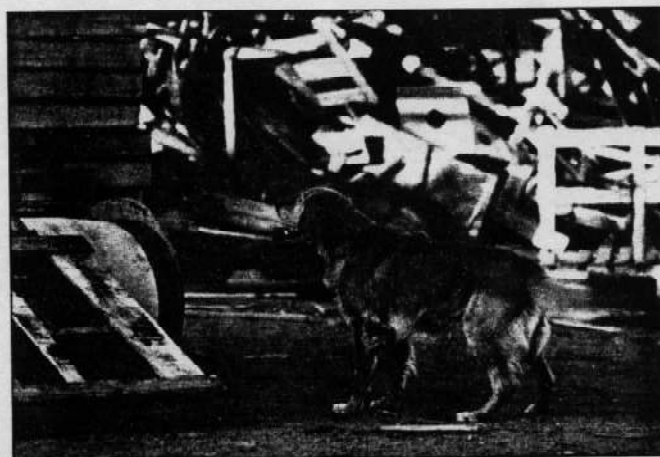


Interior shot of the bombed Murrah Federal Building that Quasar was working. Photo by Sacramento Fire CATF-7.



Above: Quasar training in concrete debris pile at Monterey, California. Photo by Robert Macaulay.

Below: Training the "focused bark." Helper is hiding in plastic barrel. Photo by Fred Pitts



away from home quickly became known as the "Hotel Bell." It was a beautiful building filled with nice offices, where we spread out our sleeping bags, set up the dog crates, and slept. As time went by, we realized just how nice a "hotel" we were staying at. Southwestern Bell could not do enough for us. They gave us free use of their phones (a major factor in keeping in contact with families back home), took dirty uniforms out to be cleaned, and in general made us feel at home.

The task force members were given a few hours' rest, but were told to be ready to go by 6:00. The entire task force assembled for a briefing, and then we went over to the equipment cache to gather last-minute pieces of gear before we went to work. On the way out of the building, we passed a banner that read "Pray for the victims, pray for the rescuers, pray for the people who did this." The people of Oklahoma City's spirits were more forgiving than mine at that point.

Our second view of the building was much closer than the first, and much more stunning. As we walked toward it, dawn was just turning the eastern sky to a dark blue, but all the emergency lights were still on. From up close, we got the idea of just how big the building was and how horribly damaged it had been. Broken glass was everywhere as we walked in, as were tumbled bricks and other signs of the power of the bomb blast.

The entire task force went into the parking garage, where we were to begin work. We were able to take a quick look at the debris piled into the basement area. This is where the doctors had been forced to amputate a victim's leg so they could remove her. Two of the dogs went to work in this area. After a short time, the other three of us were taken through a hole in the building out onto the north side. We were to search the rubble pile there. This was what was left of nine stories of offices, conference rooms and child care facilities, which had been pounded to bits by the blast and then dumped in a huge pile against the remaining building. Most of the pictures I have seen of the building show this area. The photos don't provide the detail of a close-up view, however. They don't show things like computers and phones hanging by a single cable, file cabinets ready to slide off the edge, or a family photo sticking out of the debris at your feet.

Standing right at the base of the collapsed structure could have been overwhelming if I did not have a task to do, but I did. I was finally going to work Quasar, and I had begun to tune out the overall scope of what I was seeing. I was nervous — I had never actually worked in a situation like this, and I knew there was some danger for both of us. But I also knew there could be live victims buried in the rubble in front of me, and their best chance to be found and rescued rested with the three dog teams.

We decided to split the rubble pile in two, with the bomb crater being the approximate dividing point. Pat Grant worked her dog "Topper" on the right (west side), and Shirlee Hammond worked "Spice" on the left. I watched where both dogs went and did not go, where they did and did not show any reaction. Then we pulled both dogs off the pile, and it was my turn.

No one else was on the rubble at this point; Quasar and I were the only ones working this area when we began. This was exactly the type of situation we had trained for — the dog working at a distance, taking direction from me but deciding on his own how to move in the general direction

I had set. I would not encourage or discourage his attention in any particular area. If he found a scent that interested him, he was free to follow it up and decide whether there was a live person there or not. Even though this was what we had trained for and how I expected to work, I was nervous when I started working Quasar. At no other time in my search career had it been so clear that the lives of a large number of missing people rested on how I worked my dog. I now know that no one was left alive in the debris of the building by the time I began working, but that is the knowledge provided by hindsight. At that time, I felt the weight of duty like never before.

We started on the right side and worked our way left. Quasar's light weight and great agility were very useful at this time. He had little trouble going into most of the areas I wanted him to check out. Some, however, were simply too inaccessible because of twisted rebar or other debris. He was not distracted by the presence of so many items with human scent, such as chairs, files and items of clothing. There were several areas where he stopped and paid greater attention, but then moved on. Some of these areas were where victims had been removed, or where the dead were still entombed in the building. At that time, however, we were not looking for and marking the location of the dead — we were strictly looking for live victims, as we had been trained to do.

There was a great gap torn in the far left side of the building, going most of the way to the south wall. Above this gap, a huge slab of concrete hung from the top floors. Spice had shown quite a bit of interest in this area earlier, and Quasar did as well. As Spice had done, Quasar went onto the top of the rubble pile and then partly into the building. I followed him in so that I could see where he was going and give him support and direction as needed. I knew he could work this area alone, but I felt more comfortable seeing where he was going, what his body language was saying, and knowing that he was safe. As before, he showed interest in a number of areas, but never focused on one particular area and never gave any vocalization, much less a bark. After clearing the area, we came off the rubble pile to let the search manager know where we had been and what we had found. I looked at my watch and found we had taken 30 minutes to do this first sweep.

By this time, other resources were coming back onto the scent. A SearchCam was now available to check out any area where the dogs had shown interest. Pat Grant told me that Topper had gone into a void — a gap left between two layers of concrete — and had shown some interest. I was to search the same void. The area was under a very large concrete cross beam, supported by a broken pillar. The greatest moment of fear I felt on the entire deployment was when I sent Quasar into this hole. My thoughts were pretty simple: Go do your work, but please come back safely. At first I sent him to the right, but he could only go a few feet before the void ended. To the left, the void went much further in. About five feet in, there was a drop-off. I couldn't see on the other side, but I encouraged Quasar to keep going. He jumped down — only a foot or so — and kept going. I could barely see him moving in the light from my headlamp, but it was clear when he stopped and started focusing his attention on something. I brought in a brighter light and could see Quasar sniffing intently at it. I gave him a "down" command and got an even better light. I could then see a strip of fabric that seemed to

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Bob Macaulay poses with "Quasar" — DD's Quasar Goldenlight. Whelped January 9, 1990. Sired by AFC Glenhaven Devil's Advocate UDT, MH, WCX out of OTCh DD's Calaveras Sparklin' Gold WC. Breeders: Dee Dee and Billy Anderson and Janet Naylor.



Quasar was part of a five-dog and handler team sent to Oklahoma City to search the rubble for victims. The dogs and handlers are a volunteer part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Urban Search and Rescue (FEMA-USAR) program. Search dogs are selected for this work as puppies and trained only to search for human scent.

have been drenched in blood. I saw that Quasar could not really go any further, and he showed no sign of alerting on a live person, so I recalled him and described what we had seen and where we had seen it to the search manager. The Search-Cam was brought in but could not identify anything further. I never found out if there was a body recovered here, but I expect there was.

As the day went by, more people began to work on the rubble pile. Cranes were again used to remove sections of the debris, and hand crews using five-gallon plastic buckets began to remove smaller pieces of debris. The heavy-rigging expert from the Sacramento USAR Task Force did amazing work with the crane operators to help safely remove slabs of concrete. As this happened, new void areas were exposed, and the dogs were called in to examine them for signs of live human scent. Some of the voids were too confined for the dogs to enter. Others were voids we had checked earlier but were now made more accessible by removal of some piece of debris. At this time, the pattern for the rest of our work was established. We worked the dogs under close control, focusing their attention on a small area and asking for a very detailed search. Also, we began to do something new — mark the areas where the dogs told us the dead were located.

In the middle of the afternoon, we were given a break of several hours. We were to return in the late afternoon, after more debris had been removed, and begin to work again. The two-hour nap gave me the energy I needed for the evening ahead. It also let us properly hydrate the dogs. They drank some water while on scene, but they were more interested in going back to work than in a drink of water. They needed the water, however, because of the warm temperature and the incredible amount of concrete dust in the air.

When we returned to the work site, there were some obvious changes to the rubble pile. Concrete slabs had been removed or cut into sections by drills and saws, the lights were on, and more people were at work. We met up with the other two dog handlers and, shortly after dark, began to work again. In this phase, an area of interest to the search managers would be identified and they would call for a dog to check it out. Sometimes the other rescue people on the pile moved away, but mostly they kept right on at their tasks; the dogs had to work around them. After one dog had worked through an area and the handler had discussed what was found with the search manager, another dog would be brought in to search the same area. The second team deliberately did not watch what the first team had done so they would not in some way prompt their dog to pay attention to one area or ignore another.

Just after 9:00 p.m., we changed our work method once again. All five dog teams were pulled from the main rubble pile and sent to search an area inside along the east side of the building. I believe this was on the third-floor level, but the damage was so severe that it was not possible to be sure. A portion of the area we were searching through had been filled with air-conditioning ducts and other such equipment; other portions were obviously offices or work areas. Several noteworthy things happened in this area. First, Quasar paid some attention to a piece of clothing. I looked closer and found it was a baby's bib: yellow plastic, with a white cloth front covered with small flowers. I checked the area carefully, but there were no signs of any people here. I guess the bib had just

enough scent to stand out to Quasar's nose in that particular area. This was the first time I had found something directly associated with children; it was very disturbing.

The next noteworthy occurrence was one I had not anticipated. Quasar became somewhat entangled in a set of miniblinds! He was stepping through them while searching an area and they caught around his feet. If I had not been close enough to see there was a problem and untangle them, I do not know what would have happened. Certainly his mobility had been impaired. He probably could have pulled free, but then again, maybe they would have stayed attached to him. I had envisioned a number of hazards, but plastic blinds caught around my dog's feet was not one of them.

Finally, Shirlee Hammond's dog Spice had shown strong interest in one particular area we could not get access to. We let the search team manager know and were informed that our shift was just ending, so we passed the information on to the New York City USAR Task Force coming to replace us. They were able to get access to the area and removed approximately 10 victims.

As we were getting ready to leave, we were informed that there was one more assignment for us to do. Across the street was the Department of Water Resources Building. Several people had been reportedly killed there, and many injured, but two were still considered missing. Dogs had not searched the building before, so we were assigned to clear all three floors. We worked from just after midnight to about 1:15 a.m. The dogs clearly indicated where people had been injured and had bled, but gave no indications that there were any people, living or dead, in the twisted offices and corridors of this building.

We arrived back at our accommodations at about 1:30 a.m. on Friday, April 21. We had started out from here more than 19 hours ago, and we were all pretty tired. Some of the dogs — Quasar included — were ready to call it a day, but others, such as Topper, had been reinvigorated by the time in the Water Resources Building. Given the option to go to sleep, however, all the dogs and people took advantage of it.

The next few days were very similar. We began our next shift at 1:00 a.m. on Saturday and worked to 1:00 p.m. We were staged to the side of the work area and brought in to search specific small areas in a very detailed fashion. The main change was the weather. It went from warm sunny days to high winds and rain. Occasionally, lightning storms would force a halt to all work. The winds and rain caused debris to fall from the higher floors, and everyone was pulled from the danger area. Everyone did less work and was more frustrated because of it.

One of the things we did begin to notice was excessive wear and tear on the dogs' feet. Some of this came from the overall work they were doing, but we decided that the worst damage came from the finely powdered glass that was everywhere. It was something we had not encountered before. Quasar's feet seemed to do better than the others' did. I attribute this to his small frame and his light way of moving. Even so, after three days he was showing the effects of hard work on his feet.

One of the things we did after the first day was to start our work shift with a little game of "hide-and-seek." We planted one of the rescuers in a safe portion of the rubble and let the dogs search for and find them. When they found the

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person and barked, they were rewarded greatly. This helped confirm to us that the dogs would still focus on and bark at live human scent, even in the presence of such constant smell of death, and it let us reward the dogs in the way they appreciated the most. Each of us knew that the dog's attitude would largely be a reflection of ours (emotions travel down the leash), so we made sure we kept our spirits up, and the dogs did the same.

After our shift on Sunday we were told we were being demobilized. Other teams were being brought in to take our place, to finish out the job. On Tuesday we flew home. When we left the Southwest Bell headquarters for the last time, I don't think there was a dry eye to be found; not among the task force members, and not among the employees who had been allowed back into their offices. The people of Southwest Bell had adopted us and had gone far beyond the call of duty to take care of us. They were sad to see us go, just as we were sad to leave them behind. I think they did a very good job of representing to us the spirit of everyone in Oklahoma City, a spirit of love and compassion, of caring for everyone. Actually, there may have been one set of dry eyes. Quasar did not know he was supposed to be sad at our parting of the ways. He was just delighted that so many people had come up to pat and hug him, and tell him what a good boy he was. Nearly paradise for a Golden Retriever.

AFTERWARDS

What can I say about what I learned in Oklahoma City? So much. The most important lessons were not new; they were old ones that had been reinforced. Probably the most important lesson is the value of setting a very high performance standard for this type of work and training dogs to that standard in many different situations. I can't anticipate all the twists and turns I will encounter on the next disaster, but I can expect that the tasks will be difficult and teach my dog that new things are not necessarily scary. He knows that we do our work in the same manner even if we are in a new situation. Give the dogs the broadest possible experience in training and they will give you the best possible performance when it really counts.

The related second lesson is that training is a continual, intensive investment. There are fewer than 20 advanced certified teams in the entire country. That means that in the event of a major disaster, Quasar and I will almost be certainly be among the first to respond, and we will be expected to be ready to perform our job as soon as we arrive. There will not be a few days to prime him for the task ahead. We will show up with the skills we have or do not have, and lives will depend on us.

I have talked with and heard of other dog teams that were in Oklahoma City. All the dogs that had taken and passed either the basic or advanced FEMA test did yeoman's work. The record of the other dogs is much more spotty. One team, however, deserves particular credit. Steve Powell, a dog handler from Oklahoma, and his Rottweiler "Bronte" were on scene the day of the bombing. Steve and Bronte were not trained to the FEMA standard, but they were available before any of the rest of us were. They went to work in the most frightening situation imaginable. Bronte showed enough interest in one area to bring in the rescue teams; they found and rescued Brandy Liggons. From talking later with Steve,

I think he is well motivated to work with Bronte toward passing the FEMA test. But on April 19, he was the resource that was available, he did the work that was necessary, and someone is alive because of it. In the last analysis, this is what all of the work is about.

It would be easy to level the events in Oklahoma City as a scar in my mind. Every time I see a picture of the building, I am reminded of the words Dante envisioned over the entryway to Hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." But there are other memories that are stronger than those of the evil done on that day. Those are memories of the good that was done in the minutes and days after the blast. So many people worked so hard to save a life, or to return loved ones to their families for a final farewell. The depth and strength of spirit shown in those days, especially by the people of Oklahoma City, is a reason to renew our hope, not to abandon it. I am proud that Quasar and I could be a part of that effort.