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Surrey’s Olive joins the ranks of Britain’s canine heroes

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A Guildford search and rescue dog who helped save the life of a vulnerable missing person in the Surrey countryside has received a national bravery award, joining a distinguished tradition of animals recognised for extraordinary service to humans.

Olive, a five-year-old working cocker spaniel with Surrey Search and Rescue, received the Service Award at the inaugural Burns Bravery Awards, hosted by former *Strictly Come Dancing* professional Karen Hauer in London on 3rd November.

Her achievement was all the more remarkable because she had qualified as an operational search dog only five months before making the discovery that earned her the award.

A life saved in the dead of night

In July 2026, Olive and her handler Jonathan Cole were called upon to assist Surrey Police in locating a vulnerable missing person in a remote part of the county.

The search took them into a steep-sided valley in the middle of the night. Although conditions were clear, the still air made it particularly difficult for Olive to detect the scent of a human being.

Then Jonathan noticed a change in her behaviour. Olive raised her nose and quickened her pace, signalling that she had detected something.

Following her along a path towards the edge of the valley, Jonathan shone his torch into the woodland below and spotted the missing person.

The search team reached the individual and brought them safely into the care of the emergency services. Jonathan believes Olive’s discovery saved their life.

The achievement followed almost two years of preparation, including 286 hours of formal training and countless additional hours of practice.

Jonathan said: “Olive had no idea how extraordinary that find was.

“To her, it was simply the game we’d spent years playing together: find the person, get the reward. But that night, the person was in real danger and her getting to them quickly mattered more than ever.”

Surrey’s volunteer lifesavers

Olive is part of Surrey Search and Rescue, a voluntary specialist organisation that works alongside the police and other emergency services to locate missing and vulnerable people.

According to Surrey’s Police and Crime Commissioner’s Office, around 2,100 people are reported missing in the county each year. While not all require specialist searches, some cases involve serious risks to life, particularly where people are vulnerable through age, illness, mental health difficulties or other circumstances.

Surrey Search and Rescue has around 80 volunteers and is regarded as one of the country’s busiest lowland rescue organisations. Its members give their time to training and emergency call-outs, often working in darkness, difficult terrain and adverse weather conditions.

Specialist search dogs such as Olive can make an important contribution, using their highly developed sense of smell to locate people who might otherwise remain hidden from search teams.

The best known is the PDSA Dickin Medal, established in 1943 by Maria Dickin, founder of the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals. Often described as the animals’ Victoria Cross, it recognises outstanding gallantry and devotion to duty by animals serving in military conflicts.

Its recipients have included military working dogs, messenger pigeons, horses and even a cat.

One celebrated recipient was Simon, the ship’s cat aboard HMS Amethyst during the 1949 Yangtze Incident in China. Despite being wounded when the vessel came under fire, Simon continued catching rats that threatened the crew’s food supplies. He remains the only cat to have received the Dickin Medal.

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More recently, Kuno, a British military working dog, received the medal in 2020 after suffering severe injuries while confronting insurgents during an operation in Afghanistan. His actions helped protect British troops, but his injuries required the amputation of a rear paw.

Another military search dog, Theo, received the Dickin Medal posthumously in 2012 for his work detecting explosives in Afghanistan.

The civilian counterpart is the PDSA Gold Medal, often referred to as the animals' George Cross. Introduced in 2002, it recognises life-saving acts of bravery and exceptional devotion to duty outside military conflict.

Its recipients include police dogs injured while confronting dangerous suspects and family pets whose extraordinary actions have saved lives.

In 2019, police dog Bacca received the Gold Medal after suffering eight knife wounds while protecting his handler from an armed attacker.

An earlier recipient, Endal, a golden Labrador assistance dog, was honoured in 2002 for his remarkable devotion to his disabled owner.

Lionel Blackman

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