

AUTC Trips Launch June 2010

Notes From SAR Talk by Matthew Lillis

Good evening fellow trampers. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Matthew. I joined the tramping club earlier this year. Before I joined the tramping club I spent a couple of years running round the hills with Youth Search and Rescue, and Hamilton Search and Rescue. I'm sure most of you know a bit about SAR. I was asked to get up here and tell you a bit about the way SAR operates, what to do to avoid meeting them, and what to do if you have the privilege of having a search called out for your party.

Search and Rescue is a group of voluntary organisations, which combine the resources of police, and trained volunteers. The responsibility for Search and Rescue essentially falls on the police, so they are the people to contact in the event that you or someone you know is lost or overdue from a trip. SAR will be called out for searches in a range of different environments including urban, farmland bush, mountains etc., but they are not responsible for people missing at sea. The individual SAR groups provide a pool of volunteers who the police can call on to conduct a search when the need arises, and these volunteers may be called upon to perform a wide range of different roles, from leading and organising a search, to being a team in the field tracking a missing person, operating radios, performing property searches or interviewing people who might have information relevant to the search.

So basically when a call comes in and the police make the call that SAR is required, all of the members of the SAR group responsible for the area will be paged and told to meet at a location which usually forms the base for the Search. From there, the police and senior volunteers in charge of the search will organise search teams, and a team to operate the search from the base, and deal with the logistics of the search. A drawn out search could have as many as a hundred volunteers drawn from many different SAR groups so the challenges of running a base can be huge. For teams in the field, there are many techniques for locating a missing person, and they vary according to a whole range of different things, most of which pertain to the state of mind of the missing person. For example, missing trampers would be considered responsive, and fairly sensible so teams would use sound light lines, where groups move down tracks in the bush, stopping every 30 or so metres to blow whistles, shine torches, and then wait and listen for a reply. A missing child who thinks he's playing the greatest ever game of hide and seek might not respond to searchers. Kids often think they will get a hiding if they're found, so they will tend to avoid searchers rather than coming out of their hiding places. Search and Rescue has accumulated a whole load of awesome statistics on what various different people are likely to do when they get lost. Depressed people are likely to simply avoid searchers, but also not likely to have much motivation to move far off track once lost. Hunters tend to think they're really badass, and will often try to rescue themselves, to the annoyance of searchers who have to cover so much more area when hunters get themselves in a pickle. Trampers can lack the skills to navigate safely when they get lost off track.

As much as SAR volunteers obviously love what they do, they are not there so people can be reckless and get way out of their depth in the wilderness. There is a huge responsibility on people who are out to enjoy nature to make sure that they don't get into a situation in which SAR needs to be called out. Searches put more people into often dangerous or unpleasant situations in the field looking for you, and even the smallest scale search is a large undertaking. In this spirit, there are a lot of things that you can

and should do every time you go out, as a trip leader, or as an individual. I won't dwell too much on some of these, as I'm sure you guys have heard most of it all before.

Leaders have the responsibility to ensure that the fitness, skill and equipment of their team are up to scratch, and to enforce the gear lists that they put out. Also to assess the weather and conditions of the trail. This is something I myself am notoriously bad at, but if the weather is looking like it will become beyond unpleasant across the line into dangerous, the trip leader needs to call the trip off or scale it down. As an individual, you have a responsibility to ensure you understand the difficulties of tramping, that your fitness and kit are suitable. There are a few points I would like to make in terms of what kit you bring on a trip. One of the things that SAR stresses, and the one point I would like everybody to take on from this presentation is that there is no such thing as a day pack. Any pack you take out should have enough stuff in it that you could spend a night out in area you are tramping. That doesn't a night of luxury sitting in a tent roasting marshmallows. It means that you should be able to survive a cold uncomfortable night caught out in the open, even if it starts raining. Having a survival kit here is key. You should never go out without a few things in your survival kit, most important of which is a survival bag. They weigh less than 50 grams, cost less than ten dollars, take up no space in your pack, and are highly versatile. They can be cut into impromptu raincoats, used as packliners, you can use them to create a huge obvious block of colour for searchers, or a load of smaller blocks. They are the makings of a good shelter. Hell, you can even sleep in them. Apart from a survival bag are a few obvious items I'm sure most people take already, always have a torch, knife, lighter or waterproof matches. A whistle is always useful as well. A compass is also a highly valuable tool, even if you aren't skilled in its use. The ability to walk in a straight line is mans true best friend.

I'd like to impart to you a story about our first exercise in Youth Search and Rescue. A group of twenty of us were taken 300 metres into the bush, and pointed in the direction of our base. We were set off in pairs without a compass, about ten minutes apart. After half an hour the first team who consisted of a couple of fairly macho guys blundered back into sight. They had managed to walk in a complete circle without noticing, and thought they had made it back to base when they saw our orange vests. The humiliation of that day lived on for a long time for those two. It impressed in all of us the value of a compass. Since then I have seen people managing to do the same thing with a compass, but the less said about that the better.

In terms of food, if you ever come back from a trip in the time you expected to take without food still in your pack, it is a really bad sign. While it is perfectly true that you can survive without food for weeks, it's very important not to go without food when you can avoid it, and that includes taking extra food as a contingency in case you don't make it back as soon as you would have liked. It's not a bad idea to use something really nasty as your backup food so that you don't decide to eat it half way through your trip when you get the munchies. I would advise against using chocolate for this reason. An extra days worth of food is about right on most trips.

In a Search, one of the ways SAR prioritises where to search is to go the last known point of the missing party and search a radius around it. Depending on how long the missing person has been lost, the amount of ground they could have covered will increase, and so the circle will be proportionally bigger. For this reason, as well as others, it is essential to get SAR called out as soon as possible. If it takes twice as long to get SAR into the field, they will have to search an area four times as big. This

means it is really important to have intention forms filled out, and to set out a time after which someone will call the police. The tramping club is pretty good with this, so if you fill out a tramping club intentions form you should have this covered.

OK so far all of this is stuff you can do before you leave to ensure that SAR can find you later. But let's say you and a few mates see something shiny and wander off track in its pursuit. Pretty soon you are absolutely lost with no idea where you came from. Maybe it's also started to rain. There is a SAR acronym for what to do in this sort of situation. The acronym is STOP, which stands for Stop, Think, Observe, Plan. Basically this revolves on another principle which some of you might have seen in old survival guide videos. Don't Panic. When you are initially lost panicking is a typical response, and this is when you can go from being a little geographically misplaced to full blown lost, in every way possible. If you pancake, pick a direction and run, chances are you will get yourself badly lost, when if you climbed a tree you could have seen your way back to your track. Once you have taken stock of your situation there are some methods you can use to find your way back to a known point. Direction sampling is great, where you walk in one direction twenty or thirty metres, then walk back to your starting point and do the same in another direction. If you keep doing this you can cover quite a wide area and with luck find your track. Use all of your knowledge of the area, a map if you have one (it's a really good idea to have a map), climb trees, do whatever you can to improve your idea of where you are. Try shouting and blowing whistles, then listen carefully for a response. Three short sharp blasts on a whistle is universally understood to be an SOS, and should attract the attention of anyone in the area.

If after this you are still lost you are going to have to hunker down and wait for rescue. There's a lot of folklore regarding going downhill until you hit a stream, and then following that stream back to civilisation. I would advise a lot of caution in doing this. If you know the area well, and know that not far down the stream is a track or someone who can help you, then by all means go for it. Travelling on streams can be extremely slow and dangerous. Depending on the stream you might be travelling no more than half a kilometre an hour, constantly on slippery rocks, you are likely to get wet, cold and tired. You can hit gully's and waterfalls. If for some reason you don't think anyone will come searching for you and you have to self rescue then it is a viable option.

The best indicator for whether or not a person in the bush will survive to be rescued is their mental state. Someone who thinks positively about their situation and expects to be rescued in a matter of time will be many times more likely to survive to greet their searchers. Kids can be great at this because they unrealistically think that mums going to come and pick them up in a few hours time. Adults tend to be pessimistic about their chances of rescue, and while this might be realistic, it drastically reduces their chances against the bush. I cannot stress enough that when lost, you should consciously try to be positive about the situation. It may sound stupid, but singing songs, shouting, whatever it takes to remain in a good frame of mind. If you are with a group, pessimism is infectious, but so is optimism. However you might feel, putting on a strong face and being optimistic will strengthen the group. With this state of mind it will be easier to be proactive to improve your situation, and employ whatever survival techniques you need to. The more proactive you are, the easier it is to maintain your core temperature, and stave off hypothermia which is your greatest enemy in the bush. With a good state of mind you don't need to be Bear Grylls, and most survival techniques you need for New Zealand bush are fairly rudimentary. A basic shelter to keep out the rain is fairly easy to throw up especially if you have a survival bag.

From here the most important thing to do is to help Search and Rescue find you. Whatever signals you can make, you should do so. Stuff from movies like throwing green stuff on fires is pretty effective. Noise is a great asset. Also bear in mind that anything in groups of three is an instant SOS message. That could be fires, bits of bright plastic on top of trees, rifle shots, anything. Making little tepee structures out of sticks will indicate to anyone searching that there's an engineering student who has been through recently. They're great if you are travelling and want to indicate where you have been.

The last point I'd like to make in terms of survival is – don't feel like a dick if you get lost. It happens, deal with it. Sometimes people will try and rescue themselves even after they are hopelessly lost, and just make the situation worse. You are far better to stay close to the last point you were seen, and improve your chances of rescue.

If anyone's inspired to join SAR, it's a great organisation. The Auckland branch has a website if you Google Auckland SAR and they have some useful information. If you join you will learn some impressive survival skills, how to track people through the bush, which is a very impressive skill. There are a lot of old veteran hunters and trampers involved, with a lot of experience to draw on. I would highly recommend it to anyone who has a bit of spare time, and it looks great on the old C.V.

That's all from me folks. Happy and safe tramping this holiday!