

Waikato Search and Rescue Exercise June 9th to 11th 2017

Introduction

The Waikato Sarex was a combined Waikato District and Tauranga area event held in the Kaimai Ranges. Waikato and Tauranga work closely together in this area as the ranges are on the boundary of both areas.

The area of the exercise is on a farm close to Matamata. The farm borders the forest Park. The facilities at the venue more than meet the needs of the exercise.

The overall numbers are very low. There are 7 LSAR groups in Waikato and 1 in Tauranga. Including police there are 19 field staff and 10 for IMT. AREC are managing the comms.

The small number may be due to this exercise was supposed to be run approximately 3 months ago.

General Safety

Throughout the exercise safety briefings were given, both general and at each station. This meets Worksafe, Police, and LSAR requirements.

9th June

There was no formal training planned for this evening. This was a meet and greet for all groups. However it was mostly police that attended with only a few LSAR.

10th – 11th of June

The training was supposed to start at 08:00 with 3 workshops 2 helicopter safety workshops and 1 LSAR dog workshop.

Due to weather the helicopters did not arrive and the program modified.

LSAR Dogs

The whole group completed the dog workshop. This started with a talk relating to the background of LSAR dogs and training requirements followed by a practical demonstration. During this workshops multiple questions were asked.

The objective of this session was to give the participants a better understanding of the capabilities and use of LSAR dogs in an operation. This objective was met.

Helicopter Safety

The helicopters arrived after the fog lifted and the second workshop commenced. This related to safety while working around helicopters. Safety briefing were given on both the BK and Squirrel helicopter. These are the helicopters used by the local groups. Opportunity was given to the participants to move in and out of the helicopters. They were not going at time.

The objective of this session was to ensure that participants understood the dangers of working around helicopters, knew safe procedures, and become familiar with the type of helicopters that they would normally operate. This objective was partially met (refer to recommendation 1)

Navigation Rogaine

Participants were then put into 4 teams of 4-5 and completed a navigation Rogaine in the forest area. The teams had 3 hours to complete a GPS navigation exercise in the adjoining forest park.

The objective of this session was to test the skill of GPS navigation for the participants. I believe this was met however more improved learnings can come from this session (refer to recommendation 2). Consideration can be given to saving and correctly downloading GPS tracks.

IMT Management using SARTRACK

The objective was to manage the SAREX using an IMT team and the software program SAR Track

This objective was not met. There was insufficient trained IMT staff for the exercise to manage the exercise, and no IMT staff on the 11th

AREC

AREC were involved in running the communications for the SAREX. This included taking bookings from teams for their activities and general communication with the teams.

Objectives could have been set for them including message handling and they may have been able to add value to the Communications exercise.

Round Robin Activities

8 different activities were planned for teams to move around for the rest of the exercise. 5 to be completed on the 10th and 3 on the morning of the 11th.

Each activity was planned for 1 hour then teams were given 30 minutes to move to the next activity. The plan was for each activity to be run as an assessment and points given to teams.

My intention was to visit each activity observe for a period of time and talk to the participants and activity leaders. I had no intention to stay at each activity for the whole period of time as I did not wish the leaders to feel that they were being assessed in their teaching methodology.

The objective of these workshops was to assess the skills of participants and to add a bit of competition in the SAREX by way of assessing the teams.

I will discuss each activity individually

Overall the objectives were mostly met. There was confusion whether these exercises were a training exercise, an assessment exercise, or a mixture of both. There was no obvious clear marking schedule for the assessment based on the objectives set. The timing of certain exercises was changed due to either safety or disadvantages of running the activities at night. (refer to recommendation 3)

Pack Inspection Team Building

The objectives were to ensure team members carried appropriate gear for an operation and that team members work as a team.

These objectives were met. Improvements can be made for future (refer to recommendation 4). The teams going through this workshop enjoyed it.

1st Aid

The objectives were to demonstrate 1st aid equipment carried by individuals and demonstrate basic procedures based on scenarios

These objectives were met. The feedback from the teams and leaders was positive. (For recommendations for improvement see recommendation 5)

Stretcher Carry

The objectives were to secure a patient in a stretcher and to carry that stretcher over a given course.

The activity did not fully meet the objectives. The stretcher carry became a lower using technical rope techniques using equipment that is not usually carried by general SAR teams. To meet the needs of the teams and objectives the activity should be changed (recommendation 6).

Map and Compass

The objectives were to demonstrate navigation using a map and compass.

These objectives were met and the activity identifies a number of deficiencies in people's skill levels. This activity opened a few eyes in relation to navigation and could be the basis for further training.

Communications

The objectives were to demonstrate the knowledge and use of communication equipment.

The objectives were met. This activity was more of a training activity as opposed to an assessment. There were some equipment issues. There is ability to expand on this activity (see recommendation 7).

Bushcraft

The objectives were to demonstrate basic bushcraft skills and to safely handle a firearm.

These objectives were met and teams enjoyed the learnings from this exercise.

Wandersearch

The objectives were to demonstrate their knowledge and use of wandersearch tracking equipment.

These objectives were met, for team members who had never used the equipment before there was some good learnings occurring amongst the teams. The area for this activity was not suitable. (refer to recommendation 8).

Observation Skills

The objective were to as a team use observation skills to locate items in a certain area.

This objective was met. The activity was put in place of tracking as the trackers were not available to run the activity. The activity was completed very quickly and additional related activities could have been added (refer recommendation 9)

Recommendations

- 1) I have observed that there is a trend throughout New Zealand of lack of helicopter training and flying time for LSAR. This is due to reduced support from RNZAF and cost of private helicopters. In this SAREX all staff got a briefing about helicopter safety then moved in and out of the helicopter. At the time the helicopters were not operating. Speaking to participants there is limited exposure to training with helicopters for activities such as deploying teams, hover loading and unloading, and winching. For many staff they will only be exposed to this during an operation which is not ideal and a potential safety issue. This is an issue that can only be resolved at a national level.
- 2) In teams of 4 or 5 there is limited opportunities for all team members to improve their navigation and GPS skills. If there were teams of 2 or 3 and paired up appropriately skilled vs not skilled there could have been better learning opportunities.
- 3) By having a full briefing with the leaders of the round robin activities on the Friday night some of these issues may have been resolved.
- 4) A larger area for team building activities would be useful, also a minimum gear list that is checked off by the leaders will more accurately identify gear deficiencies.
- 5) A list could have been handed out to each member after the exercise illustrating key components for a SAR 1st Aid kit. There were 3 scenarios and limited time. By dropping a scenario more time could have been spent ensuring teams got the most out of the scenarios.
- 6) Different types of stretchers should be utilised based on what the teams are likely to use. Also the carry should be within the scope of what is expected for a general SAR team member and using equipment normally carried by SAR teams. The leader expressed that all SAR personnel should know skills relating to lowering a stretcher. This is not used on a regular basis and specialist people are trained for this. It is more likely that teams will carry stretchers over difficult terrain and this is what this exercise is meant to cover.
- 7) This activity can be expanded to using different channels on the VHF radios and demonstrating reverse channels. This is an ideal time to assess the correct procedure of sending messages.
- 8) There were more suitable areas to complete this DF tracking task. Ideal locations are open areas where there is large enough space so that triangulation and other techniques. At this location along the farm road would have been ideal as there were multiple hills corners and gullies.
- 9) The observation was completed in a few minutes additional related activities such as purposeful wandering to locate clues could have easily been added as there were many suitable areas nearby. This type of activity would have been ideal for this exercise and made it more relevant to an operation.

Summary

When either reviewing training or planning training I consider several elements. The 1st and primary element is are the people involved enjoying the training. When people enjoy training they are engaged and in a better frame of mind for learning. Everyone I spoke with was engaged throughout the whole weekend with no negative feedback. They will also return for further training.

Once people are learning the thing I then look at is, are the outcomes meeting the needs of the people involved. It was clearly demonstrated that the needs of the teams and individuals were met. There was a large range of skills and abilities. The training catered for all of the ranges. One potential issue which I have not yet examined is, does the training meet LSAR competencies and do the leaders of each activity have the ability to sign off those competencies.

The weekend programme had sufficient variety to ensure that people remained engaged throughout the SAREX, also I believe that social interaction between each group is important. There was plenty of time for people to mix and get to know each other.

There was a competition component which could have been used to engage the teams further to build up more comradery and developed more of a competitive spirit.

In summary the SAREX was well executed with good objectives set. Positive outcomes and comments from all persons involved were positive. Credit needs to be given to those people who organised and set up the weekend.

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