

Suzie

It started as an everyday winter evening walk for Tom and his seven-month-old German Shepherd Suzie, but the rest of the evening was far from ordinary. Richard Hill explains

the news-maker dog



◆ Suzie, having been missing for 36 hours, is reunited with Tom and Rose in the High Dependency Unit at East Glamorgan Hospital (Picture: The Western Mail and Echo)

On 3 January 1997, Tom and Suzie left their home in Tylorstown for their three mile evening walk up one of the Rhondda valleys. Suzie, as always, walked and ran a far greater distance than Tom, racing ahead a few hundred yards, tearing back, dashing here, there and everywhere.

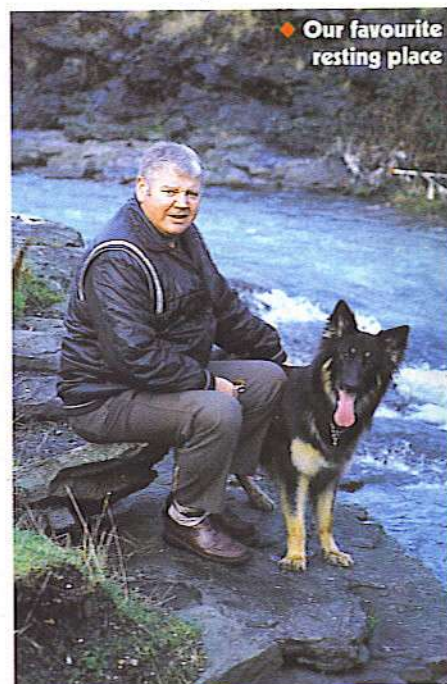
As a pup, Suzie needed regular exercise, and, on doctor's orders, so did Tom. At 55, he had already suffered a number of heart attacks and undergone quadruple heart by-pass surgery, so

exercise for Tom was an important part of this recovery. Although he still suffered some chest pain from time to time, recovery for Tom was going well, until now.

Tonight was dark and cold, made even colder by a high wind chill factor, a cold wind whipping down the slender steep-sided Welsh valley, not that the cold bothered Suzie any. They were almost half-way through their walk, nearing the point of no return, when Tom started feeling breathless with sharp pains in his

chest. He slowed down as he reached a bridge over the river where he stopped, rested and took some of his medicine. Fortunately it was downhill from here on. After a short rest for Tom, and another few frantic minutes of dashing everywhere for Suzie, they turned for home and into the wind, which caught Tom full in the face. Inhaling the cold air caused severe pains in his chest. But there was no alternative, they had to get home.

Walking ever more slowly, with Suzie becoming more impatient, Tom headed for home along the disused railway line that followed the river course. The pain was getting worse. After a few hundred yards Tom had to sit down on a bench to take more medication. He watched Suzie rummaging, dashing and scrambling in the brush around him. She at least was having a whale of a time. Tom looked up to the horizon where the sodium lights of Ferndale glimmered through the trees. That was the last thing he saw that night. Soon afterwards - and still a mile from home - Tom collapsed.



◆ Our favourite resting place



◆ "Want a hand with your work mate?"



◆ "Mum, you can't mix whites and coloureds in the same wash"

Later that night, Rose, Tom's wife, arrived home from work. But there was no Tom, and no Suzie. It was late, approaching 11pm, and Rose instinctively knew that something was wrong. After a short unfruitful search, Rose and their son Matthew called the police. They instantly summoned assistance to search the route that Tom and Suzie would have taken.

Two hours later, shortly before 1am, the police, accompanied by Matthew, spotted the intense reflections of Suzie's eyes in their powerful torch beams. Suzie started barking and, as they approached, they could see that she was lying on something. As more police converged on Suzie, she panicked and ran off. What the police then saw was that Suzie had been lying on Tom's body.

Fortunately, although unconscious and cold, Tom was still breathing and paramedics were soon on the scene to take care of him. Once satisfied that his dad was in good hands and safe, Matthew concentrated on finding Suzie.

He didn't have to go far. She sat, ears erect, watching the extraordinary events from a distance. Matthew was delighted and ran towards her but Suzie, Matthew's best buddy, was far too scared and ran off.

Every time Matthew stopped, Suzie would stop, turn and look at him, but just wouldn't let Matthew near her. Matthew followed Suzie for over three miles that night, but lost her in the end.

A few hours later, early on Saturday morning, Rose visited her husband in the coronary care unit of East Glamorgan Hospital near Pontypridd. Tom was recovering from hypothermia and his heart condition was being critically monitored. Both were thankful he was

The sharp wind caught Tom full in the face and even inhaling the cold air caused severe pains in his chest. But they had to get home

alive. If it hadn't been for Suzie it might have been much different. "How's Suzie?" Tom asked. "She's fine," said Rose, "she's in the house." But Suzie was still missing. Rose had lied, she had to. She knew that the stress of knowing the truth could seriously jeopardise Tom's recovery. By now local, even national newspapers, radio and television stations were showing increasing interest in Suzie's remarkable instinct, lying on Tom to keep him warm, probably preventing hypothermia killing him. The following morning Rose reluctantly admitted to Tom that Suzie was still missing. "That's it." Tom told the nursing staff, "Do the necessary paperwork. I'm out of here."

Tom was extremely upset that Suzie had now been out all night, particularly such a cold night. After all, Suzie was still just a seven-month-old puppy. "She was still young enough," said Tom, "to go off with someone and not pine for us. And she is such an attractive dog."

Tom's concern for Suzie's welfare was far greater than for his own, but fortunately he was persuaded not to

discharge himself. Instead he suggested to Rose and Matthew that they hastily made small photocopied fliers and distribute them to children around the district. Tom reasoned that the heightened press, radio and television publicity would alert children who would soon spread the word and might produce results.

Later that day, as a slightly healthier Tom was being transferred from coronary care to the high dependency unit, Rose received the phone call they had all been waiting for. Suzie had been found, alive and well, and was now safe in Matthew's care. "Everything's good now," said Tom. Later that day, as a special treat to Tom, Suzie was allowed to visit him, the first dog ever to have been allowed into the high dependency unit.

It was a remarkable story. Suzie, Tom and Rose were in the news everywhere and a few days later made an appearance on GMTV. Since then Suzie has been honoured with a number of awards, and was recently awarded the prestigious Gold Medal Lifesavers honour at the Pro Dog of the Year awards in London.

She's still crazy, gets up to mischief and answers the phone when she's home alone and takes the washing out of the machine as soon as Rose puts it in. Suzie is delightful and now works as a PAT dog. Thankfully, Tom has recovered well. Suzie still takes Tom for his daily

exercise. He didn't want to lose her, she doesn't want to lose him. Her kennel name is Mintas Mountain Echo. Perhaps she was just living up to her name "Mintas" which is Gaelic for "Protector".



◆ Suzie takes Tom to receive her award from Suzanne Dando at the 1997 Pet of the Year Awards in London.