

Maine Association For Search And Rescue

6 December 1998 Meeting Minutes

MASAR President John McDonough opens the meeting at 1306 hours.

Present

Patrick Dorian-Maine Warden Service, Bill Libby-MEMA, Greg Ceimbach-MEMA Robert Bohlman-York County EMA, Andy Robidoux-Mahoosuc Rescue, John McDonough-WRT, Sam Cronlate-DIRIGO, Phil DuPerry-WRT, Peter Laveway-WRT, Paul Labbé-WRT, Steve Hudson-MDISAR, Al Martin,-DIRIGO, Paul Santos-Lincoln SAR, Buzz Caverly-Director BSP, Nanei Ingraham-PTESAR, Fred Mason-Unity SAR, Kevin Donnell-Unity SAR, Chris Drew-Chief Warden BSP, Dave Martin-DIRIGO, Mike Sawyer-Maine Warden Service, Carolyn McAboy-YCERRT, Rick Grant-Lakes Region SAR, Deb Palman-Maine Warden Service/MESARD, Roger Guay-Maine Warden Service, Keith R. Heavrin Jr.-MESARD

Baxter State Park

John asks for discussion to begin with SAR operations at Baxter Park 10/31/98 to 11/1/98. Park director Buzz Caverly begins, stating that a given mission is successful any time a victim is recovered and removed safely. The Park will always seek ways to improve and strive to do a better job. During the time period of the operation Chief Ranger Chris Drew was recovering from a knee injury and there were not a lot of park staff on duty. Ranger Robert Howes was one of the staff there the day of the incident. The Park has wanted to have more people on hand at this time of year to deal with late use of the Park by the public. Mount Katahdin is technically closed during this time. During this incident a Mr. Boomer entered the Park at night when the gate keeper was called away by a family emergency. That same evening they had another incident with a 50 yr. old climber on the other side of the mountain. Once it became known that Mr. Boomer was lost or in trouble, Ranger Bob Howes started a response by calling in Lincoln SAR, HART, Wilderness, Unity SAR and other volunteer units which started arriving at the Park at 0130 on 10/31/98. Each team was briefed on the situation and it was generally agreed that the operation was progressing well at this point. When the victim was located at the top of the Hunt Trail Teams were dispatched up the shorter Abol Trail to secure and stabilize him. Chris feels that problems developed after the victim was found and stabilized. It was possible that the victim was more mobile than assessed. It was decided to sit it out till morning. The weather was turning for the worse. As the incident developed from this point, it became very complicated and Mr. Boomer was all day until 2300 hours 11/1/98 getting extracted by litter. Chris Drew feels that, from a safety point of view, the physical fitness and qualifications of the volunteer teams as well as the availability of appropriate gear, was adequate for this operation. He also reminds everyone that the Park has an agreement with Maine Warden Service that the Park will handle SAR operations for the first 24 hours or until the incident gets serious in nature. Once it goes past that critical point the Park looks for leadership from Warden Service and MASAR trained personnel. One question the Park has to figure out better is when to start helicopter extraction as opposed to opting for a litter extraction. This is a very hard call when weather is unreliable and poor or night operations are called for. Safety is the most critical issue to consider. The Park now relies 100% on volunteers for high angle rescue operations. The Park disbanded their rescue squad and has no winter rescue capability or gear any longer. The Park replaces any volunteer gear damaged or used up in rescue operations in the Park. Most rescues the Park has been seeing have come in the region of the great basins but recently they have been seeing more on the southwest side of the mountain.

Lincoln SAR was among the first to arrive at the scene and learn that the victim was at the top of the Hunt Trail. They sent three people up. HART and other volunteers arrived and started up the Abol trail. Lincoln SAR deferred management of the situation to the most qualified and experienced people at the scene.

Paul Labbé states that his assessment of the window for extraction by helo lift was very small, perhaps only 1.5 hours right at dawn. Jon Tierney and his wife Liz were there and it was generally recognized they were most experienced and brought a lot of proven technique to the scene. Belaying and anchoring systems were agreed upon and the personnel at hand proceeded with the litter evacuation. Jon's report gave the window for helo extraction up to around 1000 hours.

Buzz Caverly offers that getting helicopter support if at all possible would be in the best interest of both victim and rescue personnel in that it shortens duration of the whole operation. Helos in bad weather have their own dangerous aspect but we have always relied on highly trained pilots to make a Go or No Go call.

Dave offers that HART filed a report for the incident that outlined several areas for improvement. It is forwarded that after volunteers get in the Park, there is no formal leadership structure for operations. It is also forwarded that there were several comm. problems with radios issued that could not operate on the same channel. The primary controversy that developed concerned the type of lowering system used to extract the victim. Jon Tierney's report included a description of why he chose the methods he did. Dave Martin states that he has absolute trust in Jon's experience and methods. He is probably the most experienced and capable individual in high angle rescue in all of the northeast. Several others repeat similar confidence yet it is clear that disagreement persists concerning the methods used. Frayed and ruined climbing rope is an example.

Pete Laveway relates that Wilderness had comm. with Lincoln and understood they could stabilize the victim. Wilderness had six personnel for the operation and placed their team at the bottom of Abol slide by 0800 hours 11/1/98. They experienced trouble with communications due to radio incompatibility. Pete feels the operation should have airlifted the victim by helo first thing that morning. Pete relates a safety issue in that many climbers on the slide that day were not wearing safety helmets and there were falling rocks. The leadership issue should have been decided by the personnel present in a direct manner.

Paul Labbé offers that the issue of techniques should be resolved with a written standard by the teams who do the work getting together and working at agreement. Ropes failing, helmet use, and belays letting go are all critical safety issues.

Kevin Donnell says he felt there should have been a second long climbing rope with the extraction team. He also felt people worked together at the scene very well with a very successful and safe outcome. Fred Mason offers that the lowering operation went very smoothly. The Park or MASAR should resolve gear and safety issues with a written standards.

Dave Martin says that an incident command should have been set up for this operation and was not. The CP should have been located at Abol Camp Ground and a clear, appointed or elected, scene leader should have been on the mountain. A better job should have been done at keeping track of who was where, what they were doing and whether they all got back.

Buzz Caverly agrees 100%, and offers that, realistically, it isn't a good chance that Park personnel are going to be able to provide the best leadership in rescue operations. The Park recognizes that the volunteers have the training and expertise in this area and will look for them to step forward into leadership in these type situations in the future. The Park would prefer to be in a full support capacity for SAR operations, after they pass beyond the point where Park resources can resolve these situations, and within the legal prerogatives the Park has responsibility for.

Chris relates that radio communications problems defeated some important organizing and planning. Al Martin offers that most of the equipment and organizational problems would be resolved by redundancy.

Rick Grant relates that Lakes Region sent six people up at midnight and they cleared trail up to tree line along the proposed extraction route. When they arrived at that point they sent two persons up the mountain to assist. He regrets they had no helmets.

Steve Hudson says that MASAR needs to address standards for these type incidents. Helicopter use and when to use that resource is a management decision. Technique and gear should be addressed by standards.

John agrees that the two issues are separate and recommends we assign a committee the task of addressing the technical rescue issue similar to the way the K-9 and ground searcher standards were drawn up.

John feels MASAR should bring the advice and recommendations of the volunteers who are doing the work in our state to the committee with the goal of developing standards and an SOP to establish guidelines with safety issues of foremost consideration. John asks where Baxter Park stands on ICS system. Chris states that he has the training but is the only staff person in the Park, that he knows of, that does. The Park views searches of up to 24 hours duration as hasty search events and when they have to go longer, they call in Warden Service for leadership and management.

Bill Libby addresses several issues . The SAR issue is something that the 112th can assist with but transportation is not. Life and limb is the criterion they must meet, which does cover SAR operations but not transportation or moving people. Bill suggests it would be good to get Rob Carmichael in to discuss getting the state to address transportation costs and methods. Bill states that he is willing to supply ICS instruction and training for MASAR volunteers and asks that we contact him to schedule.

Steve rejoins that transportation IS a life and limb issue if it is considered that not having the trained people on scene to locate and evacuate a victim could lead directly to death.

Bill states that the federal issues only address the victim and not anyone else. The state can address these issues but would have to fund it.

Buzz Caverly offers that it isn't appropriate to go to the guard for transport. Their best use is for victim extraction. The state has a lot of fixed wing craft and it would be constructive to identify how these could be identified and perhaps enlisted into an agreement to provide teams with transport.

John adds that we often need to get fresh or non-exhausted personnel to search scenes safely.

Greg points out that the Guard can not go to the legislature to request funding for SAR operations or transportation. The volunteers, such as MASAR, would have to go forward with this type initiative. If the legislature is to designate monies for these areas volunteers will have to advocate for it. He feels it could prove quite productive to identify fixed wing assets and set up a duty roster for the purpose of transporting teams when the need arises.

Steve says he would like to see a Baxter Park training exercise directed towards technical rescue.

Chris Drew suggests that March is a time to consider and that snow sleds can get in to Abol slide.

Paul Labbé relates that fundamentals can take place anywhere but training in conditions and at realistic scenes is invaluable as preparation for the real thing. He feels that the various teams must work together. There is no question of ability but rather of how and whether the teams can work together .

Buzz and Chris agree that it is possible to set up a training in the Park . We'd just need to plan and set it up. They suggest Abol slide as the best consideration for a location and advise that the Park is building a new crew camp that could be an excellent support asset for SAR operations out of Abol.

Considerable discussion ensues concerning the need for MASAR to address the writing of a technical rescue standards. After numerous remarks suggesting the need for various individuals and groups to work together towards a common goal, Al Martin moves that "a committee be formed to address the writing of standards for technical rescue in Maine and that the committee chairperson be appointed by John McDonough." It is seconded by Paul Labbé. Vote is unanimous in favor. Additional discussion produced consensus that the membership would prefer to keep the committee small in number and made up of the best qualified individuals from each of the most used MASAR units in this specialty field. It is understood that there is a lot of information available for technical rescue and plenty of chance for the process to go astray due to personalities and strong opinions.

Ellsworth Search

Deb begins by relating she got a call describing a possible suicide in Ellsworth on Nov 10. She says it was an Ellsworth PD assistance call and as it developed, there was no evidence that put Dan Wolford in the woods or waters. Warden Service didn't really want to expend resources on this one. Evidence turned up a description of his clothing, considerable indication that he was despondent, a hand gun was missing from the

house and by that evening and considering a note he'd left behind, there was a strong feeling this could be a suicide. The weather was deteriorating to rain. The subject's house was on Rt. 180 right on the west side of Graham Lake. There seemed to be a lot of conflicting information about the incident. It was agreed that a serious disadvantage was created when the CP was set up in the family's garage and a large number of the family members and friends were constantly present. MDI SAR and MESARD teams were assigned hasty search objectives. MDI SAR found tracks northbound from the house (that in retrospect may have been very valuable as a clue). MESARD dog teams were assigned areas along the shore, a point of land near the house, and along the river out of Graham Lake. A lot of other units and volunteers started arriving and created a dangerous traffic situation in front of the family's house. Several volunteers made suggestions to the Ellsworth PD to help with traffic control but nothing was done until DIRIGO placed traffic cones and warning signs out to try to slow the traffic speeds down. There was still a dangerous level of congestion and potential for a serious accident. A general MASAR call out brought a considerable number of volunteers out and assignments were being given as they arrived. The MASAR trailer came after numerous teams were in the field and many of these never checked into the T-card system being employed. Several of the volunteer units never got briefed that the missing subject likely had a gun with him and they were given the impression that this was a low priority search. When a number of the teams quit for the day, they were not advised that the search would continue or that they would be needed for further effort. As a result many who might have been able to did not return to the scene again the next day or at all until the effort was secured. It was also observed that there were several long periods of time during the search when there was no one manning the CP radio and no one could get instruction from the search management.

Pat Dorian says he was very surprised that so many volunteer resources flooded this search because in his opinion and experience there was no reason for so many resources to be deployed. He felt they had called in a couple of Wardens, a few dog teams, and some hasty searchers and that should have done it for this search. Pat feels that every time volunteers get called out in such numbers before the overhead team gets there to run the search, operations are going to go a lot like the Ellsworth search or worse. If 50 or 60 volunteers are there and overhead isn't there is bound to be a lot of chaos followed by criticism. Pat would like to see a Warden Service assessment team arrive at search scenes with part of their job being to determine how many and who should respond. John states that Warden Service is in charge of incident command and that safety is the purview of that command. As an after word, the victim was a suicide and was found in a wooded place very near the power line, across the road, in an area right next to one that had been grid searched by volunteers. The victim was found by family members who continued the search for about a week after operations were closed.

MASAR Standards

The subject of Warden Service, thus the state at an official level, adopting the MASAR Ground Searcher Standards and the Dog Training Standards as the accepted state standards for volunteers is addressed. It is suggested that there is a spectrum of levels of acceptance, from a preferred standards to a required standards level. Clarification is offered that MASAR has no wish to infringe upon the prerogatives of agencies to use the volunteer help they wish to use at searches. It is forwarded that the standards shall apply to MASAR-certified teams and thus assuring that any agency using these MASAR teams will be assured of a certain level of training for the various types of resource. Pat Dorian says that Warden Service is meeting with Risk Management and that a committee has been established to address this issue. Right now they must wait for the state Risk Management office to evaluate this.

John McDonough suggests that we defer the Secretary's and the Treasurer's reports till next meeting. Seconded by Rick and unanimously approved.

A new group has been established named North Star SAR in Mapleton, Maine.

Chris Drew offers a sincere and elaborate thanks to all the volunteers who assisted with the Baxter Park Summer Volunteers program. It has been a great help to the Park and is deeply appreciated. He will be

contacting units for continued participation next year and they are enhancing their ability to make this program attractive to qualified participants.

Dave Martin announces DIRIGO is sponsoring an MLPI course with Dave teaching for the end of January and beginning of February. Handing out sheets he advises interested units or individuals contact him for information.

Keith announces that MESARD member Kate Fleury in Machias has received a Red Cross real heroes award for her work with SAR dogs and her record of good work and finds. With the award came a huge trophy and numerous television spots featuring the various recipients, including Kate.

Meeting is adjourned at 1610 hours

The next meeting will be held at the Sidney Warden Service Headquarters on Sunday February 7th at 1300 hours.

Agenda

Ben Woodard from WMA will present his views on wilderness emergency medicine and liabilities. Minutes and Treasurer's report from the previous two meetings will be considered.