

Ground Search And Rescue Has Grown Up!

A tightly spaced line of figures emerges slowly from the fog shrouded woodland. Some are wearing orange vests and hats and one is holding a compass. Some can be heard occasionally uttering the name of a child. A leader tries to keep them in line and speaks into a radio. The line slowly fades again into the mist on the other side and disappears from view.



This classic vision of a ground search and rescue (GSAR) team could not be further from the truth. SAR Units are now guided by Global Positioning Systems and their radios may even automatically transmit their position back to a sophisticated Search Command Vehicle displayed, in real-time, on a computerized map. Most team members will have individual pagers and modern outdoor clothing made with high tech materials. Modern statistical analysis has done away with tightly spaced lines in favour of fast moving small teams whose directions and tactics are dictated by sophisticated behavioral analysis of the missing person and computerized calculations of which areas have a high probability. The teams may even carry thermal imaging equipment to see through dark and fog. Yes, Ground Search and Rescue has grown up.

These changes did not occur easily or overnight. In the mid-1980s SAR teams in British Columbia, Alberta and Nova Scotia began to import more up-to-date Search Management principles and tactics from the United States and England.

Thus began a revolution in thinking, development and tactics that was fuelled mostly by an altruistic desire to find more people alive. In the 1990s the National Search and Rescue Secretariat (NSS) added a catalyst in the form of federal grants from the New Initiatives Fund. With adequate funding in hand, the pace of change rapidly accelerated to where Canada is now considered to be an international leader in modern Search and Rescue techniques, technology, management, and theory. Indeed, several countries including Sweden and New Zealand have studied British Columbia's volunteer-

based system as a model for modernizing their own SAR capabilities. Software designed in British Columbia specifically to manage large SAR operations, was used in 2003 by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help manage and coordinate the multi-state search for missing parts that fell to earth after the Space Shuttle *Columbia* explosion.

Canada's SAR volunteers act directly in support of the local police and other agencies such as Emergency Preparedness, ambulance, the military, Coast Guard, Coroners Service, and other government agencies.

A search always starts as a missing persons file managed by the police. Because SAR Units are the closest thing that most municipalities have to a Civil Defence Unit, the SAR volunteers also perform disaster-related roles such as manning the evacuation barricades in BC's urban interface wildfires in 2003 and searching for victims after the tornado in Pine Lake, Alberta (in July 2000).

SAR Units also play a key role when other unusual events occur. RCMP Staff Sgt Don Bindon has said there is nothing

SAR volunteers played key roles during BC's urban interface wildfires.

extra in the budget. Police budgets involve public funding and are carefully crafted to ensure that the maximum bang for the buck is achieved under normal circumstances. So when something abnormal occurs that is within the training and experience of a SAR unit, they can provide the extra expertise and manpower necessary to perform roles that are formally within the sphere of police services. This assistance can go well beyond SAR tasks and has even extended to evidence searches at major crime scenes, issuing evacuation notices and manning barricades during evacuations. Sometimes this means that SAR volunteers must give evidence at criminal trials, civil law suits and Coroners inquests.

Both Provincial and National associations were created to help structure and plan the revolution. In British Columbia the Justice Institute was given dedicated government funding to develop standards for training and operations with the additional role of delivering training to the volunteers in core areas.

Computer technology now plays a key role in managing large SAR operations



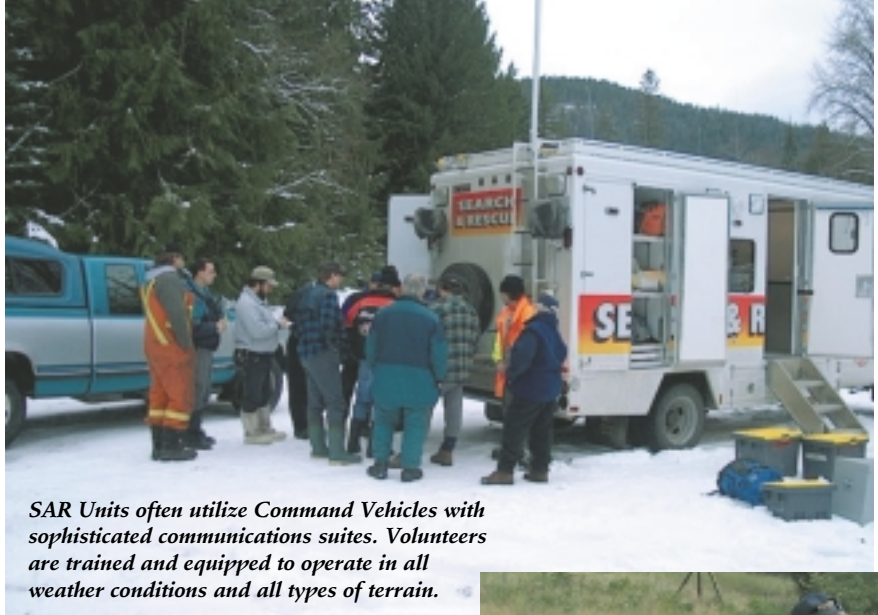
One of the greatest challenges faced by SAR Units is the public perception that they are either paid or are an extension of the Canadian Military. The truth is that they are, almost without exception, charitable organizations manned by volunteers from all walks of life. SAR membership includes doctors, lawyers, accountants, housewives, students, labourers, shift workers, senior citizens etc. They have to pay for their own personal equipment and must fundraise for Unit equipment and training, with little or no government funding. Despite those financial challenges SAR services are provided free of charge. It is truly a case of people helping people.

In recent years, an increasing number of women have joined the ranks and are now as involved in key roles as are men. The stereotype of the SAR member, as a strapping 6 foot male, has been blown to pieces by modern developments. SAR Units recognize that they can use a wide range of skills for support roles such as logistics, planning and communications.

In British Columbia the dedication, high levels of training and motivation of the SAR volunteers cause the police and other fully paid agencies to consider them as unpaid professionals.

SAR Units are not only a phenomenon of the Provinces. Nunavut, the Yukon Territory and the Northwest territories all have fully developed volunteer SAR Units. While the tactics of those SAR Units may vary due to terrain and the type of operations, their SAR volunteers still play a key role. These units, as well as those of the coastal provinces often regularly operate with federal agencies such as DND, the Coast Guard and Parks Canada. This level of interoperability is a goal that the National Search and Rescue Secretariat has pursued with fervor since its creation after the 1982 Ocean Ranger disaster off the coast of Newfoundland (the mighty drilling rig capsized, killing all 84 men).

SAR Units are not just reactive to operational tasks but are often pro-active as well. A newly emergent area in the last two decades is one called Preventative SAR. With the assistance of grants from the New Initiatives Fund a number of educational programs such as *Hug-A-Tree* have been developed to teach children how to survive when lost. Other more sophisticated campaigns such as *Smart Risk* and *Adventure Smart* engage in social engineering to educate the public in manag-



SAR Units often utilize Command Vehicles with sophisticated communications suites. Volunteers are trained and equipped to operate in all weather conditions and all types of terrain.

ing risk when engaged in outdoor activities. Many of these initiatives are supported, if not actually delivered, by SAR volunteers. Other more direct activities may involve marking poorly mapped trails or placing warning signs near natural hazards.

British Columbia has almost as many SAR incidents per year as the rest of the country put together. Not only does it have extreme terrain that varies from semi-arid deserts to coastal rainforests and real mountains, but it is also one of Canada largest tourist destinations for backcountry recreation. It is one of the few places in the country where such a large proportion of the population can literally step outside its back door and within 10 minutes be in wild country. The number of SAR operations per year has increased from 684 operations in 1994/1995 (involving 1,002 subjects) to 984 operations (1,310 subjects) in 2004/2005. Accordingly, BC has a network of 93 SAR Units and 4,700 SAR volunteers to respond to these incidents. In contrast, Prince Edward Island has only a handful of SAR Teams and SAR operations per year.

The ever-increasing role of backcountry recreation in BC's economy spells even more work for the SAR volunteers in the future. Things are simply different across the country and this is reflected in the makeup, number and size of the various SAR units. Ideally the location of SAR Units and their support is determined by operational need.

For more info check these sites:

www.nss.gc.ca	www.sarvac.ca
www.sarinfo.bc.ca	www.pep.bc.ca
www.vernonsar.ca	www.nasar.org
www.osarva.nt.net	www.casara.ca



SAR volunteers are often thought of as unpaid professionals by police task forces.

As the annual rate of SAR operations increases, the problem of volunteer burnout becomes more prominent. SAR Units already experience an annual attrition rate of approximately 15% and this creates a need for effective recruiting and training.

Yes, SAR has grown up, and it continues to develop and mature. Not content with its current progress, the SAR community continues to eagerly surge into the future looking for new concepts and techniques. Initiatives are being considered to set up foundations intended to provide secure funding for the future. Even newer technologies are being exploited to improve the SAR response at all levels. National conferences are resulting in vigorous inter-personal networking and information sharing that allows the SAR Units from each Province the opportunity to forge new partnerships and disseminate new ideas and techniques. Planting the seed is all it usually takes as the SAR volunteers enthusiastically undertake each new idea. The future looks bright as the SAR volunteers vigorously pursue their chosen part time profession. **FL**

A former infantry officer, Don Blakely is presently a lawyer and has been a SAR volunteer for 18 years. His responsibilities have included being a SAR Manager with Vernon SAR in British Columbia.