

Exercise Evaluation Report

Operation Atiu

Location: Atiu Regional Park

Date: August 31st – 3rd September 2023

Report version: 1

Evaluator(s): Senior Constable Conrad Smith

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Executive Summary

The Tamaki Makaurau annual SAREX was held at Atiu Regional Park between the 31st of August and the 3rd of September 2023.

The objectives identified for the exercise all related to testing and upskilling the Police SAR squad in the IMT, SARtrack, field gear suitability, communications, and the site-specific readiness plan.

The exercise was run in real time with an IMT operating and mimicking a real time operation for a lost party with several field teams deployed. Whilst very beneficial for the IMT, the challenge with this style of SAREX is to keep all the field teams engaged and provide them with quality learning outcomes as well. Often some teams can be deployed and walk considerable distances and only really test their fitness and gear while others deployed in the hot spots get all the exciting learning with clues, tracking and locating the missing party.

On this occasion the location and scenario were ideal to meet the objectives which were largely IMT focused, but also well developed to keep the field teams engaged overall. All in all, it was a well thought out and very productive exercise with some good learnings and points to take away for consideration.

1. Recommendations

1. Comms plan be updated with improved grid references for repeater locations.
2. Consider simplifying the Atiu Readiness Plan into a Tactical Plan and a separate Operational Plan for the district.
3. Provide training for field teams to record and implement safety decisions in the field.
4. Ensure management computers are logged into regularly and software updated prior to attending a SAROP/SAREX.

2. Introduction

Operation Atiu was the annual Tamaki Makaurau SAREX which incorporated a response from Police SAR teams, LandSAR volunteers and AREC members from across the district to a real time search scenario in the Atiu Regional Park north of Auckland City.

The scenario consisted of a father and his three children reported overdue from a trip to the park by his wife. He was visiting the park searching for an extinct lizard that he believed was still in existence.

The SAREX was separated into three phases.

Phase One – Police SAR, AREC, and LandSAR IMT staff only.

Commences on the afternoon of the 31st of August with an IC notified, IMT established at an ICP at Courtyard house and Police SAR squad members deployed on reflex taskings overnight.

Phase Two – LandSAR field teams join the exercise.

Morning of Friday the 1st of September, Land Search and Rescue volunteers join, and all teams deployed into the field with the SAREX running through to the evening of Saturday 2nd September where there is a BBQ meal and hot debrief back at Courtyard House.

Phase Three - All involved.

Sunday the 3rd of September all involved in round robin training stations at Courtyard House.

The incident management team was made up of mostly Police staff relatively new to management roles. This exercise provided an opportunity to run an operation and gain experience in a controlled environment with senior experienced staff in mentoring roles.

AREC members assisted with establishing Comms throughout the search area.

3. Background

Atiu Regional Park is located on the Okahukura Peninsula approximately 113 kilometers and a 90-minute drive north of Auckland City. It is land that was gifted and was officially opened as a regional park in 2008. It is 843 hectares in size with about a third covered in mature regenerating native forest. There are wetlands and estuarine mangroves bordering the Kaipara Harbor. It is a working farm which allows visitors to wander through paddocks. There are many kilometers of trails for walking, mountain biking and horse riding as well as an orienteering course.

Given its ease of access, relatively close location to Auckland, range of activities and stunning vistas, it is a popular destination for recreationalists with many visiting each year. The size of the park and terrain makes it susceptible to Search and Rescue operations for people who are injured or lost. As such it is important that Police and LandSAR volunteers are familiar with the intricacies of the area to respond efficiently when required. The purpose of this SAREX is outlined in the objectives but testing the readiness plan and familiarisation were both key.

DATE:

August 31st – 3rd September 2023

LOCATION:

ICP – Courtyard House, Atiu Regional Park

Search Area – Atiu Regional Park

ORGANISING AGENCIES:

Police

KEY PEOPLE:

Exercise control - Sergeant Scott Iszard

Exercise control 2IC – S/Const Brandon McCarthy

Excon & mentoring – Sara Arrow, Steve Shaskey, Pat Forde, Fred McGraw, Gordon Bailey

3.1. Participating organisations

NZ Police

AREC

Land Search and Rescue

Auckland District Council

3.2. Exercise aim

To test the objectives identified in a controlled environment for learning and future improvement.

3.3. Exercise objectives

- Test the Atiu Regional Park readiness plan with a particular focus on the communication plan and the organisational structure.
- Ensure that staff new to an IMT are given exposure to a large scale SAREX with a particular focus on the roles and responsibilities of the different functions under the CIMS structure.
- Ensure that field staff can test and adjust their SAR response equipment with at least one night in the field.
- Expose new SAR IMT members to SAR Track as an IMT management tool.

3.4 Exercise Scenario

John Anderson is an avid herpetologist who believes that there is a supposedly extinct lizard still alive in the Atiu Regional Park.

He has gone with his three children Matilda, Eugene, and Declan to stay at Atiu Cottage on Run Road with the intention to spend time searching for the lizard while his wife Mary is away.

On Thursday the 31st of August Police are contacted by Mary who is concerned that she has not been able to contact her family who are now overdue from their trip.

A SAR response is initiated by Police as per phase one and two outlined above.

A search of Atiu Cottage quickly reveals plans left behind for Anderson showing plans and several 'blinds' that he has established around the park to accommodate him and the children whilst searching for the lizard.

Teams are deployed and the Search evolves from this point on until the missing parties are located on Sunday safe and well.

4. Evaluation Methodology

4.1 The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity

It was agreed that a written report be produced measuring the SAREX against the objectives and related KPI's. This will include any recommendations relating to the objectives.

4.2 Evaluation scope

To observe the IMT operation at the Courtyard House ICP.

Provide a report against the objectives from observations of the IMT, feedback from field teams via radio comms, hot debrief and team debriefs at the conclusion of the exercise. The Atiu Park Readiness plan was also reviewed and compared against the response.

4.3 Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed.

- Briefing of teams prior to deployment.
- All aspects of the IMT function from Thursday evening through to Sunday afternoon.
- Comms between field teams, AREC and IMT.
- A brief recce of the Atiu Park by motor vehicle to familiarise with the terrain teams are operating in.
- Demobilisation and debriefing
- Reviewing the Atiu Park readiness plan.

With only one evaluator it is impractical to observe field teams operating as well at the IMT so the best use of time is spent within the IMT where an overview of all the actions can be observed. This is the location where most of the objectives were identified and could be monitored.

4.4 The process followed in preparing and submitting the report.

Contact was made and documentation was shared via a Teams chat group well in advance to ensure that a full understanding of the exercise was obtained prior to attending.

Attendance at the exercise is the source of most of this evaluation information which has subsequently been produced albeit with a significant time delay due to some unforeseen circumstances.

A draft copy will be shared for feedback prior to the final copy going to NZSAR for publication.

4.5 Other information

Nil

5. Findings

Objective 1. Test the Atiu Regional Park readiness plan with a particular focus on the communications plan and organisational structure.

I took some time to review the Atiu Park readiness plan prior to the exercise and referred to it during and have reflected on it since. I spoke with the author who acknowledged this was her first plan and sought help with writing it.

I have some suggestions around the format of SAR plans but am mindful that plans are personal and what works for some may not work for others. This feedback is as an outsider looking in and not having a complete understanding of the finer details of SAR response across the wider Tamaki Makaurau region.

In my opinion an option worth considering is to divide the plans into Strategic, Operational and Tactical plans.



The strategic plan is the overarching plan that is often very detailed and outlines how everything works down to every minute detail. This could be purpose written or the Police SAR chapter which is the guide for Police response to SAR Nationally.

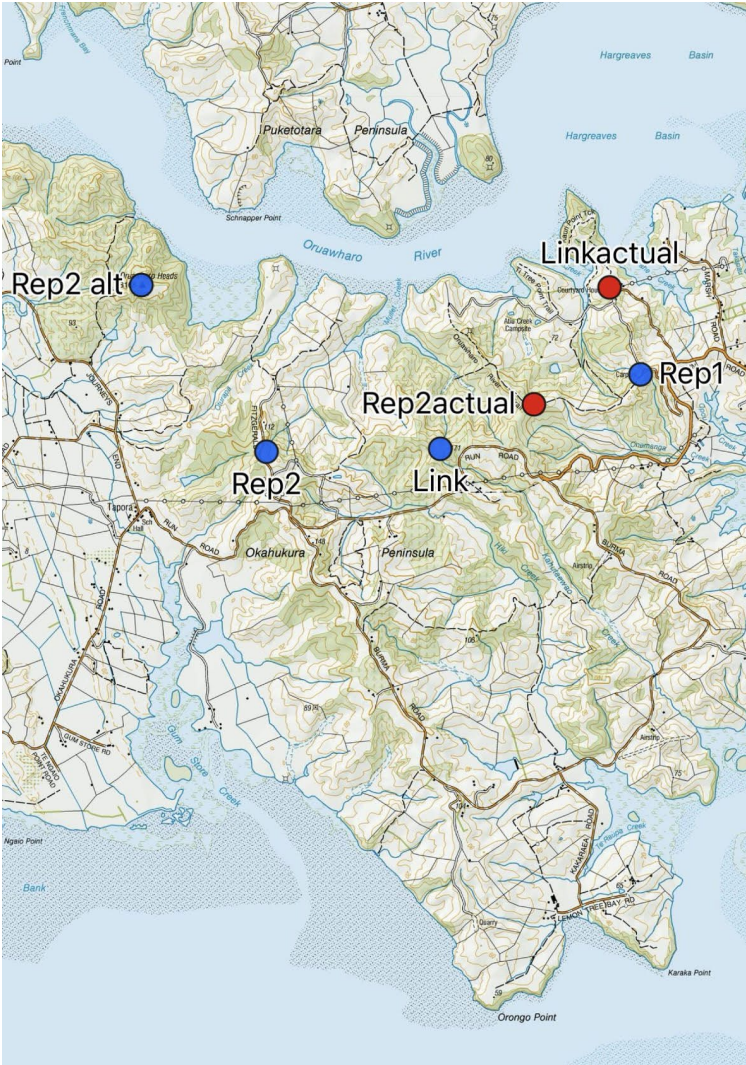
The operational plan is the peace time plan for SAR response across the district. This plan covers how SAR operates, is full of detail and covers off the squad makeup, call out procedures, NZSAR guidelines for the various stages of an operation, boundaries etc. One plan covers the whole district for land response.

The tactical plan is the war time plan. There are numerous tactical plans that sit under the one operational plan for specific locations of interest across the district such as Atiu Regional Park. This contains the prompts you need when the call comes in and you are responding to the job at a specific location. These are very simple and easy to follow and only about a page maybe two in length. They bullet point initial actions and useful information pertinent to a SAROP in that location. ICP locations, local contact numbers, repeater sites etc....

The current format of the Atiu readiness plan encompasses a mixture of an operational and tactical plan and could be simplified dramatically to assist the responding Incident Controller at the start of an operation.

The communications section of the readiness plan is well laid out with repeater sites identified by grid references to cover the park. The blue dots on the map below show the comms plan locations for the repeaters. Repeater 1 was set up in line with the plan however the red dots show where Repeater 2 and the linking repeater were actually set up not in line with the plan as these sites provided easier access with sufficient coverage.

Once established communications worked adequately for the exercise. There were patches that were bad and scratchy, but teams were always able to seek coverage with minimal effort.



There were some connectivity issues with the internet in the IMT being overloaded in the initial stages. This was partly due to computers needing software updates when turned on combined with staff using the Wi-Fi on personal phones on top of the operational requirements and SARtrack operating. This was identified and remedied however it still placed some pressure on the IMT when trying to get teams tasked on the morning of the 1st of September when LandSAR members arrived.

The organisational structure used for the SAREX was in line with the readiness plan. Not every role was filled as there were not enough people nor were all the roles required however the main roles were covered. If SARtrack is being operated there needs to be staff dedicated to that role. It is too much to ask the members operating core CIMS roles to do both.

KPI's

- The readiness plan contains accurate information and is in a usable format. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- The communications plan is adequate and allows for viable comms throughout the SAREX. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- The organisational Structure in the readiness plan is fit for purpose and is followed by the IMT. **ACHIEVED**

Objective 2. Ensure that staff new to an IMT are given exposure to a large scale SAREX with a particular focus on the roles and responsibilities of the different functions under the CIMS structure.

The IMT consisted of junior Police SAR members who were mentored by more experienced and given the opportunity to gain experience in a controlled environment. This was evident especially in the initial stages of the SAREX when mentors had to step in to keep staff operating within their lanes.

Some examples of blurred operating roles included the I/C being briefed directly by teams returning from taskings, I/C tasking teams while Ops operating the radios and SARtrack on a computer, Planning and Intel doing each other's roles.

There is a fine line between leaving an inexperienced IMT floundering whilst gaining experience and constantly telling them what to do by the mentors. Overall, this was well balanced and managed in the exercise. The scenario paused on a couple of occasions when needed and some education provided around CIMS roles and re-formatting the layout of the room to assist with better information flow between roles. Intel - Planning - Operations.

KPI's

- New staff are successfully mentored into an IMT role and given adequate support to fulfill its functions. **ACHIEVED**
- IMT roles are clearly defined and there is separation of duties within an IMT. **ACHIEVED**
- The CIMS structure is followed throughout. **ACHIEVED**

Objective 3. Ensure that field staff can test and adjust their SAR response equipment with at least one night in the field.

Police staff were deployed into the field on Thursday evening as a Police SAR squad and also again on the Friday morning with LandSAR members. This gave staff the opportunity to test and adjust gear. Police working alongside LandSAR members also had the opportunity to observe gear other than what is Police issued being used by others and allowed conversations about what gear is available and what works well.

Information flow was at times very regimented. An example being when the IMT was telling field teams they can stop for a ½ hr meal break at certain times. Field teams however felt confident to speak up when concerned about taskings which is great as sometimes there is a reluctance to push back against the IMT. An example being the team at Ti Tree point being concerned the IMT didn't understand the size of their tasking and relaying that information back instead of just persevering with the task.

Some team members when spoken to post exercise stated that they were aware of safety and a member was allocated that role within the team. It was recorded in their notebooks, but perhaps it was not an active, living, role. Safety considerations when factors changed within their tasking were not discussed within the team or updated. Many were not aware of 'Take 5' prompts inside the LandSAR notebooks, and no safety conversations had been recorded within the team. This may partly be since the terrain and weather being operated in was mellow and didn't require too much thought or offer much risk. Even so it is still a good habit to get into. There was a comprehensive safety plan completed by EXCON prior to the exercise and the IMT also had a safety plan completed.

KPI's

- Field staff are adequately trained and equipped for their tasks. **ACHIEVED**
- Health and safety better practice is maintained throughout the exercise. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- Information flows freely between the IMT and field team. **ACHIEVED**

Objective 4. Expose new SAR IMT members to SARtrack as an IMT management tool.

SARtrack was used as the management tool for the IMT, and this was a good opportunity to upskill and expose new members to its use operationally and as expected in a novice environment there was some good learnings with its use.

I am a firm believer that members carrying out the core CIMS functions in an IMT cannot successfully perform their jobs and operate SARtrack simultaneously unless they are extremely proficient with its use. Ideally the operations manager for example needs to have a dedicated person sitting alongside them entering all the data into SARtrack while they are freed up to do their job. This was clear in the initial stages when the operations manager was buried deep in the computer while others were tasking teams. This may have been a factor that led to some mission creep across the roles requiring mentors to step in.

There were still taskings that were being handwritten and then back captured after the fact within SARtrack. Although this was a KPI it was a good learning opportunity for the IMT members and a big ask when the pressure is on to get teams out in a timely fashion. It is something that will improve with more practice and exposure to SARtrack. The priority is getting teams searching and that was a good decision to get them tasked and then back capture it when time allowed.

KPI's

- SARtrack is initiated early, and all functionality is used as appropriate. **ACHIEVED**
- Tasks are written directly into SARtrack and not back captured. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- IMT members can explain the functions and usability of SARtrack. **ACHIEVED**

6. Conclusions

The SAREX was very successful overall with all the objectives either being met or as a result of learnings from the exercise are now able to be met.

Some suggestions have been provided around the format of plans. I appreciate these are opinions only and people have personal preferences however I am happy to assist with by providing examples if this is an avenue Tamaki Makaurau SAR are interested in pursuing.

Through trial and error there are now easier to access locations available for repeaters to be erected and the Comms plan for Atiu Regional Park can be updated as such.

The CIMS structure was followed, the scenario and location gave the new IMT members a realistic learning environment. Although clearly out of their depth at the outset, the IMT settled into a quiet, industrious cohesive unit over time and with the experience of mentors at hand to assist and guide when needed. This was well monitored and implemented.

The scenario and location also provided field staff with the opportunity to test and adjust gear. Some team members could have some room for upskilling around their knowledge of safety/risk and recording this in the field. The Take 5 prompts could be a good start for this as some were not aware of their existence.

SARtrack is a powerful management tool but needs specific, consistent training to be efficient in its use. A management support group is valuable to have staff working alongside those managers in the CIMS functions and this would have benefited the IMT on this occasion. Having new IMT members and a computer program that they were still coming to grips with was a challenge at first but once again over the course of the weekend, as it became more familiar it worked better. Some good learning was being done.

It is a good idea to keep software updated on management computers so that this is ready to go at the start of an operation to save time and a draw on bandwidth from multiple sources in those initial stages of a SAROP.

Overall, a very worthwhile and well organised and run exercise with good learnings for the team to take away.

7. Appendix

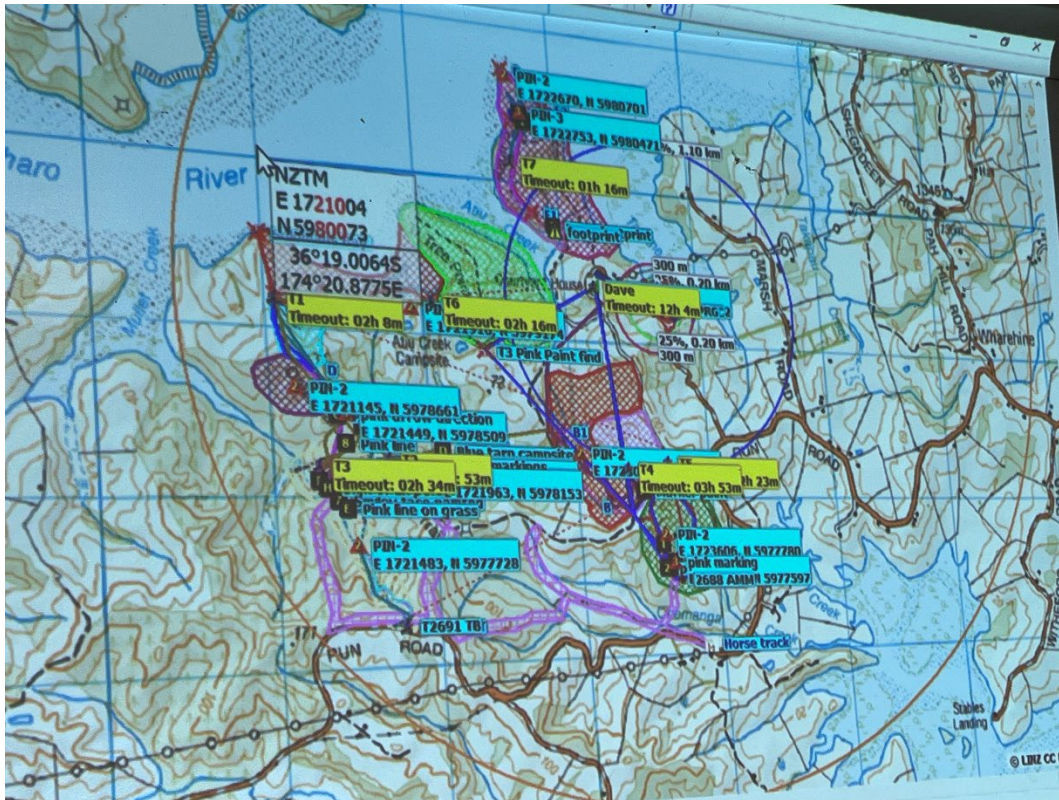
IMT operating from ICP at Courtyard House



Briefing LandSAR and Police Field teams



SARtrack



Incident Action Plan

INCIDENT ACTION PLAN			NZSAR New Zealand Search and Rescue
Situation: John Anderson & his 3 children Missing in Atiu Creek Regional Park		Phase / Operational Period: 0730 - 2200 1/07/23 1.2	
Mission / Goal: Safety locate John, Eugene, Tilly & Declan Anderson		Comms Plan: ESB 58 Backup on ESP 57 021 190 5094 Intel	
Date / Time Missing: 31/06/23 0800hrs	OBJECTIVES FOR OPERATIONAL PERIOD (Keep it SMART) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Gather Further Information Conduct Search of Coastline Conduct search of hut seat/Attachments or hotspots Conduct search of trees 	STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE IT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speak to Park Ranger Enquiries at 10 households CS - PST - Media Event ground Decider Landsar team - Eagle - Delta Landsar Team - Eagle - Delta 	Rescue Plan: Serious Injury - Helo Stroke Minor Injury - Asses / Ask - Shelia If John ambulance 14km from North Shore hospital / 6km Wellington Medical Centre 19km
Missing Person and NOK: John Anderson 01/7/23 Makaha Anderson 10/12/23 Eugene " 22/10/20 Declan " 22/5/19 NOK - Mary Anderson	Weather: 31 - H 16 - L 6 Sunny / Fine / Clear 1/07 - H 16 - L 6 Fine, but cloud increasing 2/07 - H 16 - L 10 Rain developing.	Safety / Hazards: Terrain elements / Wildlife Water / Coastline	Critical Elements / To do: Set up Repeater Process ICFP
LKP: Atiu Cottage - Rem Road	COMMAND STRUCTURE: Incident Controller: Sue Intel: Evan Planning: Ryan Operations: Gilly Logistics: Liz		
Survivability:	RCOENZ CAT II INCIDENT:		