

# HALF MOON BAY REVIEW

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## New search-and-rescue unit mounts up for County

By Anastasia Burke--Special to  
the Review



When it comes to equestrian sports, Colleen Combs has experienced the adrenaline rush of aiming a wooden mallet at a small white ball while astride 1,300 pounds of galloping horseflesh, with other similarly mounted opponents pounding toward her with betrayal on their minds.

Members of San Mateo County's Mounted Search-and-Rescue unit.

And she knows of the weary solitude that comes with endurance riding, in which it's not unusual for competitors to be navigating treacherous trails at 2 a.m. in the morning, often in cold sheets of rain.

Despite dabbling in almost every aspect of horsemanship, Combs always comes back to the basics, riding the heather-covered hills and sandy beaches of San Mateo County.

And now, when she guides her 21-year-old quarter horse, Rio, into the narrow ravines and piney ridgelines, she and her mount will bring with them a year's worth of training in search and rescue techniques as members of the newly formed San Mateo County Mounted Search and Rescue Unit.

"I love to ride the backcountry," Combs said. "Maybe now I can help out our communities and even save a life."

Comprised of men and women who donate their time, money, and horses to assist the sheriff's department in the event of an emergency, 18 new horse and rider teams participated in a swearing-in ceremony Nov. 5 at Woodside's Mounted Patrol Grounds. Most members are



The weather is  
**P/Cloudy**

Temperature 56° F

## Question of the Week

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Woodside's Mounted Patrol Grounds. Most members are from San Mateo County, but some, like Palo Alto resident Combs, live in surrounding counties.

And, most noteworthy is the fact that this is the first time in San Mateo County history that women have been allowed to participate in an officially sanctioned search and rescue (SAR).

Certified in dozens of different SAR techniques that take at least a year to learn, each horse and rider team has an estimated 480 hours of training and is prepared to handle everything from crowd control to traffic jams. But their primary mission is to navigate the often-treacherous terrain of the county in search of missing persons.

"A SAR is a great asset, especially this one," declared Sgt. John Hein, who coordinates all volunteer emergency services for San Mateo County. "A mounted SAR has the ability to search large areas quickly."

A horse and rider can get into areas that might not otherwise be covered. Also, a mounted unit is helpful in finding a person trapped in a gully who must shout to be located. In similar situations an air squad or motorcycle unit might not hear that cry for help."

Although the San Mateo County Sheriff's office had a mounted unit at one time, it was used primarily for crowd control and was disbanded approximately two years ago due to lack of use. In cases of missing persons, the sheriff's office most often called upon the Mounted Patrol of San Mateo County.

Founded in 1941, when a small band of horsemen were deputized to patrol the Coastside for enemy submarines, the Mounted Patrol developed into a volunteer search and rescue unit at the close of World War II. For years, it was the primary mounted group "called out" in the event of missing persons, and was a key factor in many successful SAR actions.

In the mid-1980s, a lawsuit was filed against the all-male organization demanding it allow women to join. A key point in the lawsuit was that since the patrol was officially linked to the sheriff's department, it was required to comply with Equal Opportunity Employment rules. Rather than break with years of tradition as a men's organization, the members of the mounted patrol chose to break off ties with the Sheriff's Office.

According to Casey Terribilini, a longtime member of the Mounted Patrol and the main force behind the creation of the newly formed squad, the loss of official status impacted the club.

"Many of the guys had been through some very rigorous SAR training but, in recent years, that's fallen a bit by the wayside," Terribilini acknowledged.

"I wanted to bring that back, and began to think that the time was ripe for a different kind of SAR."

He envisioned a volunteer unit that embraced all sectors of the equine community, regardless of the sex of the individual or the style of riding they participated in. Approaching the Sheriff's Department with the idea, he received an enthusiastic go-ahead.

"The SAR is a neutral platform," he said. "We have men, women, people who train hunter jumpers, people who ride cutting horses, people who ride for competition and people who ride for pleasure.

"What we were looking for was a way to build bridges between the Mounted Patrol and the rest of the horse community."

Combs hopes that the expanded vision for the new unit will lead to better links between the patrol and the community.

Of the 18 inductees, one third were women, a trend that is continuing in the latest training classes. All inductees participated in twice-monthly classes taught by some of the most hard-hitting in the SAR business.

"As a member of the Volunteer Horse Patrol (a mounted organization that helps patrol county parks), I had to know CPR, First Aid and basic horsemanship," said La Honda resident Willie Johnson, who hopes to complete his training sometime next year. "The training for this new SAR is a whole other thing, very intense, very tough."

"I am tough. I have to be," agreed Inspector Tom Casey, a Carson City intelligence officer certified to teach SAR techniques in both California and Nevada. "If I put you out there to save lives, you want to be saving lives. You don't want to become part of the problem."

In addition to CPR and First Aid, trainees are taught the fundamentals of map reading, orienteering, traversing

rugged terrain and searching a grid.

"There is the personal training, and then there's the horse certification process," Johnson said. "The horse and rider are a unit and have to learn how to cope with a variety of difficult situations."

For Terribilini, the training of the horses is often the most rewarding part of the process, resulting in a mounted team that has new respect in itself and in one another.

"We expose the animal to balloons, backpackers, flares, fireworks, strollers, umbrellas, helicopters, bullhorns, cave situations. It's basically horse hell," Terribilini laughed.

"There is an unbelievable excitement you get from watching people go through hours and hours of training and at the end, walk away with a newfound confidence in their horses," he continued. "And the horses gain a whole new confidence in their riders. It's very gratifying to see."

Adding to Terribilini's enthusiasm is the fact that, at last, women and men are riding together for a common good.

"It's was long overdue," he said. "And a good alliance, a great alliance."

If you are interested in learning more about SAR, logon to [www.SMCMSAR.homestead.com](http://www.SMCMSAR.homestead.com).

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