

Evaluation Report

Regional Search and Rescue Exercise

November 2015

This is an evaluation of the NZSAR funded, Southern District, training exercise held at Rees Valley Station, Glenorchy on 6,7,8 November 2015. The District boundaries are those of Region 7 of NZ LandSAR.

Personnel to be Trained

LandSAR volunteers and Police Search and Rescue staff from the Southern District.

Volunteers came from all of the established groups in Southern District excluding Stewart Island:

Wakatipu (Queenstown - hosting)

Wanaka

Southland (Invercargill)

Fiordland (Te Anau)

Catlins

Eastern Southland (Gore)

Central Otago

North Otago

Dunedin

Police SAR Squad members came from:

Queenstown

Wanaka

Invercargill

Te Anau

Dunedin

In total 89 people took part in the SAREX and their details and achievements were recorded. All Southern District groups were represented.

Needs Analysis

Prior to the exercise a sub-committee of the Wakatipu LandSAR group, including Police SAR representatives from Queenstown conducted an evaluation of the District needs.

The Southern Police District (Land SAR Region 7) is comprised, geographically, of Otago and Southland. There are extensive wilderness and mountainous areas within the District and a long, remote and exposed coastline along with large inland lakes. The weather is typically that normally associated with the latitude, but is also exacerbated by mountainous areas. This poses extra challenges associated with staff and volunteer safety as well as urgency around response times.

Police SAR Squads and LandSAR groups are spread out across the District and for the most part operate and train independently of one another.

The groups and squads appear to be well equipped and trained to deal with the types of operations typical of their respective localities.

It was identified though that interoperability at incident management level is an area that could be significantly improved upon. While it would appear that all groups are using the CIMS model of incident management there appears to be considerable variation in the management processes used by each group. Different groups use different computer systems and some groups still use a paper-based system. It was recognised that this is an obstacle to effective interoperability. In March 2014 a Southern District seminar chaired by Inspector Al Dickie ended with broad agreement that the groups in Southern District should use the same supporting computer program – and that this program should be “SAR Track”.

The Wakatipu group formed a view that there did not appear to be any progress towards this goal and that getting this progress was the most important pre-requisite to achieving genuine interoperability.

It was further recognised that in addition to IMT practices requiring standardisation there was still a broad range of skill levels at the Field Team Member level. This was also identified as a risk to interoperability as well as an organisational risk in general. A significant opportunity was however identified if all groups were to adopt the (then, trial) LandSAR competency standards for Field Team Members.

Finally it was also recognised that the involvement of IMT staff in competency training with the Field Team staff would have various benefits. It would give some of the IMT staff who are less experienced in the outdoors an appreciation of the hazards, difficulties and opportunities as well as building trust and confidence between the management and operational members.

Conclusions

That a traditional SAREX would achieve some of what was identified in the Needs Analysis but that there was limited potential for achieving enduring change and having all teams using a common operating platform while working to consistently high standards.

That the most effective way of progressing towards the goal of effective interoperability at IMT and Field Team levels would be to:

1. Hold a workshop with the key IMT representatives on the first evening to not only confirm the earlier decision to adopt “SAR Track” but to get buy-in to advance towards this goal.
2. Hold a workshop with field team members on the first evening to introduce/reintroduce the concept of Field Team Member Competencies.
3. To conduct a day-long, round-robin skills assessment exercise throughout the second day to assess IMT and Field Team members against the Trial Field Team Member Competencies while developing closer relationships between management and field staff.

Day One

Field Group Workshop

This was coordinated by Mike Ambrose the LandSAR Group Support Officer for Region 7.

All Field Team Members assembled at 1800 hrs.

The workshop was aimed at getting Field Team members to answer questions relevant to their assessments as either Probationary or full Field Team Members. It was an interactive session with a lesson plan prepared by Ed Halson, the Training Officer of the Wakatipu Land SAR Group. A record of participation and results was taken and subsequently available to assessors.

IMT Group Workshop

This was facilitated by John Fookes. It included a SAR Track presentation by Ed Halson and a further question and answer session by the system designer/programmer, Bart Kindt.

All IMT Team Members assembled at 1800 hrs.

This workshop involved IMT members from all Region 7 groups (excluding Stewart Island). Broad agreement was reached that there is a need to streamline management processes and that SAR Track is the main vehicle for this. There was some concern about cost, training and support and in some cases changing from locally tried and true methods. It was agreed that Police need to take the lead on this and that it will not be an overnight change. Any change would need to be considered against the results of a Police District SAR review that was underway at the time. Another complicating factor identified was the tendency for the groups in Southern District to work in isolation.

It was decided that upon the conclusion of the District SAR review – then underway - John Fookes would engage with District management to gain support for the IMT changes and to identify the specific solutions to the cost, training and support issues raised. It was recognised that this may generate discussion on whether adjacent groups should in some locations amalgamate their IMTs.

Guest Speaker

At the conclusion of the workshops Richard Mills, the manager of Heliworks who provide helicopter support to the Lakes District Air Rescue Trust and SAR in the Wakatipu area, drew on his 35 years in rotary wing aviation to present on the role of helicopters in Search and Rescue. This was delivered to the combined groups.

Day Two

Combined Competency Training and Assessments

This was organised by Ed Halson.

All Field and Management Team Members assembled at 0730 hrs and the day concluded after 1800 hrs.

Prior to the main component, the round robin, there were two instruction sessions.

The first, *“Structure and Organisational Overview of SAR in New Zealand”*, was conducted by Mike Ambrose. All personnel attended.

The second, *“Helicopter Safety”*, was conducted by Glenorchy Helicopters who had provided a senior pilot and helicopter without charge. All personnel attended.

After these sessions all personnel moved on to the round robin session.

Ed Halson had sourced and appointed an assessor/facilitator for each of the round-robin stations. The assessors were senior SAR practitioners considered competent to assess the prescribed skills and mentor personnel in aspects of the skills as necessary.

The stations were set up to allow participants to demonstrate the skills required to meet the Probationary and/or full Field Team Member skills to the assessors.

The stations were spread out over several square kilometres of the Rees Valley and were set up in such a way as to require groups to navigate between them.

The stations were:

- Search Methods – Sound Lines/Sweeps, Purposeful Wandering, Passive Methods.
- Track and Clue Awareness – involving several short tracks for each group.
- Clue Processing and Direction of Travel.
- Map and Compass Navigation.
- GPS Navigation.
- River Crossings – assessment and methods - theory and practical.
- Low Angle Slope Lowering of Casualties.

Presentation on the use of Drones

In the evening, at the conclusion of the round robin sessions, Julian Cahill of the Queenstown Police, representing the Wakatipu Land SAR Group did a presentation and demonstration of the group’s drone focussing on capabilities, uses and restrictions. This was delivered to the combined groups.

Training Outcomes

Field Teams

- All participants were assessed as having demonstrated competency and also provided supporting evidence as Field Team Members in terms of the LandSAR trial competencies for Field Team Members. For some members this required additional mentoring – however the structure of the round robin component lent itself to this.
- A full, formal written record in relation to each individual was kept and this is available to the Group Training Officers.
- Police Incident Controllers gained confidence in the skills of the Field Team Members and now have a written record of those who have met the competencies. This will aid in deployment decisions.

- Although not specifically intended as an outcome, informal contact between those attending generated a considerable amount of discussion that led to the exchange of useful ideas.

Management Teams

- There was general agreement that SAR Track is to be adopted by the District for search management and recording.
- There was agreement that there is a need for regular SAR Coordinators meetings at a District level to ensure that decisions with District-wide implications are implemented and followed through. This has now been implemented.
- There was an acknowledgment that interoperability is hampered by the wide range of IMT processes employed across the District and that the best way to resolve this over time is to have the single operating platform and supporting processes – the implementation of which will be facilitated by the regular SAR Coordinators meetings (see above).
- It was acknowledged that some groups may not be able to implement all of the necessary change so the coordinators will need to consider whether there will need to be some rationalisation or combining of IMTs.

Final Comments

The training exercise was very well received by the participants and feedback from both the management and field personnel was positive. A number of those involved expressed the view that something similar should be run regularly – suggestions ranged from two to three yearly intervals. Another view expressed by a number of senior participants was that, while the traditional, large-scale, scenario-based exercises have their place they tend to limit the training benefit for some personnel due to the limited role that many end up playing.

Finally, there was general agreement that genuine interoperability is a worthwhile goal but there were frank acknowledgments that it would take some time and effort to get IMTs to change from some of the current practices to one system. All agreed that it will take regular, Police led interaction to achieve this.