

Report from Waikato SAREX – June 2011

SARINZ Objectives

LandSAR Groups in the Waikato District conducted an annual Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX) over the weekend 18th - 19th June 2011. The SAREX was conducted in the Pirongia Forest Park from Rolley Road to Sainsbury Road.

SARINZ was requested to provide 3 tutors for the SAREX. One tutor was funded directly from LandSAR National Office and two tutors were funded from the NZSAR contribution to the SAREX. The tutors were tasked with organising and delivering training sessions as part of the round robin exercises during the initial part of the SAREX, and with mentoring field teams during the exercise portion.

SARINZ also provided assistance with the exercise design and the training objectives via telephone in the design phase.

Where appropriate, SARINZ were to identify training gaps and offer solutions that could be implemented in local training sessions to improve operational performance. A written report would be provided to the exercise controllers, and it would be up to these persons to determine further dissemination of the written report.

SAREX personnel

The personnel attending the Waikato SAREX were either LandSAR and/or Police personnel from throughout the Waikato region, including Coromandel, Tauranga and Taupo. Senior members of Police, LandSAR and YSAR were involved in the design and control of the SAREX. The field personnel in attendance covered a wide spectrum of experience and training – from those that have attended nearly all available formal training and 20+ years' experience to new members with little formal training and experience. All comments and feedback provided in this report should be considered with this in mind, and are a generalisation based on the overall performance of those witnessed. It is worth noting that some attendees performed at a very high standard consistent with the best field skills observed nationally.

SAREX Objectives

The objectives of the exercise were to practice and develop skills in the following activities:

- **Sign Cutting** (*SARINZ facilitated*)
- Communication with emphasis on correct radio procedures being used.
- Navigation with emphasis on the practical use of the GPS.
- **Track and Clue Awareness** (*SARINZ facilitated*)
- **Clue Processing** (*SARINZ facilitated*)
- **Search Methods** (*SARINZ facilitated*)
- First Aid

Overall these objectives were well met. Feedback from the students was highly commendable of the design and facilitation of the SAREX, with many experienced persons commenting that it was the best organised and facilitated SAREX they had been on – ever!. This is a credit to the organising committee and the Waikato Police.

From a SARINZ point of view, we were kept well informed of the design and implementation and were well briefed on the expectations and requirements of the organisers and what they wanted from the SARINZ Instructors. This meant the design and implementation of the SARINZ facilitated sessions were easily integrated into the overall SAREX plan.

SAREX Instructor Feedback

The SARINZ tutors in attendance have provided the following thoughts in terms of performance (based on observations) and offered the following solutions:

- A reluctance of personnel to go back to basics, especially amongst those who have done courses beyond Track and Clue Awareness (TCA).
Suggestion: More continuation (refresher) training that encourages the requirement to drop back to basics when appropriate.
- Discipline on remaining behind the last confirmed sign appeared sporadic, and “taking ownership” of contamination was lacking at times.
Suggestion: More training at group level with a second team taking over on a track to highlight the need to be able to readily identify contamination and confirmed subject sign.
- It would appear that some people are reliant on tracking as their only ‘search’ tool and are out of their depth once they have lost positive subject sign.
Suggestion 1: Tracking and sign cutting continuation training needed.
Suggestion 2: Continuation training re: the integration of tracking and search method skills required – ie: increase the tools in the toolbox.
- When prompted to sign cut perimeters and features that could hold sign, little or no attempt was made to take up the opportunity, (lack of skill base).
Suggestion: Conceptual and practical training in sign cutting perimeters and features that hold sign.
Continuation (refresher) training and more best practice in-group training.
- No concept of urgency when it came to medical scenario. The ‘Rescue Controller’ role needed to be taken on with greater level of assertiveness, and recognise that this role may need to shift from Search Team leader to another team member as appropriate (dependant on skill and knowledge base)
Suggestion: More group training with scenario work, focussing on changing from search mode to rescue phase.
- Great team work. SAREXs are a good place to allow for the social and learning mix and cross pollination of ideas, and group trainings are ideal for creating the high performance of teams who are familiar with each other and used to working together.
- Very good communication within the teams (interpersonal communication) and via radio with the SAR base.
- All participants seemed very receptive to instruction and continued improvement. This indicates a healthy culture within the wider Waikato land SAR community.
- Great to see Police personnel out in the field alongside volunteers. This was commented on by the volunteers as ‘great partnership’.
- The five day tacking courses would benefit some people. Three trackers warrant special attention to advancement to a high level; [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (?) (Coromandel Peninsula).
- Most people thought that SAREX format was excellent.

All three instructors would like to extend their thanks to Waikato Police and SAR Teams for the chance to be involved with this very successful SAREX.

Summary

It was evident from observation and discussion with the SAREX attendees that a culture of continued improvement existed within those attending the SAREX. The attendees relished having Subject Matter Experts (SME's) mentor them in the field on realistic (although simulated) search tasks. This was especially evident in the discussion with those attendees that had completed a number of formal courses and had years of operational experience. This type of training is consistent with what best suits these persons – small improvements that can have a significant improvement in performance rather than more formal training.

The format of the SAREX also received outstanding positive feedback – a targeted round of training sessions in the morning followed by a target overnight exercise that meant all teams had to perform basic, though realistic, search tasks. All attendees spoken to commented positively on the format, organisation and SAREX plan – special comments were made on the fact that they never had to stand around.

As a general rule the application of search skills was at a satisfactory standard given the diverse range of personnel in attendance.

Recommendations

Of the persons observed, there was clear evidence of continued ongoing local training focusing on core skill maintenance – particularly in the areas of First Aid, GPS/Navigation and on base technical search skills. This training at a local level appears to be meeting the general needs of the LandSAR personnel and was observed to be of a reasonably high standard.

Of the persons observed, training was identified at three levels.

Level One is introductory training of Search Methods, Track and Clue Awareness and Sign cutting and Ageing courses for all those yet to attend formal training. It is very likely that this need will be met through the standard scheduling of courses in the Waikato and likely requires no additional follow-up other than prompting those persons that should be attending.

Level Two is the continued maintenance and refreshing of 'core skills' with subject matter experts. It was evident that a substantial amount of effort has gone into local group practice to maintain skills, however it was also evident of a general decline around application over time – and these small improvements can make a major difference. Planning on targeted and focussed continuation/refresher training 1-2 times per year would likely address the need across the region.

Level Three is targeted development of persons likely to be used as Field Team Leaders (FTL) including development of strategic decision making, strategic application of tactics, and reinforcement of the entirety of the role including that of Rescue Site Controller. The planned rollout of the Search Team Leaders course targeting the specifics of leading a search team in the field would begin to address some of these needs. Additionally, identification of Field Team Leaders that are likely to provide ongoing service to the Waikato should be supported in the development of their skills and knowledge. Options include the Managing Initial Response (MIR) course and/or facilitated user pays workshops to extend their strategic knowledge and skills to better meet the expectations of search management.