

OUR SEARCH AND RESCUE VOLUNTEERS

Not your average hike in the woods



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANET WALLACE

Volunteers returning to the command post after a full day in the woods.

By 8:30am, two dozen people are milling about. They're wearing toques and orange winter jackets, and carrying backpacks and snowshoes. No sleeping in on a Saturday morning for this group. Some already drove an hour to get here—the outskirts of Moncton where the city ends and the woods begin. These dedicated people are volunteers with the Tri-County Ground Search & Rescue Group.

Day or night, good weather or bad, they can be called out on a search in Kent, Westmorland or Albert Counties, NB. The area extends from the Bay of Fundy to the Northumberland Strait and includes Fundy and Kouchibouguac National Parks, and the cities of Moncton and Dieppe.

When I ask a woman why she joined Search and Rescue...

"The more I can be outdoors, the better," says Tammy Lavallee, who describes herself as a bowhunter. "I just love it. It's a great team environment. Also, I learn something every day."

I ask more people why they joined and I hear the same answers again and again.

And it is fun, at least when it's a training exercise on a sunny day. I soon realize that what attracts people is only part of the story. What keeps them coming back after a grueling search is different.

For Greg Currie, an accident on a training day "sealed the deal." A searcher had a heart problem while in the woods, he explains. The atmosphere immediately changed from

lighthearted and laidback to serious and professional. When Greg saw just how well the team worked together to get the person to safety, he decided to commit to being a search and rescue volunteer.

"When you find your first subject, you're hooked," says Cedric Mallais. (The "subject" is the lost person).

"The experience of reuniting someone with their family is what keeps me going," he adds.

Cedric takes me into the command post: a truck outfitted with a computer, a table with maps, and whiteboards. Equipped with Wifi, a siren and antenna, the truck is the communications hub. People squeeze past each other as they collect their instructions for the day and register their teams on the whiteboards.

One volunteer shows me the equipment ranging from teddy bears to comfort lost children to two-way radios with "real time tracking." In a corner, Norman Deschamps shows me a map on his computer screen. As teams move, their paths are revealed by lines on the screen. At any moment, he knows where every team is and where they have been.

Bob Searle takes me outside to show me the repeater, an antenna on a tower powered by a generator. This extends the range of the radios and enables real time tracking.

Cedric and I strap on snowshoes and head out. Each team of three to four people was given co-ordinates of a location.



A searcher, who once worked as an ice-road trucker in the Yukon, is comfortable cooking in the woods.



At the start of the day, the volunteers meet at the command post to get their instructions.

Once they reach it, they will radio headquarters and be sent co-ordinates to a new spot. Soon, we see three people emerge from the woods.

As we accompany them back into the forest, Aimee Gallie, a correctional officer, explains why she joined the team 12 years ago.

“I like that it gets you outside and shows you different parts of New Brunswick,” she says. “And it’s a great group with a fantastic purpose.”

“The actual searches can be emotional rollercoasters, but you have such a great feeling when it is successful,” continues Aimee.

As she talks, her teammate falls into the snow. While helping him get back up, she describes the pockets of air around alders and downed trees in the underbrush. Whereas most of the snow can hold a person’s weight, if you step in these areas, you’ll go down.

We reach the common destination where, eventually, all teams will arrive and build fires and shelters. Every person will cook their own lunch. Some roast hotdogs while others bring out pots and packets of dry soup.

They talk about how technology has changed search and rescue. Gone are the days when many missions looked for lost hikers or hunters. With cell phones and GPS units being commonplace, these searches are becoming less common. Today, says Cedric, many searches focus on “despondents,” people who don’t want to be saved, and people with dementia.

The searchers chime in about how overdependence on technology can lead to trouble. As people trust their cars’ GPS rather than maps, they can end up on rough logging roads in areas without cell phone coverage.

The searchers complain that many people don’t know how to use their GPS, and recount a story where tourists didn’t realize that their GPS was calibrated for Germany not New Brunswick. I hear about other people who knew where they were but not how to get to safety. Someone mentions that cellphone and GPS batteries can run out—not a problem with a map and compass!

While some teams are collecting deadwood, others enjoying baked beans and hot soup. When the smoke changes direction, we all shuffle around in our snowshoes, trying to keep it out of our eyes.

Everyone seems comfortable in the woods. Many are hunters or hikers. Some have worked in the army, reserves or

police. One searcher talks about his experience as an ice road trucker in the Yukon; another worked in mine rescue. They talk about the recoveries.

Cedric recalls finding a 15-year-old boy in a ravine on Caledonia Mountain. He and the boy needed to be airlifted out by a helicopter. The challenge, he says, was that he also had to carry the boy’s dog out, which tried to bite him and attacked a police dog. Cedric received an Outstanding Service Commendation from the RCMP for his role in the rescue.

“Why aren’t they doing anything?”

I’m amazed at the commitment of these people. They volunteer and even have to raise funds for the groups. I’m shocked when a few tell me about being yelled at by family members of lost people.

They understand that stress is channeled into anger at them but that doesn’t make it easier. The trigger is the appearance of inaction right after the team is mobilized.

When someone calls 911 about a missing person, the police investigate. It can be hours before Search and Rescue is notified.

As Cedric says, “We’re the 11th hour group. After everyone else has had a chance to find someone, they call us in.”

By the time volunteers arrive on the scene, a person has been missing for a while. The team sets up the command station with the truck, generator and repeater antenna. It could be an hour before people actually start searching.

Norman Deschamps explains that the public may not realize this set-up time is crucial to an effective search. The searchers need to know how to approach the missing person and need to co-ordinate all actions. This takes time.

“We’re setting things up,” says Norman. “We need to know where to go and what to look for.”

A personalized search

“Every search is different,” I hear several people say. Not just the terrain and weather vary; each procedure is adapted to the individual who is lost.

When a search is called, the first step is to learn about the missing person, Cedric explains. Bob and other members of the team talk to the family and people in the community, such as fire chiefs. They want to know about health issues, “And we use this,” Cedric holds up a book entitled *Lost Person Behaviour*.



On the training day, each team builds a fire and a shelter with the materials they can scrounge or have brought with them.

He leafs through the book and shows me sections on various scenarios (such as a person with autism, dementia or substance abuse; hiker, hunter or runaway). Based on statistics, the book explains the most likely ways different people react to being lost.

“For example, children under the age of four might just sit down and later cry themselves to sleep,” say a volunteer. Children between seven and 12 years old, however, may hide or run away from rescuers.

The emphasis on planning and incorporating a psychological approach, Cedric adds, is a response to the tragic story of a nine-year old boy who went missing in Nova Scotia in 1986. After an eight-day search by more than 5,000 people, his body was found. It appeared he died from hypothermia four to five days after going missing. An inquest into the incident led to valuable lessons that have shaped current search and rescue procedures throughout North America.

After everyone returns to the command post, the group forms a circle. Everyone shares their impressions of the day. They discuss what went well, what went wrong and how they can improve.

There is a lot of laughter. One person realizes he carried far too much water. Someone else points out that we’re surrounded by water—in the form of snow. Others say they realize they’re out of shape. Debriefing follows every exercise and incident.

After spending just one day on a training exercise, I get a sense of why the volunteers are so committed. It’s fun to work as a team making fires and shelters in the woods. But, of course, there’s much more to it.

“Training experiences help people to get to know each other,” Craig Winsor explains. “So when they’re together on a dark night in a real search and rescue scenario, they know they can count on each other.”

“In a way, these fellows are like funeral directors,” Bob Searle gestures to the group. “They often go out after midnight to do their work. They’re people you only meet when you need them.”

“To be a good searcher, you’re programmed to be positive,” explains Bob, a veteran of more than 200 searches during his 26 years. “You need to start off with a positive attitude and believe that the search will be successful.”

“All searches are good searches,” he says. “But if you find the person alive, it’s an extra-good search.” 🐾

FUNDING IS CRITICAL

Not only are the searchers all volunteers, but they also need to fundraise to keep the charitable non-profit organization afloat. Each person provides their own gear and the group as a whole raises money to equip the trucks with equipment. Each year, the NB Department of Justice and Public Safety provides \$70,000 to 80,000 to Search and Rescue and this is divided among 10 teams.

“We used to spend a few days each year collecting donations outside NB liquor stores,” Cedric says. “But then the program (for all charities) was stopped because too many people complained. Now, it’s a lot harder to fundraise.”

Many of the volunteers also teach survival skills to school students, youth groups and adults. For example, in the Hug A Tree program, they teach children how to avoid getting lost and what to do if lost.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU’RE LOST:

Stay put. Don’t walk. Call 911 on your cellphone, if you can, before calling anyone else. The searchers recount stories of people using up the battery life of their cellphones while calling their families. It’s much better to call 911 first so that your phone can be tracked.