

# **Exercise Evaluation Report**

## **Operation Mountain House**

Location: Mt Holdsworth Tararua Forest Park

Date: 11 - 13 November 2022

Report version: 1

Evaluator(s): Conrad Smith NZ Police Senior Constable Ruapehu

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## Executive Summary

The Wellington Annual SAREX was held on the 11 – 13 November 2022 in the wider Mt Holdsworth area.

Whilst general SAR related objectives and accompanying KPI's were identified for the exercise, this also provided an opportunity to explore a SAR response to emerging back country activities in the area, packrafting and canyoning.

CanyonSAR being a newly recognised specialist squad by LandSAR and having a recently established team based in Wellington, this exercise provided an opportunity for them to demonstrate their capabilities as well as networking with the wider Wellington/Wairarapa SAR community.

The exercise provided a realistic test for the IMT and field teams pushing communications into dark spots and giving an opportunity for field to teams to refresh skills and was a very worthwhile experience for all involved.

## Recommendations

1. A Safety Management Plan be developed, displayed, updated, shared and referred to when preparing taskings and briefing teams.
2. The ICP be kept to essential IMT members only with briefings and discussions being held at another location.
3. When dealing with a specialist activity seek SME advice. (Partly done with CanyonSAR but not packrafting)
4. Ensure field teams understand necessity to relay information around taskings and safety in the field back to the IMT.
5. Wherever possible ensure IMT handovers done in person to capture a full appreciation of the situation.

## Introduction

Operation Mountain House was the annual Wellington SAREX incorporating a response from both the Wellington and Wairarapa Police SAR squads to a real time incident in the greater Mt Holdsworth area of the Tararua Ranges.

The scenario was complex involving multiple lost and injured parties spread over large distances in areas with little or no fixed communication options. It allowed the realistic involvement of not only bush search teams (made up of LandSAR volunteers and Police) but also a specialist Canyon SAR team, Amalgamated helicopters and AREC.

The SAREX was run over three days commencing on Friday evening at the Initial Action stage of a response. Teams were briefed and given taskings and mobilisation plans which were already organized by EXCON. A handover was completed inducting an incoming IMT following the deployment of the field teams.

Field members were required to spend two nights in the bush. Two IMT teams were created for the exercise one completing 'early shifts' and the second 'late shifts' for the three days with a period in the early hours of each morning with no IMT present.

The SAREX concluded mid afternoon on Sunday when all teams returned to Kaitoke and met at the campground for a barbeque and hot debrief.

# 1. Background

## **Background to the Exercise**

Pack rafting is an emerging outdoor activity rapidly gaining more popularity amongst back country users and as such brings a new set of challenges to SAR teams when something goes awry. The rivers in the Mt Holdsworth region are experiencing an increase in this activity and as such the potential of a related SAROP is increasing.

Canioning is another emerging trend requiring specialised search and rescue skills. A discipline recently recognised by LandSAR as a specialist squad, has a team based in Wellington however capabilities of the group are unknown to Police having not yet worked together.

Police SAR squads in Wairarapa and Wellington share boundaries and on occasion work together on SAR operations. Despite the geographical distance of the two work groups, it is important to maintain this relationship and train together for when large SAROP's arise.

While new members within Police and LandSAR attend training courses it is important that they also have the opportunity to gain experience in both the management team and the field. Members were rotated through some roles providing opportunity for experience and learning although the two Incident Controllers remained the same for all shifts.

The intent of this exercise was to provide an opportunity to practice a realistic scenario which incorporated not only sound SAR techniques but also the two emerging back country activities in an area with no comms and with life-threatening injuries.

## **DATES:**

11 -13 November 2022

## **LOCATION:**

ICP - Lower Hutt Police Station

Search Area – Mt Holdsworth. Waiohine and Tauherenikau Rivers and catchments. Isabelle Canyon.

## **ORGANISING AGENCIES:**

Police, LandSAR

## **KEY PEOPLE:**

A/Sgt Jonno Westrupp, Snr Const Brett Main, Allie Rutherford, Claire Pettigrew

### 1.1. Participating organisations

NZ Police – Wellington and Wairarapa  
Wellington LandSAR (IMT and Field)  
Wairarapa LandSAR (IMT and Field)  
Amateur Radio Emergency Communications (AREC)  
CanyonSAR – Wellington  
Amalgamated Helicopters  
NZDF- Dr Charmaine TAIT

### 1.2. Exercise aim

To practice search and rescue techniques within an IMT and in the field to build strength and skills for a SAR operation.

### 1.3. Exercise objectives

- SAR partners collaborate effectively.
- Risks are identified, removed, minimised, or managed.
- Test communication infrastructure in a SAR environment.
- Information is effectively managed and communicated during the response.
- SAR operational personnel refresh and practice search and rescue skills.

### 1.4. Exercise Scenario

<Briefly describe the scenario(s) and the related roll out of those during the exercise.>

A group of five have planned a packrafting and tramping mission in the Tararuas, departing from Holdsworth and finishing at Kaitoke. Two of the group were not completing the whole route but were joining partway through. The first three (Group A) were going to walk to Mid Waiohine Hut over Mt Holdsworth, pack raft to Waiohine campsite via Totara Flats hut then walk over to Cone Hut. They were going to meet the other two who are less white water experienced (Group B) at Cone hut, and from their pack raft down Tauherenikau to Smiths Creek shelter, before walking out over the puffer saddle to Kaitoke.

The trip has been a disaster. Group A has almost immediately ran into difficulty with one member being pinned and nearly drowned. A pack raft containing the only PLB has been lost in the process of rescuing and resuscitating the near-drowned person. The group has been unable to locate the lost pack raft, bedded down for the night, and tried to walk out the following morning. The unwell person has become further injured, so they've sent one person for help. They have tried to navigate up or alongside Isabelle Creek and come to grief in [Isabelle Canyon](#). After waiting some time for help to come, the remaining healthy person has also attempted to walk out. They successfully reach Powell on Friday evening and borrow a phone to call Police, after the SAREX is already underway.

Group B has walked in, and when their friends have not been in Cone Hut or arrived overnight, they've been unsure of what to do. Without a vehicle at Waiohine Gorge, and with some uncertainty about whether they were meeting at Cone or at Tutuwai, they've decided to pack raft down the Tauherenikau and hopefully meet up with them along the way. They've missed the Smith Creek takeout and entered the Tauherenikau Gorge. Realising their mistake and not being sufficiently skilled to paddle the gorge, they've attempted to walk out, eventually becoming stuck near a Smith's Creek tributary.



## **2. Evaluation Methodology**

### **2.1. The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity**

It was agreed that a written report be produced measuring the SAREX against the objectives and related KPI's. This will include any recommendations relating to the objectives.

### **2.2. Evaluation scope**

To observe the IMT at Lower Hutt Police Station.

Provide a report against the objectives from observations of the IMT, feedback from field teams via radio comms, hot debrief and team debriefs at the conclusion of the exercise.

### **2.3. Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed**

- Briefing of teams prior to deployment.
- All aspects of the IMT function from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon.
- Comms between field teams, AREC and IMT.
- Demobilisation and debriefing.

Due to the vast area covered by field teams and only one evaluator no actions of the field teams were observed in person however they were monitored via the IMT, briefings and debriefings.

### **2.4. The process followed in preparing and submitting the report**

Contact was made by A/Sgt Westrupp and Wellington DSARAC Aliyah Parsons well in advance of the exercise taking place. Planning documents were shared and discussed via email, phone and a Webex meeting.

A draft copy will be shared for feedback prior to the final copy being forwarded to NZSAR for their information and recording purposes.

### **2.5. Other information**

### 3. Findings

#### Objective 1. SAR partners collaborate effectively

As previously mentioned, seven agencies/groups were involved in the running of this SAREX. All groups participated fully and contributed to the running of the operation. A CIMS structure was used appropriately for all agencies.

Whilst not a specific objective as such, a goal of this SAREX was to work with the newly established Canyon SAR team and gain an appreciation of their expertise and networking with each other. Having a subject matter expert in the IMT for Canyon SAR was invaluable in understanding the teams' capabilities and safety which also stretched to cover field teams within the river catchments.

AREC although large in number and sometimes 'crowding' the Incident Control Point with people and chatter, worked well from their Comms room and had a good understanding of SARTrack and relayed messages effectively and accomplished a solid comms plan.

When used Amalgamated helicopters had robust discussions about taskings and safety margins and role played and taskings were appropriate.

The Wellington and Wairarapa Police squads worked well however having an IC returning to Wairarapa late at night did provide some challenges with passing on of information to the incoming IMT the following morning.

#### KPI's

- All agencies required for the exercise, participate **ACHIEVED**
- Liaison arrangements for inter-agency engagement are maintained. **ACHIEVED**
- Agencies work under common structures, roles and responsibilities and use common terminology (CIMS) **ACHIEVED**
- Agency work is coordinated **ACHIEVED**

#### Objective 2. Risks are identified, removed, minimised or managed.

##### Safety Always.

1. When teams were deployed on the first evening, they received a safety briefing which covered fatigue, Take5, feedback on taskings and action around a No Duff.
2. The IMT turned its mind to safety but perhaps not in the depth required. The safety portfolio was allocated to and covered by a member in the IMT with safety plans developed for each IMT shift. These were saved in the shared drive but were not really referred to or displayed as well as they could be. They appeared to be more a box ticking exercise than a lived document.
3. Having a Canyon SME in the IMT was invaluable not just for providing advice around the capabilities and requirements for the Canyon team and ensuring they were tasked appropriately. His specialist knowledge around river levels, water catchment area and size and interpreting the forecast played a large role in providing safety oversight for all teams in the river valleys.
4. Packrafting is a specialised back country activity and carries unique risks. A pack rafting community is becoming established as the sport grows and would be a good source of information for an IMT. This could be a consideration for future exercises or operations as I didn't observe any consultation on this occasion.

5. Communication is two way and concerns in the field need to be relayed back to the IMT to assist with safe appropriate taskings. An IMT relies on information and the field teams are an important source for this. A NO DUFF was received from field team three who needed to be rescued by helicopter late on Saturday afternoon. EXCON stepped in and ran the rescue effectively however when debriefed the team had been unhappy with their tasking leading up to the incident. There was no communication received by the IMT around this being an unsafe tasking at the time from the field team. It is imperative that field teams understand and are comfortable pushing back on the IMT when taskings are deemed unsafe.

#### KPI's

- Operational risks area analysed. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- Risk management systems and processes appropriate to the nature and complexity or the situation are defined. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- Briefing information appropriately addresses identified risks. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**
- All participants understand their personal responsibilities in regard to risk. **PARTLY ACHIEVED**

#### **Objective 3. Test communication infrastructure in a SAR environment.**

The Ground for the SAREX was well picked not only for the pack rafting rivers and Isabelle Canyon but also to test the implementation of communications into a dark spots and test the IMT working relationship with AREC.

Teams were deployed with a robust Comms plan;

1. SAR teams deployed on Friday evening working from the permanent repeater at Cone which covered the front country.
2. A team was tasked simultaneously on Friday to erect a portable repeater at high point .656 on the Dobson Loop Track which would provide radio comms deeper into the back country the following days.
3. A linking repeater set up at Climie on Friday night ready for Saturday.
4. Teams had an inReach as a third back up communication device and safety measure.

Despite some initial issues gaining permission to access the 4x4 track to Climie on the Friday night, the linking repeater was erected on Saturday morning. As teams made their way into the upper Tauherenikau River on the Saturday morning the .656 portable repeater had been linked with Climie and comms established back to the IMT in Lower Hutt.

This was a well thought through plan and despite scratchy messages in places worked well.

#### KPI's

- Communication lines between IMT and field teams operate effectively. **ACHIEVED**
- Communication systems are operational in a timely manner. **ACHIEVED**
- Communication systems remain operational throughout the response period. **ACHIEVED**

#### **Objective 4. Information is effectively managed and communicated during the response.**

Information flow within the IMT worked well on the whole with AREC entering messages directly into SARTRACK which populated through in the ICP for the Planning/Intel team. Having read previous evaluation reports this has been an area of concern and appeared to have been addressed on this occasion. *(Note: Some AREC members appeared less conversant with the programme and would benefit from more SARTrack exposure and training – Jo Holden Exercise Evaluation Nov 2021)*

A quiet IMT with only essential persons can be more productive as some messages were missed in a noisy, busy ICP. Footprint and sachet clues found by CanyonSAR during the NO DUFF were overlooked for some time and a witness was located at Powell Hut with valuable information for over 30 mins on Friday evening before IMT was aware and this information affected team taskings.

The difference in handovers between IMT's was apparent. The early shift handover to late shift was smoother being done in person however the handover from late shift to early shift was done in writing due to no one being present. While this worked, and any alternative method would have required some logistical effort, the incoming IC on Saturday morning did find it difficult to gain a full appreciation of the situation he was taking over and the ability to ask questions was limited.

Good use was made of white boards and the ICP was well set up with formatted boards keeping track of teams and clues etc along with large TV's displaying SARTRACK information and maps on the map table. Everything electronic was saved to a share drive and readily accessible with a management team member overseeing this.

An Incident Action Plan was established and displayed, and tasking were appropriate to this.

##### **KPI's**

- Information is collated and disseminated within the IMT as appropriate. **ACHIEVED**
- Information received within the IMT is analysed and corroborated. **ACHIEVED**
- Actionable intelligence is developed. **ACHIEVED**

#### **Objective 5. SAR operational personnel refresh and practice search and rescue skills**

Running a real time SAREX with field teams and an IMT mimicking a real SAROP is always a challenge. Developing a scenario that will provide engagement for every participant is difficult with often one or two teams doing all the work and gaining the majority of the learning while remaining teams only get to test their fitness, bushcraft and navigation some distance away from the action.

The magnitude of this SAREX was optimistic at the outset however the many moving parts and mini scenarios within the overarching scenario were required to facilitate the objectives and number of participants involved.

A great deal of thought and planning had been done by EXCON to create something that tested emerging threats in their patch and managed to keep everyone engaged and worked well.

Attending the team debriefs on the Sunday the teams were positive in their feedback and felt the exercise was worthwhile and enjoyable. Some teams did a lot more walking than others with not as much action but that is realistic, and they still got to practice navigation,

communication and bushcraft skill and welfare was managed in that these teams were offered helicopter evacuation at demobilisation ahead of less tired teams.

#### KPI's

- SAR field teams apply appropriate search techniques **ACHIEVED**
- Field support resources perform to the standard of their specialty **ACHIEVED**
- Teams undertake taskings in line with IAP. **ACHIEVED**
- Field team welfare is managed throughout the exercise and on demobilisation. **ACHIEVED**

## 4. Conclusions

The SAREX overall was successful in achieving it's aim of practicing search and rescue techniques within an IMT and in the field to build strength and skills for a SAR operation.

This was a well-run exercise that identified emerging risks in an appropriate location and the time and resourcing required was well used to gain maximum benefit and learnings for the management of future operations in this area. It also provided good familiarisation of the area and an appreciation of the skill sets, and resourcing required to respond adequately and safely to future calls for help.

This was a learning opportunity and people were assigned roles in the IMT that they had not performed before including Incident Controller. This should be encouraged in a safe environment and the experience will help grow more depth in the Police and LandSAR teams.

The KPI's and objectives were met on the whole apart from some easily implemented suggestions around the more active role of a safety manager and minor recommendations.



## 5. Appendix

Operation Name: SARex		Prepared By: John Linschoten	
Date Created: 11 Nov 2022	Time: 1600	Time Created: 1915hrs	
Date Logged: _____	Time: _____	UI: _____	

## Communications Plan

- Operational Period**

Operational Period Begins	Date:	Operational Period Ends	Time:
Date: 11 Nov 2022	Time: 1600		
- IMT Contacts** (Cell phones & names are only required if there is no landline number or insufficient landlines)
 

Landline	Incident Controller
04 4953443	
Email: operations@landsearwellington.org	
Cell Ph	
Name	
Scena	

Operations Mgr	Planning Mgr	Intel Mgr	Logistics Mgr
Landline: 04 4953443	04 4953533	04 4953533	04 4953533
Email: operations@landsearwellington.org	operations@landsearwellington.org	operations@landsearwellington.org	operations@landsearwellington.org
Cell Ph			
Name	Alex	Clair	Steve
			Comms Unit

Radio Operator	
Landline: 04 4953410	
Email: operations@landsearwellington.org	
Cell Ph	
Name: John Linschoten <>	027 451 1806
Robert Wallace <>	027 763 925
Wilbert Gooden <>	027 451 9717
- Location(s)**

Name of Venue(s), Location(s) & Physical Address	
ICP	Lower Hutt Police Station, 04 49603443
Staging Area	Lower Hutt Police Station, 04 49603443
- VHF Comms**

Channel Name	Channel #	Repeater Site & Coverage
Primary Channel CLIMIEH	ESB 07	Mt Climie
Back Up Channel DDC9 CONE	ESB 124	Cone Ridge
Simplex ESX07	ESX 07	SAR Simplex 1
ESB58	ESB 58	Portable Repeater
- HF Comms**

Chan Name	HF Sched Time	Comments & Call Sign
Day		Call Sign = Wign SAR Base
Night		Call Sign = Wign SAR Base
Police 7		

**Time to change HF channels - Day/Time Starts:**

**8. Additional Equipment, Notes & Other Comms** (Suggestions for radio report in times)

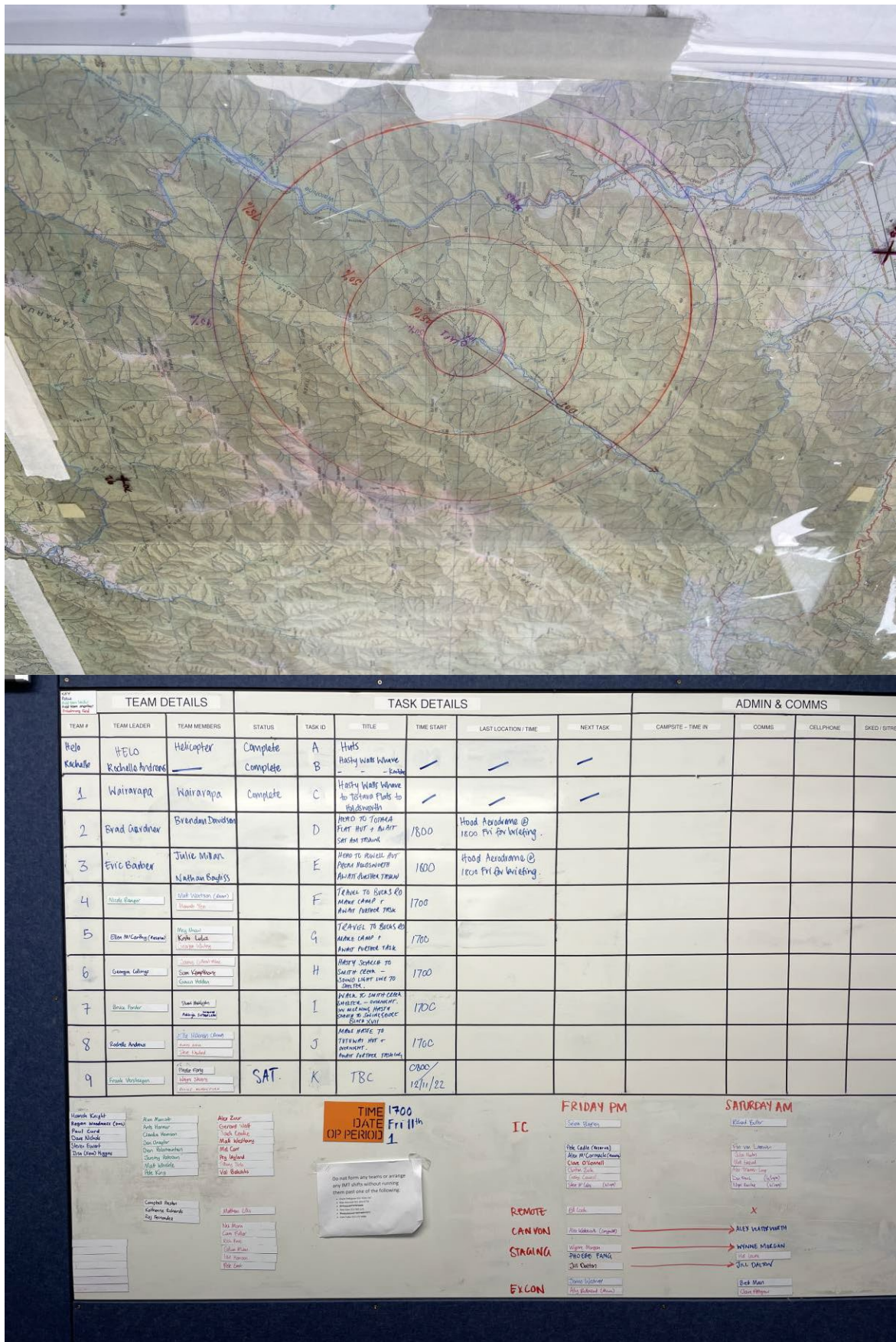
(Field teams are to complete radio check on leaving staging, are to make contact with Operations every hour.

# Great Comms Plan



Busy noisy IMT with superfluous people and conversations





Great clear use of white boards displaying information



OPERATION Mountain House		EVENT #P	
<b>SITUATION</b> KATHY ANDERSON + JACK MILLER ARE OVERDUE FROM PAUL REPTING. THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO MEET 3 OTHER PARTIES		<b>MISSION</b> To locate KATHY + JACK	
<b>TIME/DATE MISSING</b> Overdue as at 1800 Thursday	<b>LKP</b> Cave HUT - WED 9 <sup>th</sup> NOV.	<b>TFFS</b> ask CHAG	<b>MP-MATRIX</b> Mobile response
<b>MP DETAILS</b> KATHY ANDERSON 63785 022 102 44 30	<b>OBJECTIVES</b> 1. Place containment in search area by 1200 Saturday. 2. Search the LKP close in phenomena by 1100 Saturday. 3. Search key attractants and final features within the search area by 1700 Saturday. 4. Develop missing person profiles. 5. Develop a plan for the next operational period by 1600 Saturday.	<b>STRATEGIES</b> 1-1 Media release. 1-2 LandsAR containment teams. 2-1 LandsAR/Police search teams. 3-1 Helo. 3-2 LandsAR/Police search teams. 4-1 Interviews of family/friends/associates.	<b>PHASE</b> 1 Friday 0700 Saturday 1700
<b>NOK/CONTACT PERSON(S)</b> SACHA ANDERSON 022 458 06 32			<b>TO DO</b> Mark up search area on map with stat rings etc.  <b>TIME</b> 1700 <b>DATE</b> Friday 11 <sup>th</sup> <b>OP PERIOD</b> 1
<b>WEATHER</b> RAINING	<b>COMMS PLAN</b> TBC	<b>COMMAND</b> IN-COMM, SÉLVA BLAINEY JONATHAN WESTEUPP →	<b>RESCUE PLAN</b> HELO
<b>TIMELINE</b> (Major events) ENTERED AT MOUNTAIN HOUSE - STAYED IN CAVE HUT OVERNIGHT 09 <sup>th</sup> NOV → DETERMINED INTENT TO RAFT TAINOON KAY TO SMITHS CREEK SHEPHERD.			



SEARCH & RESCUE

LAND SAR

NEW ZEALAND

LandSAR Team Tasking & Safety Assessment Form

(version 2)

1 of 2

This form is for use whenever written task assignments are prepared at LandSAR events (eg. SAROPs and SAREXs). Incident managers (IMTs) should complete page 1 and task leaders should then complete page 2, with input from their teams.

Operation name:

EX20221111

Prepared by:

Matt Gazzard

Team Leader/Person in Control of Task:

Samuel KEMPTHORNE (4572)

Team name:

Team 4

Today's date/time:

12 Nov 00:35

Task ID:

Task AD

Team type:

Purposeful Wandering

Team members

Nicole RANGER Matthew (Matt) Watson Hannah Yen

Map

Tasking assignment:

Task AD Team 4 From Waiohine Campsite cross Coal Stream and travel up Mt Reeves Track follow Mt Reeves track to Tutuwai Hut, purposeful wander occasional soundlines

Current and Expected Environmental Conditions:

Rain

Hazards and Risk Controls—List which LandSAR Safety Guides apply to this task and list any other hazards and controls, applicable to this task, that have been noted at a management level:

Communications (Ref: Comms Plan for additional information)

ICP Phone:

VHF Rptr(s):

VHF Simplex:

Ground to Air:

HF Channel:

Day

Night

Police 7

Times:

Additional information including transport and decision points:



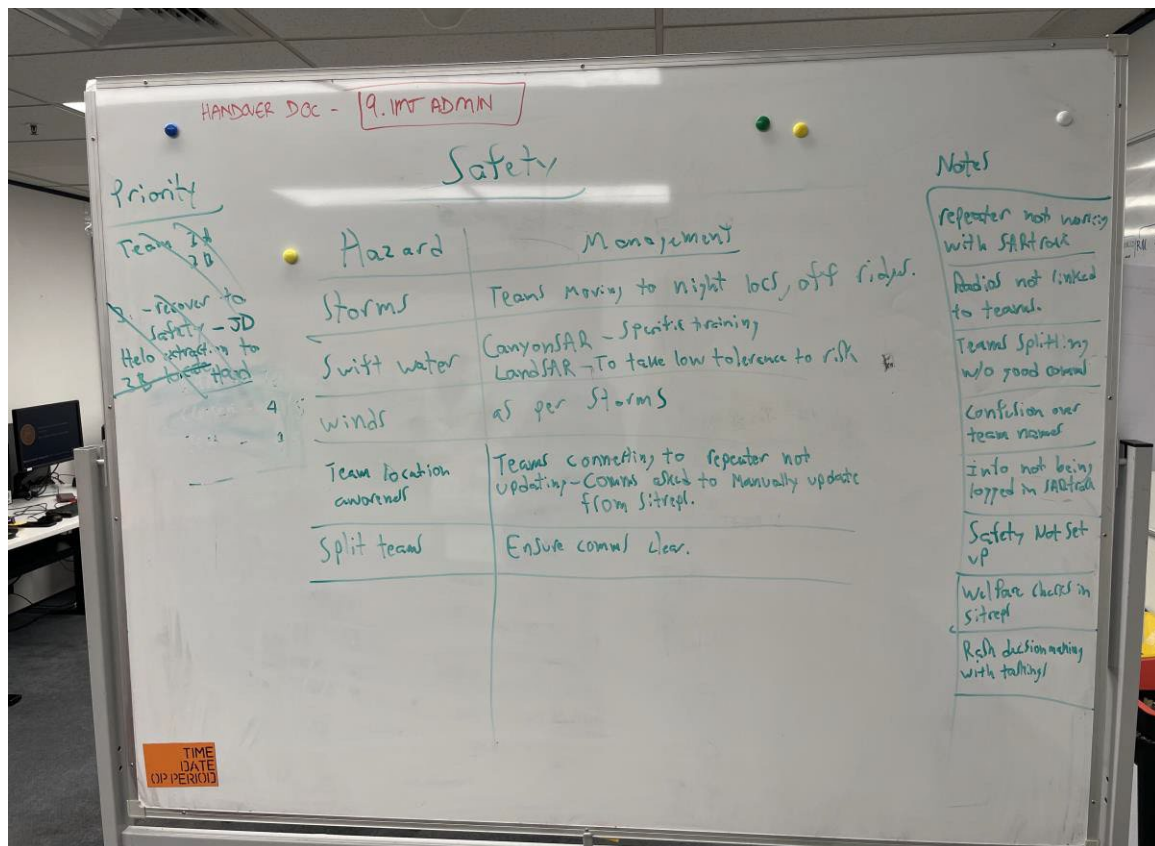


Photo taken at 2046hrs after NODUFF and EXCON step in and request improved Safety Plan and IMT turn their mind more to safety.