
NZLSAR News

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Wellingtonian wins Police Search and Rescue award

Wellington policeman Senior Constable Daniel O'Connell is the sixth recipient of the Lou Grant Award for excellence in and contribution to police Search and Rescue.



Deputy Commissioner Rob Pope presented him with the award on 19 June.

Dan, the Diplomatic Protection Squad representative at Parliament, has been with Wellington Police SAR for 32 years, making him one of the longest serving SAR squad members in the country.

The Lou Grant Award commemorates a popular sergeant who died in the police Eagle helicopter crash in Auckland, in November 1993. Lou's widow Cath donated a bronze trophy which is awarded every two years for excellence and contribution to police SAR.

Lou Grant ran Auckland's SAR squad for many years, leaving SAR only to set up the Auckland Police air support unit.

Senior Sergeant Gerard Prins, National SAR Coordinator, says several nominations were received for the award. "All were worthy winners but Dan's all round contribution really stood out."

Dan started his police career in Greymouth in 1971. Two years later he transferred to Wellington and shortly afterwards joined SAR. Dan's worked in a variety of police positions in Wellington, all of them sanctioning his place on the SAR squad.

He's worked on hundreds of SAR missions during the past 32 years. Some notable ones include:

- In November 1977 finding the body of a child missing from her home. Dan was involved in the search and, using his initiative, found her body well hidden under the floor of a Johnsonville School.
- In May 1989 Hutt Valley schoolgirl Carla Cardno went missing from near her home. Dan worked with SAR for extended periods in the search for Carlo whose body was found after six weeks, buried near Pencarrow.
- Dan was the first SAR member at the site of a mail plane crash in the Tararua Ranges in the winter of 1997. The crash site was steep, exposed and saturated with aircraft fuel. Dan stayed at the site in extremely inhospitable conditions to complete the body recovery of the pilot.

Sergeant Jo Holden, Wellington SAR coordinator, says Dan regularly takes the on-call responsibilities and has effectively controlled many SAR operations.

"In January last year we had the rescue of tramper Louise Wilkinson in atrocious conditions from the top of the Tararuas.

"Dan's timely response to the initial call from the patient helped SAR squad members to quickly find her. Louise was in a severely hypothermic condition and over the next two days Dan worked long hours to evacuate her, and ensure the team completed the mission without incident or injury."

Around the same time Dan coordinated two other significant SAR events - a search for a missing party in the Orongorongos and the rescue of a family trapped in floodwaters in the Akatarawa family.

"Dan's developed a skill base that would be hard to match in most Police SAR squads in the country," Jo says. "He's noted for his accuracy with navigation and distance travelled, and his air observer proficiency.

"He's flown dozens of air observer missions with the Westpac Rescue helicopter, mostly lying down on his stomach, head out the door and looking straight down at the ground or the sea in conditions that make most people immediately airsick."

When he's not involved with SAR or other police duties, Dan can also be found at a hockey field, whistle in hand. He's a longstanding Wellington hockey referee.

NZLSAR Strategic Development Plan Progress

Newsletter # 4 -September 2006

The NZLSAR Annual General Meeting was held at the Police College on Sunday 27th of August, where the proposed changes to the NZLSAR Constitution were debated and, with some minor changes, approved unanimously by the seven regions and five full member organisations. We thank all those who have had input into the development of this new constitution, with a special mention of Roger Barrowclough's legal guidance and assistance.

The current National Committee and sub-committee members and structure will remain responsible for the affairs of NZLSAR Inc until the constitution is formally registered, and takes effect on the 31st of October 2006. During this time the full Board will be established and a new Chairman elected. In addition the Position Description for the Business manager will be finalised and the recruitment process established and implemented.

The AGM also confirmed the selection of the four SAR experienced members for the inaugural NZLSAR Board. We were fortunate to have six very strong applicants for the positions. Candidates were interviewed by a selection panel consisting of Roscoe Tait, Tric Moller, Barry Were and Tony McLeod (National Operations Manager for the NZ Police).

The successful SAR based candidates for the inaugural NZLSAR Board are: Mr Ray Bellringer (Mt Cook) Mr Stuart Davies (Palmerston North) Mr Dave Comber (Taupo) Mr John Scobie (Nelson).

A short introductory note from each Board Member, and background information will be circulated with the next newsletter.

While having the new constitution ratified at the AGM, and the appointment of the SAR based Directors confirmed, are significant steps in NZLSAR's development, there is much work still to be done before the new structure can

fully take effect. The four new SAR based Board Members will undergo specific training regarding the governance/Board of Director role for a "Not for Profit" organisation such as NZLSAR. Three additional Independent Board Members have yet to be identified, as does the Business Manager. The current Chairman's Working Group and the four newly appointed SAR Board Members will take on this responsibility.

When the members of the inaugural NZLSAR Board, and the Business Manager have been appointed, the Administration Support Officer (ASO) roles can be clearly defined, and the position vacancies advertised. It should be noted that, those appointed to the ASO roles may have current employment responsibilities to fulfil before being able to focus fully on their new NZLSAR roles, and it is likely there will also be a need for some familiarisation and training to be conducted before they can become effective in supporting NZLSAR volunteers.

We will endeavour to keep you informed as we progress through this period of exciting development for LandSAR.

Night Sarex, Belmont Park May 2006

Sue Chesterfield & LandSAR Dog, Nugget

I write up a debrief on most exercises and all searches for my own learning and analysis, because at the time of searching I am totally focused on what is happening 'at the moment', and later see the bigger picture and think of how I could have done things differently, better, what was good etc.

Wellington SAR had a night exercise for experienced and new members. The purpose was to use and/or teach different Search Methods which are effective for night searching.

Making Decisions with Limited Information -

On arrival at Stratton Street HQ, WLSAR advisors told me I was to be a Team Leader, and asked me how many people I wanted in my team, and how many teams I needed for the search. I had to decide before knowing the search area, number of people missing, previous searching, terrain, etc.

I decided our team (Team 1) should be a total of 3 searchers (Sue, Peter, Rowena) & Nugget. This was increased as a late arrival was added, and a good decision as Gavin had just started training a LandSAR dog in the Wellington region, just as Rowena is. As for another team.....I wanted to say none but opted for 1 other team (Team 2). I considered that the less contamination, the less scent from other teams, the easier it would be for Nugget to focus & find. As I didn't know the search area yet, I didn't know how much separation we could have between the teams either.

The wind was very light, a drifting northerly. The cooling air was dropping to the ground, which would allow for scent to concentrate. Crystal clear sky (after huge amounts of rain recently) and 3/4 moon.

The search advisor informed us that the search area was criss-crossed with numerous bike and walking tracks which didn't appear on the map.

Brief

Area to search: 3-3.5 km of track

1 person missing

No information except his name - Rick

Search Plan

TL for Team 2 and I studied the map and area to be searched. There was an obvious river track north and a circular track going easterly gradually up hill, then northerly along a ridge then down in a steep westerly direction. The junction of the river and circular route was 200m from our start point. We agreed that Team 1 search the circular route.

I planned to stay ahead of our team with Nugget, as the track was obvious, and it was safe to do this. The other 3 team members would look for Sign and Clues at the 'upwind' side of the track and call and listen for a response from Rick, our lost person.

My Rationale

I chose to search the area of rising and falling land as this would increase the distance of 'off track' area that Nugget could pick up human scent from. This ability of a dog to collect scent 'off the wind', without actually going to all that area, would mean that Nugget would be searching a bigger search area than people could from the track. The benefit of having a search dog is that they can detect a person who is not visible from the track due to darkness, bush cover, no sign etc.

The light northerly would aid the scent to rise up the slopes toward the track and the breeze would likely be greater the higher the altitude. Started at 120M and highest point 360M. Nugget would be most proficient searching the air, north of the tracks and so the search team concentrated looking for sign south of the track. While searching, areas not searched would be noted using the GPS and map and notes.

The Search

The tracks had been heavily used recently /today and it looked like many bicycles and people had been on and off track. While working Nugget 'off track' into the wind, I looked at the edge of the track for recent sign of a person entering the bush. This was unlikely to help find Rick in view of the heavy traffic through.

With myself and Nugget searching ahead of the team, we gained a lot of distance from the other team members. This wasn't ideal (although I could still hear them and see their torches most of the time). Their task meant they had to be slower and observant to detail, and stop to shout and listen etc. The area also had numerous tracks through it that weren't on the map, so there

was a high risk of the team being separated by going different routes. I was stopping every 6 or 7 minutes so we could catch up. Rowena suggested that she and I remain together while Peter and Gavin continued behind. We would still stop to regroup when suitable i.e. every 10-15 minutes.

Nugget ranged off track to the north 30m, which meant she was picking up scent from 200-300m downwind. The distance would vary depending on how dense the scrub/undergrowth was. She would search the south side of the track when asked. We marked all track junctions, power lines, changes of direction, track signs and a small hut using the GPS.

When nearing the DanZig, track, Base re-tasked us to a new grid point, to the start of our downhill search. This was where we were heading anyway so we hastily walked allowing Nugget to remain free and searching naturally, just in case she picked up scent of a person. After all, there could have been a member of the public up there out for a stroll and its preferable that she is allowed to alert on all human scent, because that's what she is trained to do. Better to have her barking at a searcher/member of the public, than learning to ignore any person, in the middle of a search.

This downhill track had thick gorse either side for 300m, then low thick bush. Nugget ranged ahead. At a bend she took off into gorse/bush and was gone for 2-3 minutes. While away I gave the search command as normal. She returned on her own accord. This indicated to me that she was trying to follow-up scent but lost it. This scent would have been coming from below and off to the north of the track as it was 'on the wind'. Back on track she extended her ranging and as I moved along the track, I could see her glow collar disappearing into the bush and I could hear her crashing in the undergrowth. I couldn't see her after the first glimpse. I couldn't hear her so either she was too far away to be heard, or she was staying put with a person. As before, I gave the search command and she barked and barked to indicate that she had found Rick. Exactly what I have come to expect of Nugget but still extremely thrilling for her and our team.

Rowena and I scrambled through toward her barking and found her sitting on Rick, who played the unconscious person. She wasn't moving from him and continued to bark with excitement.

Rowena and I stayed with Rick. Rowena waited for Gavin and Peter to pass on the track. She shouted the 'find' them and they radioed Base. Meantime I commenced to do a first aid assessment.....at which time Rick recovered immediately!

Debrief

- Although winds were very light, Nugget was able to pick up Rick's scent from 100-200m away through dense bush and gorse, above him
- As she had been running up hill and covering a lot of ground for the past 2 hours, she sat with Rick for 1 minute before barking (catching her breath). This is acceptable as she was firmly staying with him and in fact sitting on him some of the time

- As handler, I observed that she was keenly interested in following up human scent when she left the track and pushed through gorse. By returning without a 'find' I decided that she found a 'spot' of scent which had bounced uphill or sifted through the bush and there wasn't any more scent 'on the wind' for her to follow up.
- If she hadn't made a find, the previous area of interest would be reported to base and marked with GPS.
- Nugget picked up her pace after this spot of scent and ranged further away from me. She was air and track scenting. This indicated to me that she was working on finding the source of the scent
- On cold nights, wind direction is easily seen by human breath.....no need for dusting powder etc.
- On returning to base, our track was downloaded from the GPS and put onto a photographic map. This made it very easy to describe areas searched and not searched. This would be vital if a find had not been made. It also had Ricks track on it.
- A realistic and correct scenario for the use of a search dog. Dark, with an unresponsive lost person needing to be found asap.
- The ideal dog team size is either 2 or 4. The dog team must be able to move faster than the human search team. The handler needs to see how, where, what speed, change of direction etc the dog is making. This distracts from navigating, so need a competent navigator alongside the handler.

NOTES OF EXPLANATION

Nugget is Qualified as an Air Scenting dog but she will also track and decide if the air scent matches the ground scent. In other words, a dog will use all its skills to make a find, but qualify in their specialty.

All civilian qualified search dogs are on website: NZLSAR Search Dogs.

All handlers are volunteers and they have trained their own dog/s. They put in the effort and time in the hopes of being called out. Please don't hesitate to call us.....no matter the time of day or night.

All dogs listed on the web site have been tested by a civilian and police assessor over a period of 4 days, every year. The police also test police SAR dogs to the same standard. Sergeant Alan Mcrae and Chris Best are the assessors.

Dog teams can be deployed to anywhere in New Zealand.

A number of dog teams can work on the same search, but in different areas.

If there isn't an area for the dog to search, advisor's can still call the dog team to base to be available for deployment asap. Also the handler can offer ideas of where a dog would be useful or otherwise.

Sue Chesterfield, Wellington Land SAR

Managing Land Search Operations (MLSO) courses 2006/2007

Names are now needed for the next MLSO course to be held at the Police College.

The dates are: First course – 29th January to 2nd February

Second Course - 5th to 9th February

Auckland Anniversary day is on the Monday of the first course and Waitangi day on the Tuesday of the second course. Neither of these holidays will affect the running of the courses.

The preference is for South Island people to attend the first course and North Island people the second.

Each course is runs for five days, starting Monday morning and finishing on Friday afternoon. With the Monday morning start, most people will fly in on Sunday and accommodation will be provided at the College from Sunday night (and on Friday night, if required by flights, at the end of the course). Transport, accommodation and meal costs are met by NZLSAR and Police.

These are the first of the revised MLSO courses to be run using the new modular format.

Each region is allocated a minimum of two places on the course, although there are additional places available which will be allocated on a case by case basis. Local SAR organisations and regional training co-ordinators need to select those members who would benefit from attending. Nominations must to be submitted to Barry Were, Chairman of the Training Subcommittee by 1 November 2006 to allow sufficient time for the selection of candidates, the purchase of airline tickets, send out course material, etc. To help us manage the risk associated with the purchase of non-transferable air tickets, please ensure that those people that are nominated are in a position to attend.

It is important that this opportunity be advertised as widely as possible and to encourage those members who are, or are likely, to be involved in the IMT during a SAROP. If you wish to attend, speak to your local SAR organisation Training Officer

Editors Comments

Thanks to the people who contributed articles for this newsletter. I would like to get another newsletter out before xmas but to do that I need contributions, so if any of you have anything of interest you want to share please forward it to me by the end of November.

Phil Whitelaw