



Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group

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Debbie Myers - Bear Run, PA

After Action Report

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¹ Thanks to Cory Wentzel (PA DCNR) and Rob Speiden (SWVaMRG) for maps and additional information.

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Summary

At 2030hrs on Tuesday, August 23rd, 2011 Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group (AMRG) was dispatched to assist Fayette County Sheriff 's Tactical Search and Rescue team in the search for a missing 47-year-old female in the Bear Run Nature Reserve just north of Ohiopyle, PA. The subject was last seen at 1100hrs on Monday the 22nd and last heard from at 1400hrs the same day. Fayette County SAR took on the initial management tasks and acted as SAR manager until early evening on August 24th when management was transferred to the ASRC.

SAR operations continued, 24 hours a day, until mid morning Saturday, August 27th when a status 3 find was made. The ASRC assisted Pennsylvania State Police and the Fayette County Coroner with investigation and recovery.

Subject Background

The subject, Debbie Myers, was a nurse in the ICU at the WVU hospital. Even though she lived in Morgantown, her family had deep ties in the Ohiopyle area. There is still a family homestead in the borough of Ohiopyle. Debbie spent significant amounts of time in the area, hiking in the State Park and in the Bear Run Reserve. She was intimately familiar with the area.

She had a history of depression that was exacerbated by a number of recent setbacks in her personal life. Ten days prior to the event Debbie learned that her attempts to reconcile with her ex-husband were no longer welcomed. This was followed by a performance evaluation from work that indicated that one more late arrival or missed day of work would result in her termination.

The depression history along with the upheaval in her personal life lead to the use of a despondent profile during initial operations. This profile was supported by a number of her family members.

Search Area

Bear Run is a natural area owned by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. The area (5098 acres) includes a large network of hiking trails and four high gradient streams. The coverage is second growth hardwood and hemlock with large areas of thick rhododendron. Bear Run also includes Fallingwater, a Frank Lloyd Wright home and tourist attraction. The area borders Ohiopyle State Park, the largest (20,500 acres) of the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) parks.

Within Bear Run, law enforcement responsibilities belong to the Pennsylvania State Police out of the Uniontown barracks. Law enforcement within Ohiopyle State Park is provided by DCNR.



Command Structure

The operation was run under a standard SAR incident command system. While the Pennsylvania State Police were the RA for the incident, they were not involved with day-to-day management. PSP had contacted the Fayette County Sheriff for support and the Sheriff provided it. Interaction with PSP followed a long established path. At the beginning of each PSP shift a new trooper would arrive and introduce themselves. This Trooper was then available anytime the command staff needed input. Additionally, there was a higher-ranking PSP officer available during the entire operation that could be contacted if needed. The Fayette County Sheriff would stop by the command post every other day or so but did not make any changes in operations.

Command was turned over to ARMG, and hence the ASRC, ASRC when I arrived on the scene in the early afternoon of the 24th.

Investigation

The investigation process was a critical component of this search. It started with the initial callout information and was then continued throughout the search period. Later interviews with the subject's mother, brother-in-law and co-workers provided valuable information on Debbie's mental state and insight into her possible actions. PSP lead the investigative process from the law enforcement perspective. Carl Wertz (MARG) & Carl Solomon (MSAR) both added valuable insight through their interactions with the family and co-workers. These two individuals functioned as Family Liaison Officers (FLO's) during my operational periods. During the process of supporting the family, these individuals, through normal conversations, were able to gain significant insight into Debbie's mental status and her personal history including her favorite spots in the area, her experience in the woods and her past behavior in a previous "lost person" event. The combination of PSP and the FLO's worked very well. PSP would find information during their investigations that would be given to the IC & FLO. When the FLO or IC had questions about possible criminal acts, PSP took the lead and investigated.

Daily Information, Statistics and Overview of SAR Ops

Overview

Search operations were performed using trained searchers and emergent volunteers. During the operation the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy not only provided facilities but also provided on-the-clock manpower. A number of these volunteers were part of the land trust staff who worked at the facility and who had in-depth knowledge of the property.

August 23rd

Search operations on the 23rd centered on hasty searches of the trails leading from the PLS. All searches were done at night with the majority of the tasks being K9, both trailing and air scenting. Trailing dog indications pushed search planning to focus on trails (Peninsula and Tissue Lane) east of the PLS. A number of hasty tasks were executed along the trails where the find was eventually made, however these were made by emergent volunteers without SAR personal and were not well documented.

Search Mgr: Val Farris (Start of Operations to 0000hrs)

Plans: Unknown

Ops: Unknown

Field Staff: 71

Tasks: 8

Field Hrs: Unknown

Comms: Unknown

Objectives: Unknown

Tasks completed:



August 24th

The approach for this period was to continue hasty searches of the high probability travel aid areas and to start to grid some of the high probability areas.

- 24-3 Trailing task This task went past the find location.
24-12 Hasty task This task appears to have gone past the find location. Debriefing information indicates that this should be a low probability area.
24-20 Hasty task This task ran along the trails to the find location. Debriefing information provides no clues.

Search Mgr: Val Farris (0000hrs to 1200hrs)
Don Scelza (1200hrs – 0000hrd)

Plans: Carl Werntz

Ops: Dan Patterson

Field Staff: 64

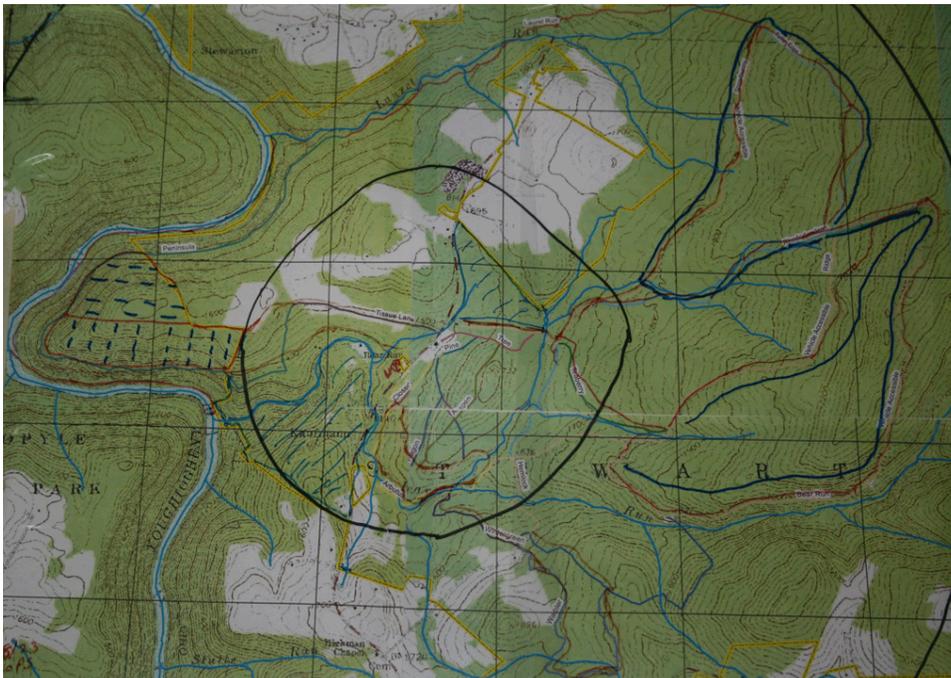
Tasks: 20

Field Hrs: 241

Comms: 104

Objectives: Written by Don Scelza

Complete initial hasty over all trails in the search area; Continue investigation; Segment search area for next op period; Grid high probability areas; Alert other SAR teams for next operational period; Decide on continuation or suspension of search.



August 25th

Starting on the 25th, “corridor” searches were started on the high probability travel aids. These tasks were executed by grid teams searching both sides of the travel aids for a specified distance. The two considerations that drove these tasks were a) the profile of a despondent moving just slightly off of the trail and b) the areas of very heavy vegetation.

25-21 – 24 These were hasty searches of areas in Ohiopyle State Park that were favorites of the subject. This information came from the ongoing interview process conducted by the FLOs. A request was made to the assistant park manager to search the areas.

Search Mgr: Don Scelza (0000hrs – 1700hrs)

Evan Koepke (1700hrs – 0000hrs)

Plans: Carl Solomon

Ops: Ray Bloesel

Field Staff: 71

Tasks: 23

Field Hrs: 231

Comms: 44

Objectives: Written by Carl Solomon

Find Debbie today; Be safe; Watch for rattlesnakes and copperheads;

Search corridors, sweeps & hastys all with a POD of 60% for unresponsive subject based on subject profile.



August 26th

On the 26th more high probability areas were starting to be grid searched. Trailing and Air scenting tasks continued.

26-7 Air scent This task was very close to the find location. Handler indicated during debriefing that conditions were very poor for air scent K9s (this task was dispatched at 1130hrs)

26-8 Hasty K9? This task was on the trails that ran past the find site.

26-23 Air scent During this task the K9 showed strong interest (Hysterical dog alerts) into the creek. Handler asked to write a task to be executed tomorrow.

Just prior to the evening planning session, contact was made with Bob Koester. He suggested that we deemphasize the initial 25% ring based on the subject's familiarity with the area. Based on subject profile, terrain and available resources he made a suggestion that large-scale grid searches not be performed but that grid searches be performed in a 0.25 mile radius of scenic locations. He also agreed with the continuation of corridor searches of the linear features.

Due to recent changes in DCNR operating doctrine, it is now possible to request DCNR resources for a search on private lands. A request was made, through PEMA, for DCNR resources. The initial response was by a four person overhead team.

Search Mgr: Evan Koepke (0000hrs – 1800hrs)
Don Scelza (1800 – 0000hrs)

Plans: Carl Solomon
Cory Wentzel

Ops: Linda Blossel

Field Staff: 78

Tasks: 22

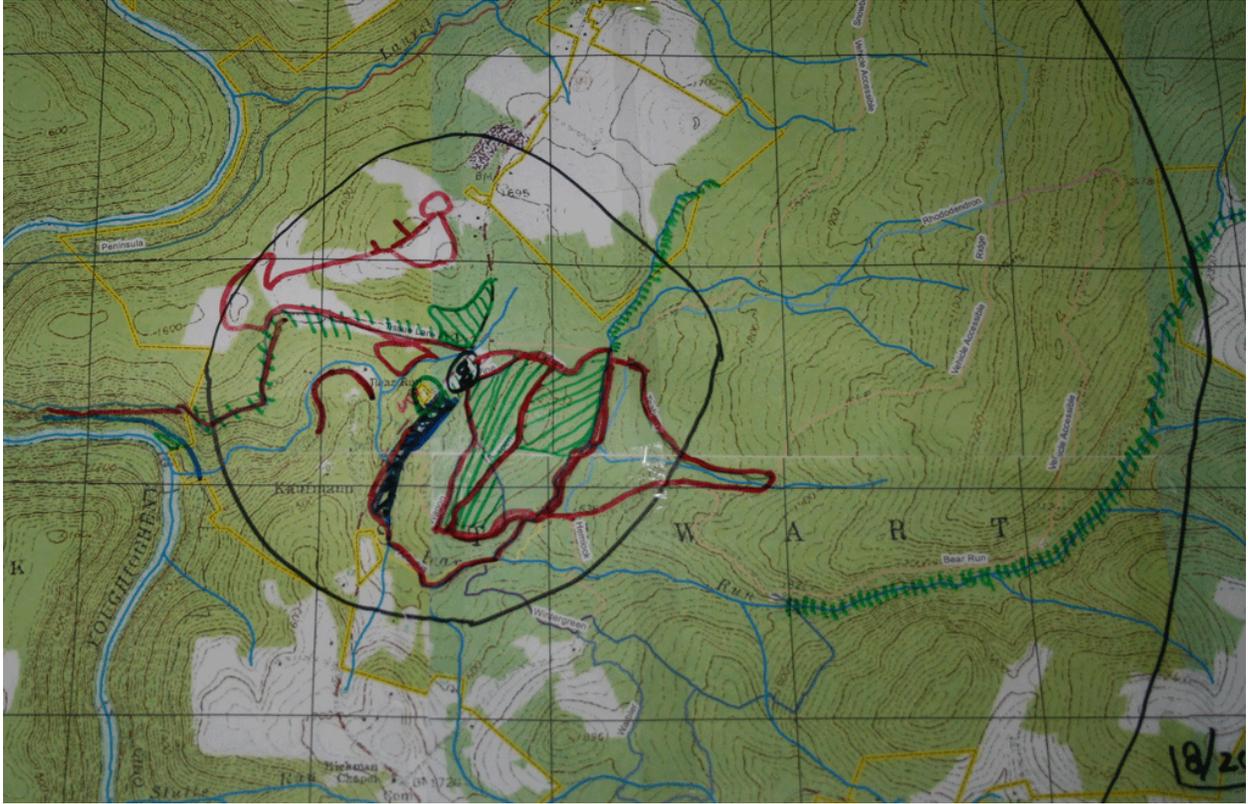
Field Hrs: 257

Comms: 46

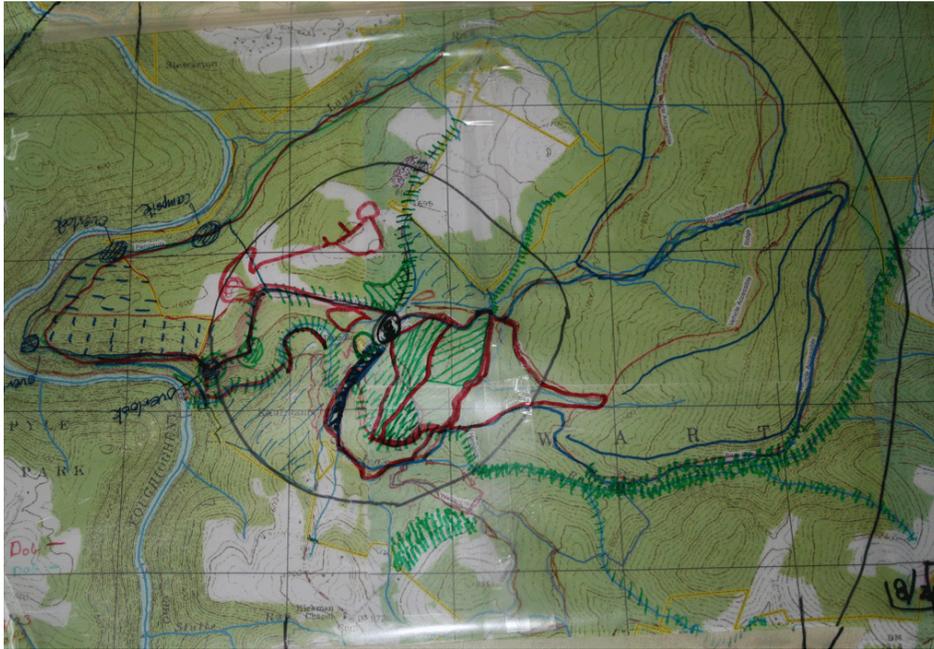
Objectives: Written by Evan Koepke²

Complete targeted searches of high probability locations within the 25% zone to a 80% POD. Search 25% zone to 90% POD; Begin searching high probability zones beyond 25% zone, but within the 50% zone to 90% POD; Continue investigation efforts.

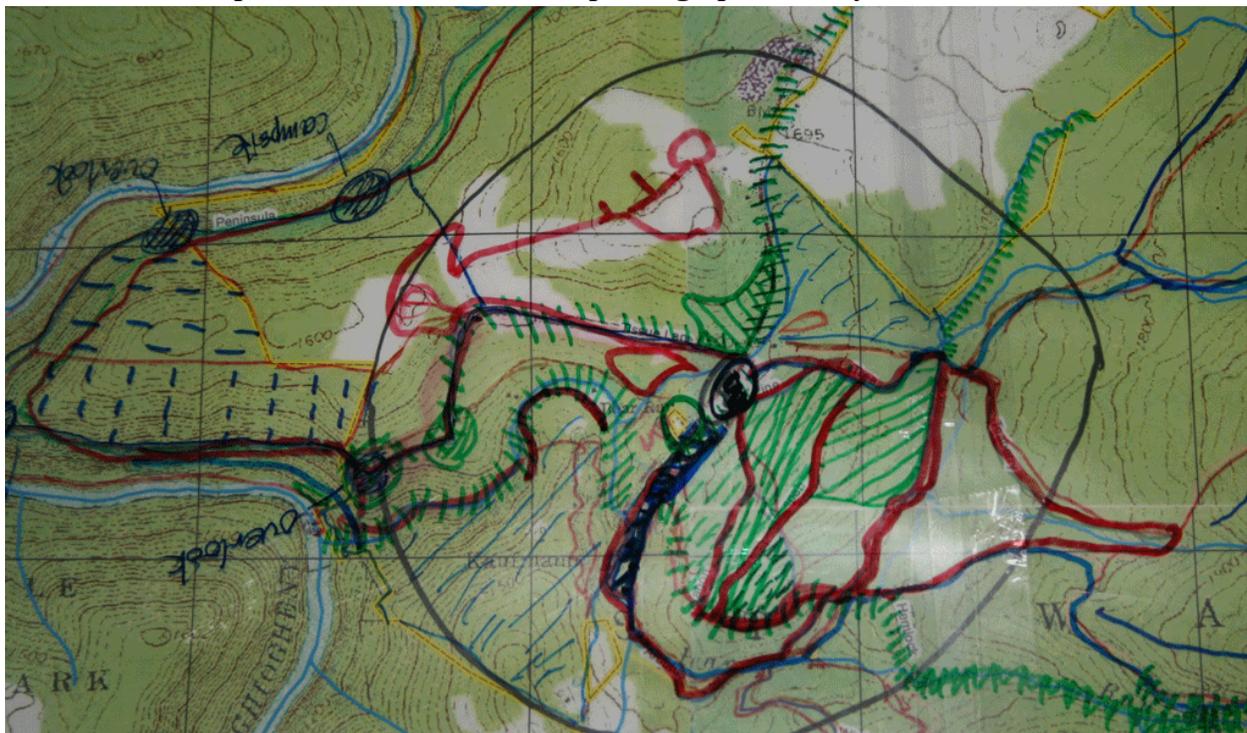
² These objectives were written prior to the discussion with Bob Koester. Discussions with Bob happened as part of the planning for operations on the 27th. This explains the apparent, but not actual, discrepancies between Bob's suggestions and Evan's objectives.



Total Tasks Completed 8/23 – 8/26



Total Tasks Completed 8/23 – 8/26 Close-up of high probability areas



August 27th***Planning on the evening of the 26th***

There was a general understanding that Saturday the 27th would be the big push day and that if a find were not made on that day, the search would likely be suspended.

Don Scelza, Evan Koepke, Carl Solomon and the four DCNR staff members discussed strategies for the evening and the next day operations. The first logistical task was to move the command post to a new location. This was required due to a wedding that was taking place in the facility that was being used as the command post. The next task was to complete the Tasks Completed Map for 8/25 and 8/26.

Tasks were written to implement Bob's suggested strategy.

After the Tasks Completed map for searches up through the end of the 26th was completed it was noted that there was an obvious hole in coverage to the SE of the LKP. This area correlated well with the area noted by the dog handler on task 26-23.

Because of the number of family members in the search base, all teams were given special instructions in the event of a find. Find information was to be communicated via cell phone and not on the radio. Additional crime scene instructions were given to all FTLs.

Search Mgr: Don Scelza (0000hrs – close)

Plans: Cory Wentzel

Ops: Ralph Campbell

Field Staff: 32

Tasks: 17

Field Hrs: 97

Comms: 46

Objectives: Grid the Bear Run corridor; Grid search around vistas for a 0.25 mile radius (RK suggestion); Follow up on dog alerts; Make suspension decision

Subject Find & Evacuation

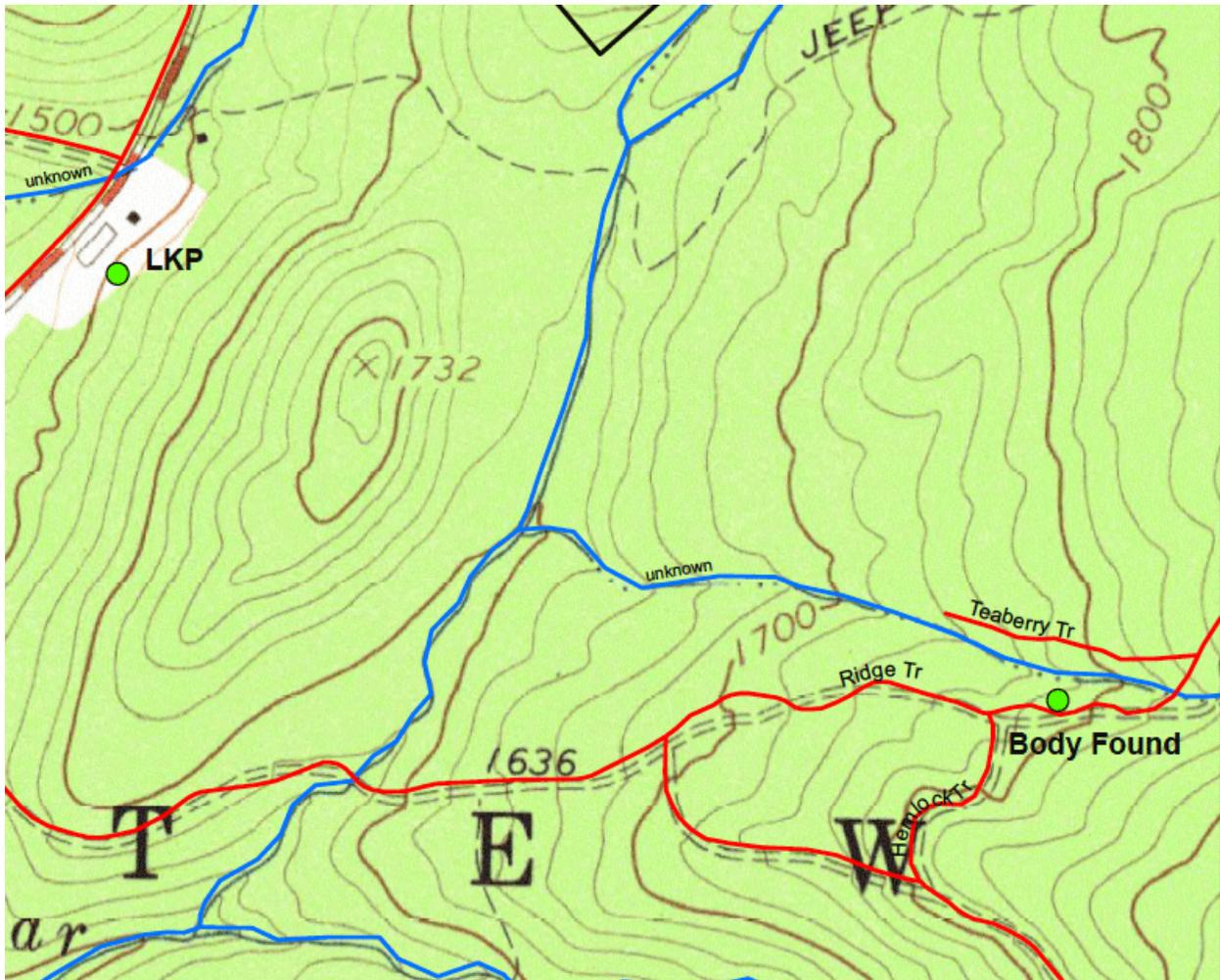
At 1008hrs I received a call from the leader of team Echo (task 27-5) indicating that they had a find. I requested that a single team member access PT status and call back. At 1012 I received notification that this was a Status 3 find. A senior member of AMRG was dispatched to the find location to help secure that area and take over as scene command. PSP was contacted.

Numerous other notifications were made (see IC's Daily Command Log for 8/27). A request was made to Ohiopyle/Steward Station 31 for their 6 wheel vehicle to transport the body. PSP &

Fayette County Coroner were transported to find location using 6 & 4 wheel ATVs. Subject's body was brought out at 1405.

The subject was ~20 yards off of the trail well hidden in the rhododendron.

"According to my measurements, her body was 0.767 miles from the LKP as the crow flies. If she indeed left the LKP and walked Arbutus Trail to Wagon Trail to Ridge Trail, she would have walked 1.08 miles to where she decided to take her own life" - Cory Wentzel DCNR Forester





Picture of Find Location



Much closer picture

Family Interactions

During the time of the search, family members were present in the search base or at nearby locations. A FLO was continuously assigned starting at the point the ASRC assumed management of the search. This assignment proved to be invaluable during both search operations and recovery operations. The relationship that developed between the FLOs and the family facilitated the gathering of significant investigative information; information that played a key role in creating the strategies used. In addition, the close relationship made delivery of the find information slightly easier. After approval by PSP (the RA), Carl Solomon (FLO) and I gathered the family in a room at the command post and delivered the bad news to them. Due to the relationship Carl & I (mainly Carl) had developed with the family over a couple of days of operations, this notification went as well as anyone could expect.

Searcher Injuries

A number of searchers suffered bee stings during operations. A ground yellow jacket nest was discovered just off of one of the trails. After the location was verified, the area was flagged with multiple tapes of differing colors.

There was one fall that resulted in a facial laceration – Task 24-7. The volunteer searcher was walking on one of the trails when he slipped and fell. The searcher did not get his hands out in front of him and he struck his face on the ground. The laceration was caused by the rim of his glasses. There was no loss of consciousness. The searcher walked approximately 1.5 miles back to the command post along with the rest of his team. The laceration was cleaned with high pressure irrigation using ~300cc of NSS. A bandage was then placed over the cut. Local EMS was on scene, however the searcher refused transport. A release was obtained by EMS and a copy was kept as part of the search records.

Considerations for Future Searches

This section identifies a number of issues that should be taken into consideration for future searches.

Creation of a good relationship with the family is very important. The relationship the FLOs had with the family facilitated the gathering of large amounts of information, some of which was instrumental in creating operational strategies.

- Careful tracking of tasks completed and debriefing information is crucial.
- Ask your trusted resources what they think you should do with a piece of information.
There were a couple of times during this operation where we asked the resources to write

the TAF for a team to follow up on an idea they had. One of these TAFs was the one for the team that made the find.

- Briefing of hasty teams need to contain instructions to include both sides of the assigned travel aid in their search scanning.
- The overhead team needs to sleep. This may seem like a no brainer, however in the heat of the operation it seems that sleep hours are few and far between. Having a well rested IC and overhead staff allowed careful evaluation of clues and previous operations. This lead directly to the successful find of the subject.
- At one point in this search a family member ended up on a field task without the knowledge of the IC or Plans. Good communication of family member identification needs to be maintained through out the operation and between all Staff.

Organizations

Below is a list of organizations that participated in the Bear Run search.

Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference

MARG

AMRG

SMRG

MSAR

BRMRG

SWVaMRG

RACE

Fayette County Sheriff's Tactical Search and Rescue

Air SAR

WOSAR

PAWSAR

Pennsylvania DCNR – Parks

Pennsylvania DCNR – Forestry

Fayette County Sheriff

Pennsylvania State Police

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

Spring Valley

Salvation Army

Tasking statistics

	8/23	8/24	8/25	8/26	8/27	Total
Total Tasks	8	20	23	22	17	90
Hasty		8	5	3	1	17
Grid	1	5	12	9	6	33
K9 Air	4	4		3	4	15
K9 Trail	3	1	5	6	1	16
Horse					1	1
Bike			1			1
Recovery					2	2
High Angle					1	1
Grounds					1	1
Flagging		1				1
Family		1				1
Sign Cut				1		1
Total Task Field Hrs	104	241	231	257	97	930

Timeline

Bear Run, PA
Debbie Myers
August 22 – August 27 2011
Overview Timeline

