



Tri-County Ground Search and Rescue Group Inc. Occasional Paper # 8

In Defence of Strong Search Manager Certification Requirements

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This paper was written as a personal reflection on the need to introduce strong Search Manager certification programs within the volunteer GSAR community in the province. The aim is to address the issue of losing volunteers who do not feel they require formal search management training, at recognized levels, in order to continue to direct search operations.

Search and Rescue volunteers provide emergency response to police forces. GSAR groups commit exceptional levels of time and money to training their members in search and search management techniques. The level of investment is such that the expertise in managing GSAR operations resides with the volunteer sector search managers, rather than with the police officers who act as Incident Commanders. In such a situation, the question of certifying the competence of search managers must necessarily arise. Along with the questions of certifying comes the entire question of expectations the GSAR community places on those volunteers who have experience managing GSAR operations without necessarily having formal search management training.

Police Framework

Police forces are responsible for lost and missing person incidents within their areas of responsibility. They are therefore legally responsible for the overall conduct of search operations. Recent RCMP policy changes recognize the need for proper SAR training. According to their policy "Detachment Commanders ensure that [..w]hen warranted, a SAR trained RCMP Search Com-

mander is appointed and a search is initiated".¹ RCMP policy continues:

"RCMP Search Commanders assume overall on-site authority for the organization and management of the actual search and ensure the search is well organized and managed according to proven management procedures. The assistance of a SAR trained volunteer civilian Search Manager and SAR trained volunteers may be requested."

[..]

*"As a standard for training, the RCMP has formally recognized "basic", "advanced" and "management" SAR courses produced by, or based on the principles of, the United States based Emergency Response Institute (ERI), and the U.S. National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR)."*²

The policy concludes by saying: "Recent developments have brought a new level of SAR importance and accountability in the RCMP and a greater reliance on the development and use of trained volunteers."³

SAR involves providing a specialized emergency response service to police services in our area of

¹ "Welcome to CCAPS-Contract Policing-Search and Rescue" <http://www.rcmp.ccaps.com/sar.htm>, May 05, 2002.

² Idem

³ Idem

operation. The Province of New Brunswick under an MOU and SAR Support Plan recognizes volunteer SAR teams.⁴ We are also recognized by police forces who have also signed a Service Level Agreement with the Association and who call on the services of the local teams.

The Service Level Agreement states that the Association, through its member teams are, responsible for providing, inter alia, “teams of trained and certified management”.⁵

From this short review of police policy, it is clear that the RCMP will privilege the role of volunteers, up to and including the use of civilians in management positions, but only to the extent that those managers are “SAR trained” and search operations are conducted according to “proven management procedures”. The training recognized by the force is ERI or NASAR search management programs.

NBGSARA Framework

The NBGSARA has been using NASAR based training material since 1990. The Managing the Search Function (MSF) and since 1996, the Managing the Lost Person Incident (MLPI) are the basic search management courses provided to volunteer, police, DNR&E and Parks Canada personnel. One session of the Planning Section Chief Course, again a NASAR product has been provided as advance management training.

The NASAR courses have been provided in 1990, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998 and 2000. The bylaws of the NBGSARA require that the association host a management course on a bi-annual basis. Volunteers were also provided access to a Parks Canada hosted course in 2001. Since 1990, 150 people have participated in these courses. These courses have always attempted to ensure police and volunteers train together.

At the Board of Directors meeting in May 2001, the NBGSARA adopted a policy on Search Manager Certification⁶. According to this policy, the

⁴ Government of New Brunswick, “Support Plan for Sea, Air and Ground Search and Rescue Operations and Training”, 06 APR 1990 and attached MOU.

⁵ Service Level Agreement Between the Royal Canadian Mounted Police J Division and New Brunswick Ground Search and Rescue Association, March 17, 2001.

⁶ NBGSARA, “Certified Search Manager Policy” Revision 1.1, 05 May 2001, available at

NBGSARA will certify a Search Manager provided:

1. They are a member of a team in good standing with NBGSARA
2. They have successfully completed the MSF or MLPI course
3. They are recommended for certification by their team

Each team is required to submit a request for certification within 45 days of the AGM. The Training Officer will inform the team of the decision on the certification request within 45 days. The Training Officer will provide a list of certified search manager to the provincial GSAR steering committee within 90 days of the beginning of the financial year.

On order to retain the certification, a search manager must meet certain currency of practice requirements. Certified search managers must be staffed into a management position for one search or two full-scale mock searches within the previous 12 months. Member teams must maintain backup documentation on currency requirements for a minimum of three years.

Managers whose certification expires can be re-certified for up to 24 months after the expiry of their certification by successfully completing the MLPI exam. Expired certifications older than 24 months can only be renewed if the candidate successfully completes the MLPI course again.

Importance of Standards

We have seen from the review of RCMP policy that proper training is considered important in search management. The police attach such importance to proper training that they have recognized two organizations as the source of search management practices. Within NB, the NBGSARA has also recognized the importance of training in proper search management and has used NASAR material exclusively since 1990. This reliance on a single source of management doctrine, some times criticized within the volunteer sector in the province, has important implications.

Best Practices

http://www.nbgsara.nb.ca/docs/pol_std/pol_srchmgr_v1-1.pdf as of 22 May 2002.

The management of GSAR operations has evolved dramatically since the 1975 publication of lost person behaviour studies by Syrotuck⁷. Various courses have been developed from a common framework. The framework published in *Managing the Lost Person Incident* book by Ken Hill currently directs NB GSAR. MLPI is the distillation of the work done by GSAR volunteers and professionals from across North America. The current version is the 3rd edition, 4th revision, 1997. It represents the consensus on GSAR management as determined by the broad-based membership of NASAR.

No one can ever expect to arrive at a “final” definitive version of a GSAR management framework. We will continue to review the outline in MLPI and continue to improve it as we gain more and more experience. But what we can state is the MLPI is the most widely reviewed and used management framework, and the one from which all other can and should be measured.

MLPI provides GSAR volunteers with a management framework that can be considered “best practice”. Monitoring the revisions to MLPI will also provide the GSAR volunteer with an excellent opportunity to integrate new and improved approaches to their own practice of search management.

Liability Mitigation

When providing emergency response services, liability for error, incompetence or negligence cannot be underestimated. Claims against the police force, the GSAR teams, GSAR leaders and individual GSAR volunteers can be brought before civil courts. The assessment of liability and therefore the award of damages will be based on a number of considerations, the most important of which will be diligence and reasonable care.

⁷ William Syrotuck, “*Introduction to Land Search Probabilities*”, 1975. See also “*Some Grid Search Techniques for Locating Individuals in Wilderness Areas*”, 1974, and “*Analysis of Lost Person Behavior*”, 1977

In assessing liability, the court will consider the actions by the managers of the search and attempt to determine if they exercised proper care.

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One of the first elements in establishing proper care will be the level of training and whether any certification or attestation of training has been obtained. A further consideration will be the currency of the practitioner, i.e., is search management something that the volunteer does regularly. Finally, the actions of the search manager will be measured against a standard that will most probably be the NASAR or ERI training program.

Commonality of Management

A core element of MLPI is a SAR implementation of the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS provides organizations with a management framework that provides for easy escalation or de-escalation of operations, allows integration of multiple organizations into one effective operation and lays out clear lines of authority, responsibility and accountability.

The GSAR implementation of ICS, as outlined in MLPI, allows NB GSAR teams to operate together when the search requires more resources than can be fielded by a single team. It also allows managers to rotate effectively to ensure proper rest of command staff.

ICS allows teams to preplan operational responsibilities and duties and therefore deploy field resources more quickly than having to start from scratch for each operation.

By having a common management reference, we can ensure that the management of a search is up to the highest current standards. It also allows us to benefit from the development work and research of all the volunteers from across North America who contribute to NASAR and its course material. Finally, the common management standard obtained from a common training program provides a conscious framework from which detailed operational policy for all NBGSAR member teams can be developed.

The Interest of the Subject

In our considerations so far, we have spoken about the interests of police forces or volunteers, but the most important reason to have proper training and certification standards is to **protect the interest of the subject**.

It is all too easy to forget the primacy of the interests of our search subjects when we start planning training and certification programs. The volunteer GSAR teams exist to locate and rescue lost, missing and injured people. These are people who are in danger. When searches are managed properly, these people can most often be returned, safe and sound, to their loved ones. On the other hand, when searches are poorly managed the outcomes can be less pleasant.

The harsh reality behind the need for best practices, the mitigation of liability and commonality of management is that when we don't do it right, people die. With the availability of proper training and currency of practice, there is no reason why the interest and life of the search subject should be put at risk. If we want to hold ourselves out as emergency service providers, we have an obligation, as much moral as legal, to ensure we provide the best possible management of the search and rescue operation. If we are truly dedicated to the interests of the search subject, we will continually strive to improve our training and the expectations we have of ourselves and our ability to effectively manage search operations.

Standards and Their Importance

GSAR teams in the province have gone from being ad hoc groups of people that come together when someone in their community gets lost to unpaid professional, specialized service providers, called in to do what the local police force can't do. As our teams have progressed, the rec-

ognition provided by the province has grown. The police forces that use our services have recognized our contribution and have formalized their relationship with us through services level agreements. As we have progressed, so have the expectations of the other stakeholders and the general public.

As we progress, we will have to continually improve the standard of service we deliver. Not only will we have to provide better search and search management services, but also we will have to improve the management and sustainability of our teams.

The skills, commitment, sacrifices and rewards of being a GSAR volunteer, particularly a volunteer GSAR manager, have changed since the mid 90s. They must continue to change as the GSAR volunteer sector progresses into the next decade and century. As we move forward there will undoubtedly be individual volunteers that will not be willing to make the changes or invest the time required to meet the new expectations. Although unfortunate, this is a process of constant revitalization of our teams. It is both healthy and necessary. As a volunteer organization, a GSAR team must constantly provide an incentive for new, more skilled people to join. It is so much what is lost when an older member leaves a team, it's about what we gain when new people with new ideas join the organization, revitalize it and help it adapt to changing requirements.

Best practice, liability mediation, commonality management, and most importantly, the life and welfare of search subjects, mean we have no choice but to continually improve our management, our training and our certification standards. Continuous improvement bring with it new challenges, but at the same time provides the basis for the revitalization of local teams.

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