

SAR ALBERTA – FUTURE

Jim Thoreson

I have been approached by President Rodney to prepare a document outlining how CASARA 's experiences could benefit SAR Alberta.

For those who do not know me, I am one of the founding members of SAR Alberta. My 20 years plus, background in SAR is as follows:

DND GSAR trained as a Team Leader
ERI course in Management of Search Operations
Alberta Public Safety Services training in Technical Rescue, Incident Commander, Rescue Team Leader
DND Search Master Course
CASARA Search Coordinator
CASARA Aircrew Navigator
CASARA pilot
CASARA Alberta Provincial Training Officer
CASARA Alberta Executive Director
CASARA National VP Plans and Equipment.

Over the past few years, I have been watching the progress of SAR Alberta with respect to accountability, standards, and currency. Since CASARA has already gone through all the hoops and pitfalls that are prevalent in a budding organization such as SAR Alberta, I would hope that perhaps CASARA's experiences would be of assistance in refining SAR Alberta's methods and procedures. I would like to bring some recommendations/thoughts to you from my experience with respect to GSAR Standards and management of your membership now that we are coming under the EMA branch of the provincial government.

Over the past years after SAR Alberta was born, I have watched as many internal squabbles and fights went on about different standards, and directions to follow etc. etc. In a new organization, or any organization for that matter, there are bound to be growing pains. These can be healthy, or they can also drag an organization down.

While I am not in GSAR any more, I don't intend to tell you how to do things, but rather I would like to bring some of my experiences in CASARA forward in hopes that SAR Alberta members/teams/executive will look at them and perhaps use these experiences to their benefit. In other words, don't reinvent the wheel. CASARA has already gone through what SAR Alberta is going through now. I would hope that you would take the benefit of our experience and put it to good use.

First, let me outline how CASARA is set up. There are some similarities to SAR Alberta.

CASARA is made up of an umbrella organization called CASARA National. (This could be looked upon as similar to SAR Alberta.) "National", as we refer to it, serves to look after all the MOU's, Contribution Agreement with DND and Transport Canada, distribution of funds, purchases equipment and sets out policies, and directives for all of CASARA throughout Canada. (CASARA National has a Contribution Agreement with DND and Transport Canada to provide us with funding. These funds are to be used for training, administration, and equipment.)

Each province and territory is a CASARA organization within itself. For example, Alberta has it's own organization called CASARA Alberta. Each province or territory is referred to as a "Member Organization" (MO). Each MO has a Director who sits on the National Board of Directors and represents his/her MO. Each province and territory signs an Agreement with National that they will follow and abide by all the policies and directives of National. This allows National to distribute funds to each province/territory and to monitor their adherence to the agreement. This also allows us to be able to answer to DND for the funds that we are allotted throughout the year. Because DND requires very stringent procedures both in administration, training and operations, they constantly monitor our progress. Since all the problems within the federal government in the last few years i.e. the Jane Stewart affair, Adscam etc etc. the government now demands full accountability for any and all funds that are allotted. CASARA funds are distributed to the MOs based on a special formula that includes many facets. If necessary I could explain the formula, but that is very complicated and is a whole separate subject that can be dealt with under a separate cover.

I. MEMBERSHIP RECORDS:

CASARA's agreement with the Department of National Defence (DND) mandates that we MUST keep complete personnel records of ALL members. These records include, date of birth, physical description, address, phone numbers, next of kin, etc. This information is also required by CASARA's insurance company, which provides us liability coverage, and for death and dismemberment. There are some members out there that balk at the thought of having their personal information in someone else's hands. This was especially so after we built a computer program that keeps track of all this information. (more on that later). Security measures have been put in place to protect personal information. The bottom line was that if they had a problem with their information being out there in CASARA's hands then basically they could either "suck it up", or take their attributes elsewhere's. We are all volunteers but that doesn't mean that we didn't have some prerequisites with which we selected our membership. In other words it is a requirement that this information be kept on file, so if people did not want to supply us this information, then they aren't accepted as a member of CASARA.

II. STANDARDS:

CASARA has a National Policy Manual that lays out everything from Finances, to Administration, Operations, and Training. For each aircrew, and search coordinator position, there are set down standards that must be adhered to. The National Board of Directors has set these standards. The CASARA National Board of Directors is constantly reviewing them, and if changes are needed they also have to be approved before they are put into place.

III. CERTIFICATION/CURRENCY REQUIREMENTS:

Within the Policy Manual, under "Training", we lay out our aircrew requirements for certification and currency as a pilot, navigator, or spotter, whichever position the member is training for. For example, to train as a CASARA pilot, a member must have certain prerequisites with respect to his/her experience as a pilot. In other words they have to be "qualified" to take the CASARA pilot training. (It should be clear that CASARA does not provide pilot training, but rather trains pilots to fly SAR.) He/she then undergoes the training course as laid out in the Policy Manual. CASARA aircrew courses are Nationally approved, and covers the items in the CASARA pilot/navigator/spotter's course. Once successfully completed, the aircrew member is then "certified" as a CASARA aircrew member, whether it is as a pilot, navigator or spotter. Within the next 365 days, this aircrew member must maintain his/her currency by completing all the items that are listed in the Policy Manual. For example, for a pilot to maintain his/her currency, in the next 365 days, he/she must fly 6 flights or not less than one hour, and must have at least 24 hours flying time. The extra 18 hours can be SAR flying, or it can be "other" flying, which could be business, personal travel or whatever. This pilot must also complete at least 3 hours of academics, do at least three ELT homings, and fly at least 4 search patterns pertinent to our area of operation.

The navigators and spotters have similar requirements for currency.

No aircrew member can take part in an actual search unless they are certified/current in their respective aircrew position. There are HUGE legal implications if this rule isn't followed. Recently, CASARA had an occasion where a plane in BC was on an actual search and it crashed, killing all three crewmembers on board. The insurance company and the military immediately stepped in and seized all the training records for all the crewmembers on board to ensure that they were, in fact certified/current aircrew members. Luckily, they were.

There is no sense in having people trained if they don't keep their training up. By that I mean if they take a course and never use it again for the next year or so, they will tend to lose the skills that they were taught. Then when the time comes to use those skills, and you are relying on that person to be able to use them, you have lost that resource, or you can't rely on him/her to come through when they

are needed the most. Something like that will not only reduce the effectiveness of the team, it can knock a big hole in your credibility. Currency is a must.

How does this apply to GSAR? I am going to suggest to you that in very short order someone, whether it be a tasking agency (RCMP for example) or the EMA in the provincial government will be making it mandatory that GSAR members must maintain some sort of currency. They are not going to be doing this to be sticklers or pain in the butts, but rather so they can say with certainty that anyone going out on searches are meeting a regulated currency standard. From what I have seen and heard at meetings, some teams are already doing this on their own, but I have not seen any SAR Alberta currency requirements that have been set down and put into force. If they are out there, I have not seen them being applied across the board. I am suggesting that this will have to change.

IV. TRAINING RECORDS:

In order to maintain some sort of currency requirements, you MUST keep individual training records for all operational members. CASARA found this quite difficult and each province and zones across Canada were keeping their own style of records. Some you could follow, others were impossible to read. CASARA national attempted several times to get, buy, and build a computer program to track all facets of CASARA work/membership/training. For one reason or another, they all failed. We tried “off the shelf” stuff, Excel spreadsheets, etc, but none suited our purpose. Three years ago, we contracted a company to build a special program for us, to our specifications. I am happy to say that that program is now fully in operation across Canada. This program is web based and keeps all member’s personal records, training records, and exercises, and actual operations records. The currency requirements from our Policy Manual are programmed into the program and the program automatically tracks our training and currency requirements for each member. It will also provide call-out sheets listing all the members that are certified/current aircrew members. It keeps the training records for each member so the training officers can set up training programs that enable all the members to maintain their currency.

In any case, I would suggest that a standard form of training record be implemented and kept by every GSAR team. If it ever came to pass that some training records had to be used for some purpose, whether it be in court or wherever, then it is much easier to present a STANDARD form with a member’s training record on it, that a bunch of different forms and styles of records.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS:

From CASARA’s experience, we have found it necessary to get past some of the little things that some zones (teams) may hold “dear to themselves”, and move ahead. It therefore became incumbent for the zones to step up to the plate and

get past these stumbling blocks. It is also necessary that the organization as a whole take some solid steps ahead to make all this happen. To do this your Standards Committee must come together and move ahead. You can't please everyone all the time. But at the same time it must be remembered that we are all volunteers.

I would therefore like to make some recommendations for SAR Alberta to consider, based on my experience in CASARA, at the provincial and National levels. Please note that you may already have some of this in place, if so, please don't get hung up on my notes.

- a. Build yourselves a Policy Manual for your Administration, Operations, Financial and Training. In this manual lay out criteria for your training standards, for certification and for currency, if that is what you want to call it.
- b. Set up a protocol for preparing and accepting policy changes.
- c. You may want to have each team sign on to SAR Alberta in the form of an Agreement to follow SAR AB directives. This will come in handy if/when you start getting funding from the Province. They will demand accountability right on down the line.
- d. Get on with setting up your standards.
- e. Get on with setting up currencies.
- f. Develop and use standardized forms throughout GSAR.
- g. Proceed as fast as possible to implement procedures etc. as I would bet that it will be coming at you from the government or tasking agencies, in very short order. BE PROACTIVE, not REACTIVE. Be ready when it comes.
- h. You may have to revamp your procedures for developing policies, standards, and currency. It has been found that if you have too many people sitting on a committee, or voting for something, that it is extremely hard to get anything done. (too many opinions and too many voices – the old adage – “Too many cooks spoil the soup.”) Most often, more can be accomplished by a few good people than if there are bunch working on it.

I reiterate that I am simply passing on my experiences in CASARA, having gone through all this at a National level. I hope my suggestions can help SAR Alberta be prepared when the EMA officially takes over and starts making policies that must be followed. I'm sure that they will be coming in the near future. Don't get me wrong, that is not necessary a bad thing, but BE PREPARED.

I will make myself available to the SAR Alberta Executive and Board of Directors if they have any questions, or require additional information or clarification.

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