



Southern Regional SAREX

Glenorchy 11,12, 13 May 2012

Review

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Southern Regional SAREX - Glenorchy, Queenstown, 11,12, 13 May 2012.

Objectives of the exercise for the Southern Region:

- **to run a SAR operation in challenging terrain from an unfamiliar ICP**
- **to establish an Incident Control Point (ICP) and staff this with an Incident Management Team (IMT)**
- **to build a regional team**
- **to test efficacy of regional response**

Objectives of the review team:

- **Evaluate establishment and implementation of CIMS structure and functions**
- **Evaluate implementation and efficacy of search management processes.**

Significant factors affecting the SAREX

- Strong and appropriate leadership from the exercise organisers [REDACTED].
- Establishing an IMT in a woolshed as opposed to the Operations room in Queenstown Police station.
- Populating IMTs and establishing field teams with personnel from throughout the region with representation from Queenstown, Southland, Te Anau, Dunedin and Central Otago.
- Use of RNZAF Iroquois - an unfamiliar resource as local operators are normally utilised
- Challenging terrain
- Unsettled weather with forecast southerly fronts passing through a largely alpine search area during the SAREX duration.

Scenario

An appropriate scenario had been developed involving two subjects who had been dropped off at the Routeburn track road end, with the stated aim of scouting a high level route for a running section of a multi-sport adventure race. Clues had been placed in a series of huts and sign had been laid at critical decision points, two subjects and the clues were placed in the field by a local helicopter prior to the arrival of the Iroquois and the commencement of the SAREX.

Overview

The IMTs were notable for their calm professional approach. Despite the significant challenges faced by the management teams this calm, quiet, efficient and professional manner was maintained throughout the exercise from the initial notification on Friday to demobilisation midday Sunday. The reviewers feel that Search and Rescue in the Southern Region is in capable hands. Our overall impression of the SAREX was that it was a job that was very well done in difficult and demanding circumstances. The comments and recommendations below should be read with this overall impression in mind. The review has been organised around the two general areas of CIMS and Search Management processes.

CIMS

The artificial SAREX environment and the difficulty of establishing an effective Incident Control Point (ICP) in a woolshed provided significant challenges to the team. Once the field teams were kept out of the immediate IMT area and vests were used to identify unit managers the operation ran much more smoothly. Some IMT members were unfamiliar with CIMS and lacked knowledge of the CIMS roles and functions; however this unfamiliarity was mitigated by an intuitive approach to incident management and strong leadership skills.

Resource tracking, status monitoring and a lack of visible dissemination of such information was a factor throughout the SAREX. There was minimal projection of digital maps and no apparent GPS downloading or display of such information. Lack of capacity in the Management Support Unit was a significant contributor here (further exasperated by a member of the MSU having to be deployed as a missing person).

Poor communications arising from difficulties associated with terrain and equipment were an ongoing issue throughout the SAREX. There was no visible comms plan and the lack of a dedicated comms unit and associated manager contributed significantly to this issue. The comms function was initially retained, at least in part, by the Operations Manager (OPSM) who had considerable other functional responsibilities including Safety. This was an altogether unsatisfactory situation and led to the OPSM span of control being compromised.

The SAREX would have benefited through the appointment of a dedicated safety officer. However there was a dedicated paramedic on site but this role was not identified on the command chart.

Some IMT managers (but certainly not all) fell into the 'activity trap' and were doing not managing. There were considerable available personnel and managers could have added to their teams to ensure that they were managing the incident rather than being task focussed.

The woolshed/ICP had some major deficiencies as an ICP. One major factor was the access which was up stairs through an unprotected platform and a heavy sliding door situated over 2m above ground level. This platform was often cluttered with people and in the dark was a significant hazard. The close proximity of the ICP to the Heli-pad was also a significant issue and detracted from the efficient working of the IMT; the Heli-pad should have been sited some distance from the ICP.

Unfamiliarity with the Incident Action Planning (IAP) process was apparent but rectified to some extent after some mentoring. Some training in the setting of goals and SMART objectives would mitigate this issue.

The lack of any investigative detail for the planning team to get their teeth into was a significant factor and led to an artificial environment. However the scenario resulted in an operations driven SAREX with the IMT reacting to clues in the field and tasking field teams appropriately.

Toward the end of the operation several teams were deployed into a confined location in order to track down a subject who had been sighted. A person was deployed from the IMT into the field to coordinate the search effort. This field deployed manager was variously referred to as "forward ops, forward command, forward control, and forward base" It was the opinion of both reviewers that at this stage the IMT was vulnerable and there was a significant chance of control of the incident being transferred to the person in the field. Such a field deployment requires considerable care and thought, good communications and the understanding that control remains with the IMT and the OPSM, there is only one incident control point. The correct nomenclature for such a role is 'sector supervisor' and this person must answer directly to the OPSM. For Cat II Search and Rescue operation this role could also be that of 'On Scene Coordinator'.

Regular planning meetings were held throughout the SAREX. These short meetings provided ample opportunity for information sharing and collective problem solving, they were well run and occurred on a regular basis.

Handover briefings were very well done. In general IC's and unit managers exhibited excellent leadership and management styles throughout the SAREX. IC's and unit managers fulfilled their roles in a collaborative inclusive manner with staff input encouraged, but the ultimate decisions were made by the IC/Unit manager.

Search management processes

On notification the initial information collection and assessment of the situation was performed effectively and efficiently. However the obvious reflex tasks of investigating the initial planning point (IPP), probable direction of travel and a quick helicopter recognisance of both the subjects probable route and the likely attractors along that route such as huts etc., were not undertaken for some considerable time. The reasons for this oversight were a combination of 'exercise fog' and issues around the use of the RNZAF Iroquois (addressed elsewhere in this report). The failure to affect these basic reflex tasks had a major impact on the unfolding of the scenario and the subsequent conduct of the SAREX.

The initial response and reflex tasking phase occurred with little or no reference to the available statistics or lost person behaviour data. The reviewer was concerned that the vast majority of the resources were deployed outside the 95% statistical zone for all relevant LPB categories. It should be noted however that both subjects had been placed some considerable distance from the IPP and the subjects would have been statistical outliers regardless of which LPB category they belonged to.

The scenario unfolded in a manner that led to an operationally driven search with little need for scenario analysis, formal planning or the investigative function of the IMT.

Written team tasking sheets were not done well. Taskings were in general imprecise with considerable potential for confusion. Examples of such potential confusion included a task '*proceed to Kowhai Creek*' (there were two Kowhai Creeks in search area and the tasking referred to the Kowhai Creek that was not named on the map); '*Proceed to the base of Scotts creek and set up camp*' (Base of Scotts Creek?). A task issued on Saturday evening did have a seriously deleterious effect on the search. The tasking read: '*you will be dropped below .1388 make your way down by the easiest route*'. If this tasking had read: 'sign cut all likely routes down from the saddle then proceed down by the easiest route', the copious amount of sign laid intentionally by the subject would probably have been identified and the subject could have been located that evening, thus sparing the injured subject from a night on an exposed mountain side with an incoming southerly front.

Contingency planning was lacking in some areas. Some teams had just one means of communication - VHF radios - no HF back up and no contingency planning for a staging area or pick up point in case of a communications break down.

Issues pertaining to the RNZAF Iroquois presented the Management team with significant challenges and hugely complicated the operation. Saturday morning was fine and sunny with a forecast cold front predicted to move over the search area later that day. Searchers were dressed and ready to be deployed at 0730hrs. The helicopter arrived and everyone was briefed and the machine began to fly at 1030hrs. The requirement to winch all searchers into the machine and the slow speed at which the machine placed teams in the field had a huge impact on the operation. Many volunteers had driven considerable distance to take part; one example being a Te Anau team that had arrived Friday night, camped and were ready to be deployed at 0730hrs. Saturday - that team were finally airlifted to the search area at 1400hrs. which was an unacceptable delay. The operation was mainly an alpine search; despite the critical weather situation on Saturday 12 May the Iroquois had deployed just three teams by 1200hrs. It seemed at times that the volunteers were being used to train the Iroquois crew rather than the Iroquois supporting the SAR operation.

Recommendations

ICP - the woolshed chosen as an ICP encompassed food preparation, cooking facilities, areas for eating and socialising, the sole toilet, registration, tasking and de briefing areas, the IMT itself, a full wool-press and several bales of wool - all in one contiguous space. It was not insulated, cold and so noisy that conversation was impossible while the helicopter was working nearby. The whole complex was approached via a significant safety hazard, a concrete platform with no safety rails approximately 2m above ground level. Some thought must be given to identifying a more suitable ICP location if the Queenstown Police Station Operations room is not to be utilised.

Safety Officer - consideration should be given to appointing a dedicated safety officer for the duration of the exercise.

CIMS Roles - a degree of confusion and unfamiliarity exists around the CIMS roles. All IMT personnel should be made familiar with these roles and all IMT members should have a copy of 'Search and Rescue Incident Management Guidelines, 2006'. (Land SAR NZ to supply). All IMT members, certainly those in a management role, should undertake CIMS Level 4 training.

Management Support - is a critical IMT function and there is an evident lack of capability in this area. Both further recruitment and the utilisation of personnel from neighbouring areas should be considered. Care should be taken to ensure MSU personnel are integrated into functional areas of the IMT (Planning, OPs, Logs. etc) and not allowed to operate as a stand-alone unit.

Tasking - a more thoughtful and indeed pedantic attitude to written team tasking is recommended. Information conveyed to teams regarding tasks should be accompanied with grid references, more precise tasking details are required to ensure that the IMTs plan is being properly executed in the field. However it is important not to be overly prescriptive in the choice of search method, as this may be best determined by the team leader for the terrain in the field.

Contingency Planning - all teams deployed in the field should carry at least two means of communication, furthermore they should be given a time and location to gather in the event of total communication breakdown.

Sector Supervisor - the correct designation of a field deployed manager is Sector Supervisor, terms like 'forward base, forward control, forward ops, forward command' all lead to real potential for confusion and the transfer of control of the operation from the IMT to a field based manager - great care should be exercised. Note that the sector supervisor function is normally undertaken from the ICP or a nearby staging area.

Incident Action Planning - there is a lack of understanding and familiarity with the IAP process and further training is recommended.

Scenario development - in order to promote best operational practice some thought could be given to developing scenarios with a significant investigative component and related to international SAR LPB profiles and statistics. More complex scenarios, in which a scenario develops and unfolds, would provide work and focus for the investigative component of the IMT.

Helicopter - issues of funding are pertinent here. However funding aside, training should be around and supported by resources that would be utilised in a real event. The RNZAF Iroquois added little value in the development of a regional team and introduced a series of complications that had a significant effect on the SAREX. It's recommended that there be a concentration on testing and refining existing systems and SOPs and an emphasis on developing a team response based on locally available resources.

Regional Response - this was a regional SAREX with the intent of building regional capacity and regional team capable of responding to multi period operations. All neighbouring SAR groups and areas should be strongly encouraged to participate; there is a clear and apparent need to breakdown parochial barriers in order to be able to source the most capable people from across the region.

Conclusion

The management team attending the SAREX faced significant challenges: a predominantly alpine search in unsettled weather with predicted cold fronts bringing sleet and snow, unfamiliar resources, a challenging ICP location, search and management personnel from around the region, technical and terrain problems complicating communications and the normal artificiality associated with large and complex exercises. Despite these challenges the IMTs coped very well. The exercise was run with calm efficiency. The team did lack experience in formal planning and CIMS knowledge, but this was compensated for by an intuitive grasp of incident management and an open collaborative management style.

The reviewers feel that Search and Rescue in the Southern Region is functioning well. Our overall impression of the SAREX was that it was a well run operation, especially given the difficult and demanding circumstances. We make the comments and recommendations above in order to facilitate the building of an even more professional and experienced regional SAR management team.