

Exercise Evaluation Report

Operation Nightwing

Location: *Waipu Caves Farm Park
NORTHLAND*

Date: *17th to 19th November 2023*

**Report
version:** *FINAL*

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Executive Summary

The Northland SAREX of 2023, Operation Nightwing, was held between the 17th and 19th November 2023.

The venue was the Waipu Caves farm Park, on Waipu Caves Road. This is a privately owned property, being developed as a camping and activity-based venue. It has adjacent bush areas and a multitude of cave systems, both small and large.

It was an ideal location for this SAREX, catering for accommodation, ablution, cooking, and activity requirements.

The exercise was based around two scenarios run contemporaneously.

One being a land-based scenario, necessitating a response from landsar field teams, and the second requiring a response from ropes rescue and cave rescue teams.

The “lost party” for the land-based scenario were local teenagers who know the area well. This group was very well briefed on their roles, and all added to the scenario.

The overdue cavers were from the Auckland Police SAR squad. It was refreshing to see the inter-district support for this exercise. The two from the Auckland SAR squad were able to take away a number of learnings from this exercise to enhance their own skill levels for their SAR squad.

The objectives of the exercise were all wholly met, but still provided for learnings, skills practice and knowledge enhancement for the local groups and agencies.

The inter-agency responses, cooperation and collaboration was demonstrated as very sound, with agencies included from outside traditional land-based SAR response including St John and surf lifesaving.

Recommendations

All of the objectives were wholly met. No recommendations are required from the evaluator from those objectives (See findings and conclusion)

Recommendation 1

That in preparing a SAREX plan, the NZSAR Guidelines and in particular the SAREX planning template be used.

See findings. (Additional findings)

Introduction

Operation Nightwing was the Northland District SAREX for 2023.

It was held at the Waipu Caves Farm Park, South of Whangarei.

The exercise was primarily a combination of two scenario-based activities, one involving a traditional missing party with a second involving an overdue and subsequently injured caver.

The scenario activities were planned to include a number of agencies, including cave rescue, Rope rescue, Far North and Whangarei SAR groups, Police, St John and Surf lifesaving.

In some down- time there were also a number of workshop based activities, including two navigation workshops and one of rope work.

A further activity included an extended and complicated stretcher carry. This included all the Landsar based participants.

The Exercise began on the Friday afternoon with both the land based and cave scenarios continued into the early morning of the Saturday. This was deliberate to test the fatigue policy response for both the land based and cave rescue scenario. The cave rescue scenario was paused for a rest period and continued through to the Saturday late afternoon.

The exercise was well planned and managed, with some modifications required due to inclement weather.

Background

Background to the Exercise

While not documented in the planning documentation, the background of this exercise stems from the identified need to practice SAR skills between cave rescue teams, rope rescue teams and landsar teams in the Far North and Whangarei SAR groups. The planning team also involved other agencies to join the exercise with inter-agency responses.

Dates, location, organising agency(s), key people

The SAREX was held between the 17th and 19th November, with heavy rain and winds limiting any activity on the morning of the 19th. That morning in effect reduced to a hot de-brief, clean up and pack up prior to departure.

The key person to this exercise was the SAREX director Shane TURNER of the Northland Police SAR Squad.

The exercise was held at the Waipu Caves Farm Park. This was an ideal location with accommodation in tents, cooking and ablution blocks, nearby bush area and caves.

The organizing agencies included Police, Cave rescue, line rescue and landsar.

Participating organisations

A number of agencies took part in this exercise including Far North and Whangarei landsar groups, Northland Rope rescue and Northland Cave rescue, St John Ambulance and surf lifesaving. The Auckland Police SAR squad also supplied the cave rescue lost party.

Exercise aim

To provide a realistic land-based, multi-agency rescue incident to build positive relationships and skills between partner agencies through effective teamwork. To create an opportunity to interact and co-ordinate a rescue effort with specialist cave/rope SAR teams while conducting a land-based search and considering asset fatigue management. To demonstrate navigation skills in a rural setting in the form of a Rogaine.

Exercise objectives

The objectives were field based but with a focus of Risk and Fatigue Management and integrating specialists into the IMT.

Objective 1

SAR partners Collaborate effectively.

Objective 2

Risk and Fatigue Management

Objective 3

SAR operational personnel refresh and practice SAR skills.

Exercise Scenario

The first scenario is based on a group of 4 teenage children who have gone missing from a school camp at the farm park. The scenario described some behavioral issues including drugs and alcohol. It included some mixed intents. And a vehicle that was unlawfully taken by the group

The initial notification at the beginning of this exercise was made to Police comms, who ultimately contacted the duty SAR manager for the Northland Police District.

The missing party ultimately separate into 2 groups, each with their own intents. One of those groups will include one participant requiring a stretcher carry.

The response to the scenario then is managed by the subsequent IMT set up by the Police SAR Squad and response agencies tasked as appropriate.

With the expectations of injuries in the scenario, St John have attended to set up their portable Triage tent.

At approximately 2200 hrs. a wife will report 2 cavers overdue from a caving expedition in the area. This will result in a requirement to search nearby caving systems, identify the correct cave, to enter and search the cave for the overdue searchers, and subsequent rescue of those cavers, one of which is seriously injured and requires recovery by stretcher.

Evaluation Methodology

Primarily the objectives of the DSAREX were field based. As such it was agreed that the evaluator will spend most of the evaluating effort with field teams, with a small amount of time within the IMT, particularly identifying issuers around safety and fatigue management.

Evaluation scope

The evaluator was able to include comments of all of the objectives from his own observations, including comments made by participants.

Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed

All of the objectives were able to be commented on based on observations by the evaluator, but also from comments made by the participants. The evaluator did not enter the cave system, but observed the management of the cave rescue from the cave entrance.

The process followed in preparing and submitting the report

The reporting was discussed with the exercise Director, including the expected time frame. Normally that would be 10 days, however due to other commitments, the evaluator could not deliver within that time frame. The draft report was to be completed in the 1st week of December. The final report once the Exercise director has reviewed the draft report.

Other information

While the only part of the IMT function that formed part of the objectives was on risk and fatigue management, the evaluator was able to observe not only that part of the management, but an overall IMT response. Some comments will be included.

Findings

Objective 1

SAR Partners Collaborate Effectively

KPIs include.

Incorporate partner agencies and organisations.

Attending agencies collaborate effectively, work together under common structures, roles and responsibilities.

Specialist SAR advisers are integrated into IMT.

All attending agencies were integrated into this response. From and landsar scenario perspective this included both the Far North and Whangarei Landsar groups in the response to the scenario. It included the St John personnel who were integrated and worked with the landsar groups to extradite one “patient:” by stretcher, providing valuable knowledge and experience to field teams. It also included the Surf Lifesaving participants who attended to seek and improve their IMT knowledge and experience.

From the Cave Rescue scenario it included and confirmed the working relationship between the cave rescue teams and rope rescue teams. Both having similar practical requirements but in different environments.

It also included the knowledge and experience shared between the Cave rescue and St John personnel, with a St John Paramedic lowered into the caving system.

Objective 2

Risk/Fatigue Management

KPIs include.

Operational risks analyzed and systems and processes appropriate to the nature and complexity of situation.

All Participants understand their personal responsibilities in regard to risk.

Briefing information appropriately identified risk.

Suitable qualified/skilled staff are utilized and fatigue management across the exercise is considered and planned for.

The three key response agencies, Landsar field teams, Cave/ropes rescue and St John all integrated their own risk assessments into the IMT, particularly that of and during the cave rescue scenario. This formed part of the action plans developed by the IMT.

The landsar Field teams observed by the evaluator all considered the risks and hazards associated with their respective tasks and continually re-evaluated those during their tasks. In particular observed by the evaluator during the patient care and stretcher extraction.

The evaluator also observed in the management of the cave rescue scenario, a very strong focus on safety, with dedicated safety advisor on site during the exercise. The forward coordinator for the cave rescue scenario demonstrated very sound skills and experience to compliment the safety and risk mitigation focus.

The fatigue management was very well managed by the IMT, with a dedicated fatigue management function assigned. All of the responding personnel had their current work and sleep hours recorded prior to deployment. Responding personnel were stood down, prior to fatigue becoming an issue, despite the exercise as a whole extending into early hours.

Objective 3

SAR Operational Personnel refresh and practice SAR skills

KPI's include.

SAR teams apply appropriate search techniques.

SAR teams provide accurate and timely information to IMT.

Team GPS logs consistent with taskings.

Safety of “Lost persons” and search team members is maintained during recovery.

Field teams provide de-briefs on their welfare throughout exercise.

During the exercise a number of search techniques were observed by the evaluator. Those included sound and light lines, sound and light sweeps, purposeful wandering.

These were well demonstrated by the field teams observed by the evaluator, and ultimately lead to the successful locating of the “lost parties”.

During these searches a number of items of interest were located. These were appropriately handled, logged, documented and information passed to IMT in a timely and accurate manner.

The teams GPS logs and team debriefs that were carried out demonstrated that the tasks set by the IMT for teams were adequate and understood.

The communication between the Cave rescue forward coordinator and IMT was accurate and ongoing, with the IMT consistently aware of the progress.

Constant risk assessments were made of the extraction of all the “Lost Parties” both in the field and in the cave rescue. That included this who were walked out, and those involving stretcher carries.

During the exercise all teams provided status reports of their individual and teams welfare direct to the IMT, including towards the end of that first operational period, 30 minute reports to the IMT of their welfare status.

Additional findings

IMT

While the IMT and their participation was not part of the objectives set for this SAREX, the evaluator did observe some of their activities. In particular the observation of the debrief after the initial land exercise.

While not everything went well, by and large their planning processes were successful. What was particularly refreshing was that during the de-brief, all of those points that didn't go so well were identified by the IMT group themselves and good learnings by the IMT group were gained.

SAEX Planning

The SAREX planning document was full, with all information contained, but for clarity and consistency the NZSAR SAREX Planning Guidelines should be followed, including the Planning Template.

Conclusions

Objective 1

SAR partners collaborate effectively.

Objective wholly met.

The evaluator observed during the whole exercise a very strong partnership and relationships between all of the responding groups and responding agencies. The prime example being the involvement of the Surf Lifesaving agency representatives involved the IMT to add to the response and to also gain experience and skill for their own agency. It also includes the relationship between both Far North and Whangarei landsar groups, including the Police SAR squad.

Objective 2

Risk/fatigue Management

Objective wholly met.

The evaluator observed a very strong safety and risk management culture across all of the groups and agencies during their respective response, within planning groups, teams and in the planning and IMT functions.

Particularly in the field of fatigue management which has become an important function in itself. This was managed by a dedicated fatigue management role and worked very effectively throughout the exercise. Hours of wakefulness, hours of work were both recorded, maintained and considered during planning and tasking.

Objective 3

SAR Operational Personnel refresh and practice SAR skills

Objective Wholly Met

All SAR teams identified very sound SAR skills within teams and were able to share skills with less experienced personnel. In particular were the observed search techniques used by the various groups and teams but also during the workshop activities of navigation and ropes and also during the stretcher carries, both during the scenario and the workshop-based activity.

Appendix

<Specifically include evidence to substantiate Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations. Number the Appendices in order, title or caption each piece of information.>