

November 29/2009 Manitoba Ski Patrol/SAR Exercise at Falcon Lake

FalconSAR.html (Pics & group shot at the chalet)

ARES Radio Operators were requested for the event by the Ski Patrol Public Relations Officer, Gerry Desjardins . Radio Operators were provided from three ARES clubs/groups; Winnipeg ARES, Pinawa ARES and South Central/Eastern Manitoba ARES.

ARES members present were:

(From Winnipeg ARES):

VE4TRO Fred
VE4KAZ Richard
VE4KEH Kent
VE4ESX Richard
VE4CDM Craig
VE4GWB Garth
VE4BAW Geoff

(From Pinawa ARES):

VE4GMS Garry

(From South Central/Eastern ARES):

VE4MHZ Paula
VE4GLS Gord

The exercise was a bit different from the last one ARES attended due to the type of rescue scenario and there were a few more participants in both the professional side and ARES side, and the weather was much nicer. This years' scenario was a family affair with the Father (Gerry) having had a chain saw accident (dismemberment), and two children, one with a broken leg and the other succumbing to CO poisoning inside a nearby building. (See the link for pics). A woman from the Ski Patrol also played the part of the Mother who literally stumbled into the ski chalet to start the event. The (actors) really played the parts well.

Searchers were split off into three groups with members of the Ski Patrol, local fire departments, paramedics, K9 unit, and SAR techs from the OFC. I was expecting 4-5 groups to be put together with two ARES operators per group, but we ended up with three groups so we had ample personnel for the event. Weather was quite mild however a light snow the night before left the area quite slippery in places so there were several slips and falls but no one hurt as far as I have heard so far. The "injured" were pulled back to the ski chalet on rescue toboggans.

The search started with a preliminary look-around the chalet to find clues as to where the victims would be. The groups came back to the Chalet to discuss what they found and where to go next for the wider area search. When the victims were found two sleds were dispatched with medical supplies and blankets. One had to be re-dispatched for the third victim. This is where most of the physically demanding part of the exercise occurs and everyone did very well!

After the event and a snack all participants took part in a debriefing session to discuss what went well and what didn't. This was very helpful to all and there were several issues that came up such as who has the right to pronounce someone deceased, code words and phrases used over the radio, etc.

ARES side of the operation:

We used a Kenwood D-710 mobile, power supply, feedline, pop-up tower and J-pole antenna for the base station equipment. We set up the J-pole and tower just outside the (back) door where I could park the truck to anchor the tower base. This was within 50ft of the operating position. Paula VE4MHZ ran NCS duties. We were going to set up APRS but since I was the only portable capable of the mode we decided not to use digital and use the second VFO to monitor the repeater, VE4FAL. The local repeater site does now have an APRS digipeater that covers the southern Whiteshell area very well. Talk in was via the VE4FAL repeater located nearby, but we used a simplex VHF channel (ARES #1) for the operation. All operators had good portable setups and were within range of the base at all times. Keep in mind that the event was all located within about 500 meter radius of the base.

Search groups were sorted out by tactical callsigns for easy identification. Since radio equipment with each group was redundant one operator would monitor the local repeater if they had the capability to monitor 2 frequencies at once in case we had to use it as a backup to simplex in case they went out of simplex range. Teams 1-2 had three ARES operators and Team 3 had two. I stayed back at NCS as a backup/monitor. Communications was clear and decisive but there were some problems once the victims were found and the search groups split up; it was difficult to grasp the scene from the NCS side when the search group tactical designations no longer worked.

We ran into a couple of issues that would cause trouble in a real scenario. The first problem we ran into is the use of code words over the air. It seemed that not all organizations use the same code words or are not aware what they might mean. This might be considered typical of when otherwise separate organisations have to work together, certainly an inter-operational limitation. There are times when it is not prudent to utilize plain language, such as when there may be a deceased person involved or descriptions of major injuries. There was an agreed upon code word designated before the event to use in case there was a real emergency. In reality as radio operators we shouldn't "need" to know what the other groups have set up as long as each group that needs to know them is on the same page!

The second issue was some radio confusion when the event switched from search mode to recovery mode. For some reason I don't remember this being an issue during the previous event but it certainly caused some confusion this time around. I suspect this was more pronounced this time because there was more radio operators at the scene. I think there are a few solutions because surely someone has ran into this before.

a) designate a field radio coordinator:

This person would be in the field and at the scene. NCS could designate the first operator to arrive at the scene re-issue tactical callsigns to newly formed groups, victims, or particular piece of equipment

b) re-designate tactical callsigns directly from NCS

c) have the radio coordinator in the field to re-designate the callsigns.

d) agree on tactical callsigns to utilize when the search switches over to recovery mode at a pre-event briefing.

I must re-iterate that our communications did work and we did get the required messages through to where they needed to go; just it might have taken a bit longer. I think experience is the key. The value of working with served agencies in an exercise like this can not be over estimated!

Equipment issues were minimal as the weather was warm, but there was one comment regarding how to transport radios while in the field. I had advised to use a backpack to hold the radio, batteries, spare clothing, etc. I agree a large backpack was cumbersome for this operation and a shoulder holster or something similar would be more convenient. This sort of thing is rather operator specific and everyone has their preference and equipment set-up for what works for them. As Amateur Operators we certainly have the right to be creative!

I want to thank Gerry and the Ski Patrol for inviting us once again. This as a great training opportunity for us to take part in. We all enjoyed the event and hope to take part again. I did talk to Gerry this morning and it sounds like we can plan on taking part again next year. The Ski Patrol was very happy to have us participate and really appreciated how involved the operators were in the exercise; such as helping to move objects, watch victims, pull the rescue toboggans, etc., as well as the professionalism in doing their primary task of doing the radio work. Lots of good comments at the debriefing too. Great work ARES and a very BIG Thank You to all the ARES operators involved. You each left a great impression on the other participants and organizers and I enjoyed working with you!

Thanks to Garry VE4GMS for the pictures in the web link at the top.

-Gordon Snarr VE4GLS
ARES EC South Central/Eastern Manitoba ARES