

Exercise Evaluation Report

Operation Missing Kayakers

Wellington SAREX 2025

Location: *Wellington District; Vicinity of Kapiti coast & Kapiti Island*

Date: *Sunday 15th June 2025*

Report version: *Final*

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Executive Summary

New Zealand police are responsible for the coordination of category 1 search and rescue responses.

The Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS) and Search and Rescue (SAR) processes are outlined in the NZSAR guidelines ([NZ's SAR Guidelines Overview » NZSAR](#)). These doctrinal references provide the best practice guidance for category 1 SAR coordination and response.

The references enable experienced practitioners to appropriately tailor operational processes and systems for responses.

For example, in the ideal world “SAR best practice” dictates “dedicated” resources for the ICP. In practice, however, these resources are often utilized for other policing functions and will be multi-use and therefore may not be completely faithful to recommended SAR or CIMS doctrine.

The WPMU are the Subject Matter Experts (SME) for marine SAR in the Wellington police district. Arguably this is true for both response and coordination. Recent experienced staff SME loss from the unit has threatened the unit’s capacity to manage all marine SAR responses. This capacity gap initiated a need for specialist training for replacement personnel to be accelerated.

The police district of Wellington is geographically diverse. Many of their district marine areas are a considerable distance from the Wellington Police Maritime Unit (WPMU) base in the Wellington CBD.

Geographical factors can contribute to difficult operational communications between partner agencies and resources.

This exercise was designed to enable the evaluation of current SME capability and operational communications. This exercise used the CIMS IMT framework and where appropriate SAR best practice and processes.

Existing readiness plans in the form of District Mobilisation Plans (DMP) and Master Standard Operating Procedures (MSOP) were used for the response.

Because this was an exercise, there were considerable numbers of personnel (6) immediately available at the WPMU base, for appointments to various IMT function positions.

It should be noted that this staff availability will rarely be available in real-world situations. Therefore, systems and resources should be prepared and cognisant of real-world situations, where personnel shortages particularly in the early stages will be an operational impediment.

In addition, considerable risks for safety and operational outcomes exist in any response. More so in multi-agency responses. Robust communications and real-time resource tracking or monitoring

is a priority, as capability assists in ensuring that tasked resources are safe and importantly, actually executing their tasks as directed by the Incident Controller, thereby maximizing the efficiency of the response.

This exercise response was well executed and demonstrated the capability and expertise of participants.

Finally, in the continuous quest for improvement where possible and excellence, the recommendations below are made.

Recommendations

1. Regularly review internal DMP's, and individual agency and stakeholder response plans (Readiness Plans) to ensure they are practically and functionally executable, are complementary with lead agency requirements and will support effective, efficient multi-agency responses.

[Creating readiness plans » NZSAR](#)

2. Specifically ensure core stakeholder and supporting agency plans complement the lead agency plan by detailing practical, coordination, command and control processes and live monitoring for response assets, where or when deployed in the field of operations.
3. Review and determine effective ways for the appointment of a suitable, qualified competent OSC (On Scene Coordinator) where indicated.
4. Consider the preparation of operation management resources, including whiteboard or equivalent large-scale templates that are always immediately available at the WPMU base.

As a minimum to have immediately available:

- Incident Action Plan (IAP) templates (that includes function appointments)
- Detailed pretested communications plans
- Resource status templates (deployed & available)
- Electronic real-time tracking systems, including of regular use partner agency resources.
- Electronic Search Area Determination (SAD) and Search Area Coverage (SAC) planning tools.

5. Establish a practice of conducting short (30-60 min) desktop exercises, possibly during normal duty shifts, to enable unit SMEs to practice and further expand their knowledge and experience of CIMS and SAR operations.

Introduction

This exercise was titled “Operation Missing Kayaker” and was conducted on the 15th of June 2025 between approximately 08:00 and 14:00.

The exercise scenario was conceived to consider a range of operational risks and challenges that could occur.

Overarching themes included:

- An opportunity for inexperienced staff with support of a mentor, to exercise the functions of Incident Control and other IMT functions during a response.
- Evaluate the ability of police in a timely manner to establish at the WPMU base an effective Incident Control Point (ICP).
- Evaluate the capability of the IMT to employ appropriate CIMS practice and processes.
- Evaluate the IMT ability to establish effective communications between the WPMU base and resources deployed to a geographically remote (from Wellington CBD) operational field in the Kapiti area.
- Evaluate the ability of the IMT and specifically the IC to maintain situational awareness throughout the operation.

SAREX Aim:

To conduct a multi-agency Search and Rescue exercise involving lost parties, search teams and an IMT.

Execution:

The exercise was conducted in a single phase.

0800hrs

Sunday 15th June 2025 WPMU staff assigned to participate in the exercise meet at unit base for briefing.

Exercise control staff, the NZSAR evaluator and the exercise IMT mentor introduced, and their relevant duties explained to the exercise participants.

Exercise control makes an appointment [Appendix 1](#) to Incident Control and advise that after approximately 4 hours IC would change to another WPMU member to maximise the opportunity for key individuals to experience key roles.

Six WPMU members were in attendance and available to the IC for exercise use.

[IMT at work.](#)

0830hrs

Supporting agencies, Coastguard and Surf Lifesaving had their resources assembled at Kapiti Coastguard Base. Surf assigned a Surf resource OSC.

0900hrs

All resources or assets were available and ready for deployment as required.

0908hrs

Communications by phone occurred between Central Comms (Police) and Exercise IC, to confirm the reported incident (Exercise scenario) and at which time the IC clearly advised Central Comms that he (WPMU appointed IC) was the operation IC.

The situation was analyzed with an appreciation process led by the IC and aim and objectives developed. [Area of operations](#)

An IAP was prepared. [IAP](#)

0935hrs

The communications plan was documented on a whiteboard. [Whiteboard Communications Plan.](#)
A SAR plan was devised.

[Search Plan](#)

[Taskings](#)

1032hrs

WPMU O/C arrived in the ICP and required a sitrep with a view to determining the IMT situational awareness.

[Tasked Resource Tracking.](#)

10:32hrs

The first subject is located, and resource tasked to interview to gain further intelligence.

10:55hrs

IC handover occurred and the response continued seamlessly.

13:00hrs

The second subject was located and recovered.

[ICP Operations Timeline](#)

13:25hrs

SAREX concluded and resources stood down.

13:34hrs

SAREX debrief.

Background

The WPMU has recently had multiple new members join the unit. These staff were replacements for a considerable group of experienced members who had left the unit. Formal training in a SAR management course is not immediately available for these new staff members for a variety of administrative reasons.

SAR response management and coordination, and especially for marine SAR, requires Subject Matter Expertise due to the technical nature of planning and execution.

To mitigate coordination capability risks, internal (unit) training has and is being delivered as an interim solution. The lack of critical operational experience is countered to some degree by the availability of on-call experienced police marine SAR practitioners who provide operational advice and mentoring as required.

The Wellington Police district marine SAR DMP has recently been updated, and the opportunity was seized to further evaluate if it is “fit for purpose”.

Operational voice communication between the WPMU base, where it’s common to establish the marine SAR ICP, and resources deployed in remote locations, is often challenging. It was deemed prudent to further evaluate communication effectiveness by applying a degree of “stress testing”.

SAREX Objectives & Key Performance indicators:

1. Establish an IMT in a timely manner with clearly defined roles.
 - a. *IMT personnel have appropriate skills and knowledge for their role. (Mentor support)*
2. Alert or activate resources as the incident appreciation and information known at the time dictates.
 - a. *IMT executes step up SOPs (pagers, apps, phones)*
 - b. *IMT confirms the availability and response of resources*
3. The IMT activates and manages appropriate resources to meet the demands of the exercise.
4. IMT and field communications follow SOPs.
 - a. *IMT ensures suitable communications for the incident are established.*
 - b. *Field teams follow radio schedules and protocols*
 - c. *Communication lines between MT and field teams operate effectively*

Coordinating Authority:

New Zealand Police.

SAREX Planning Team:

Sergeant Richard Kennedy

Participating Agencies:

New Zealand Police, Kapiti Coastguard,

Surf Lifesaving New Zealand

Ambulance

The Maritime Operations Centre advised.

The Rescue Coordination Centre NZ advised.

Media:

The Police Media team had lead

Exercise Scenario

Kayaker's Ava Jones and her father Peter have gone for an early morning kayak fish. They left from beach at Kapiti Boating club at 0500hrs. Was only going to be a short trip as Ava was due to start work at 0830hrs at Ambience Cafe on Marine Parade.

Ava is never late for work, and it is now 0830hrs. Ambience Co-workers have gone across the road and Peter's car with empty kayak roof rack is still on the beach. Neither Ava nor Peter are answering their phones. Unknown intended fishing location. Not likely to be far due to short fishing trip window.

They are both experienced and always well equipped with lifejackets, good safety equipment and comms (cell phone, VHF radio) and both have an EPIRB. Ava is 25 and Peter 55, both in good health.

Evaluation Methodology

The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity

The objectives and KPIs were set by the exercise controller for the evaluator.

This report forms the outcome of the evaluation, with copies of the final report to be distributed to Wellington Police Maritime Unit. WPMU will distribute the report further within their partner agencies at their discretion.

Each KPI can be:

Met

Partially Met

Not Met

Evaluator comments are included.

Evaluation scope

Included in the evaluation:

- IMT activities on the day of the SAREX with observations of documentation sighted and interactions within the IMT observed.

Excluded from the evaluation:

- Functional activities that took place outside of the IMT not observed.
- Activities prior to the commencement of the SAREX, or that took place after the SAREX was ENDEX.

Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed

The evaluator remained present throughout the entire exercise within the IMT. The evaluator circulated throughout the IMT making observational notes and taking photographs to document evidence.

The process followed in preparing and submitting the report

A draft copy of this report is to be submitted to the WPMU SAREX controller for review. The evaluator will consider any review comment returned before submitting a final report.

Findings

1. Establish an IMT in a timely manner with clearly defined roles.
 - a) *IMT personnel have appropriate skills and knowledge for their role. (with Mentor support)*

MET

The IMT was established in a timely manner and individuals were assigned clearly define roles. The SAREX commenced efficiently in a facility (WPMU base) frequently used as a SAR ICP. The IC communicated directly with police comms and clearly identified himself as the operation IC.

The appointed IC quickly appointed various roles to the staff available to him. It's noted that due to familiarity good appointment choices were made with IMT functional roles assigned to personnel with the appropriate skill sets.

A written log (in a hardbound notebook) commenced immediately.

2. Alert or activate resources as the incident appreciation and information known at the time dictates.
 - a) *IMT executes step up SOPs (pagers, apps, phones)*
 - b) *IMT confirms the availability and response of resources*

MET

The DMP was used for initial resource alert. This was via direct communications to Kapiti coastguard base, by phone for coastguard resources and by phone via Surf Communications center (National in Auckland) for surf lifesaving resources.

Appropriate information was alternatively provided or sought so appropriate resources could be made available. Appropriate consideration was given to the incident scenario and local maritime conditions.

3. The IMT activates and manages appropriate resources to meet the demands of the exercise.

PARTIALLY MET

Supporting agencies were communicated with as per SOPs.

Subsequent communications confirmed the availability and capability of specific resources, and these were made available by Kapiti coastguard and local surf lifesaving. Direct tasking from the ICP to deployed resources was not possible due to the need for communication relays.

Appropriate taskings for resources were communicated to the Kapiti Coastguard base or to a surf lifesaving OSC (who was appointed by surf and stationed on the beach in the general vicinity of operations). In turn these taskings were communicated using local communication systems to the on-water resources.

No copy of relayed tasks received by the on-water resources was sought or available for the ICP.

This later point highlights the risk of final relayed tasking not being accurate or consistent with the original IC approved tasks. Mitigation of this risk could be with the use of tasked resource live tracking.

In due course a live tracking system for coastguard vessels was made available. This became viewable on a large screen in the ICP.

No equivalent system was available for surf lifesaving resources.

4. IMT and field communications follow SOPs.

- a) IMT ensures suitable communications for the incident are established.*
- b) Field teams follow radio schedules and protocols*
- c) Communication lines between MT and field teams operate effectively*

PARTIALLY MET

Within each agency communications were established and maintained.

Communications between the ICP and agency representatives were also established and maintained.

In the absence of comprehensive live monitoring of communications between agencies and tasked assets, mechanisms are needed to ensure the IC SAR plan is being executed as planned and expected.

Reliance on voice communication relay was initially pragmatic and likely the only viable option for this exercise.

Systems or processes that provide an appropriate overview and audit (monitoring) of how well the actual execution complies with the SAR plan tasking is critical and needs further development.

Conclusion

It's important to note that marine SAR is or should be always perceived and treated as time critical. Responses must be considered urgent until the Incident Controller has sufficient evidence to enable the response to be modified if required, to an alternative appropriate response scale and speed.

There is ample evidence that at the "Awareness" [*Glossary for NZ's SAR Guidelines » Nzsar*](#) stage of SAR there is often an initial inclination or assessment bias with an expectation that the incident will be resolved quickly. There is clear empirical evidence to support this reality.

This bias can result in an initiated response which proves to be ultimately inadequate or at worst delayed and inefficient.

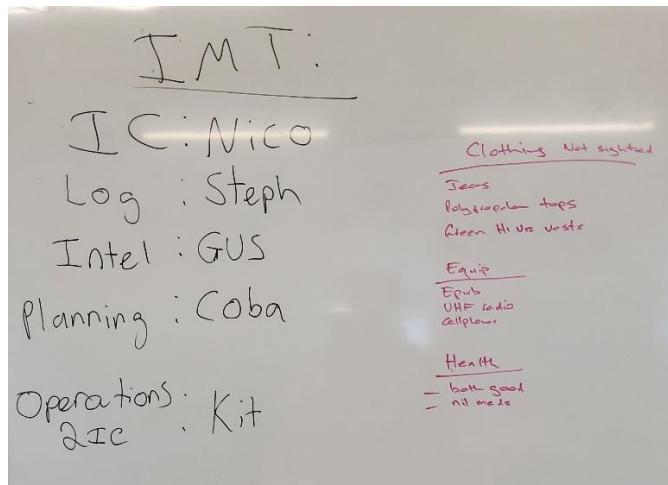
Planners should mitigate this risk by adopting readiness plans (and or DMP) that ensure the worst case is anticipated with an ability to down grade when the evidence to support this becomes available.

Clearly documented defined descriptions and standards for "Alert, mobilising, deploying, tasking" [*Glossary for NZ's SAR Guidelines » Nzsar*](#) with clear identified opportunities and indicators for scaling back as evidence is available should be available.

For this exercise ICP facilities were adequate but the availability or immediacy of access of some specific ICP resources could be enhanced.

ICP resources as previously mentioned include pre-formatted planning boards (IAP, resource tracking, communications plan etc.) and electronic SAD planning and monitoring systems for tasked resource tracking (real-time)

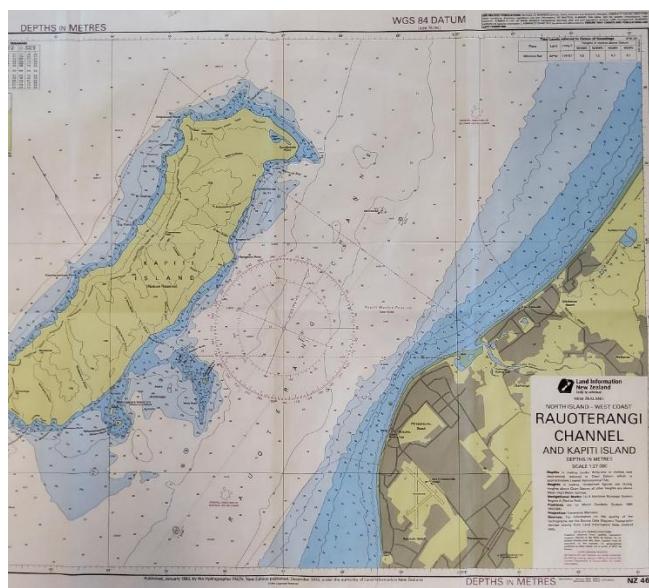
Appendix 1



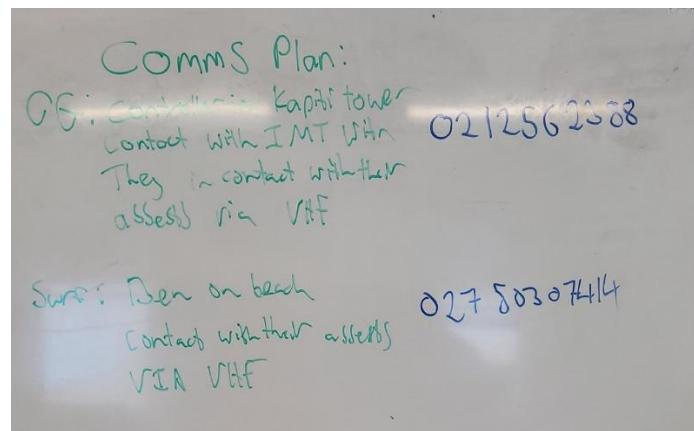
Initial IMT appointments by IC.

INCIDENT ACTION PLAN			
Situation: 2 x overdue kayakers Kapiti Mission / Goal: Locate overdue kayakers		Phase / Operational Period: Initial	
Date / Time: 15/10/2018 0500 hrs Name: Person and NRIC: Mrs Jones SS Mr Jones SS	OBJECTIVES FOR OPERATIONAL PERIOD (Refer SMART)		Comms Plan: - Cell phones charged - UHF radio - Back up with handheld radio contact
	1. Initial search strategy		
	2. Notify家人 (Family)		
	3. RCC V		
	4. All Buoys		
Weather: 4 En B SE Calm Sea Low tide: 5.57m High tide: 12.02m Low tide: 18.10m Sun set: 16.51m		Safety / Hazards: Agencies responsible for our HAs	
Critical Elements / To do		Resource Plan	
COMMAND STRUCTURE		Incident: GUS Planning: COBA Incident Controller: NICO Operations: _____ Logistics: _____	
		Media: Social media our missing person radio complete	

IAP



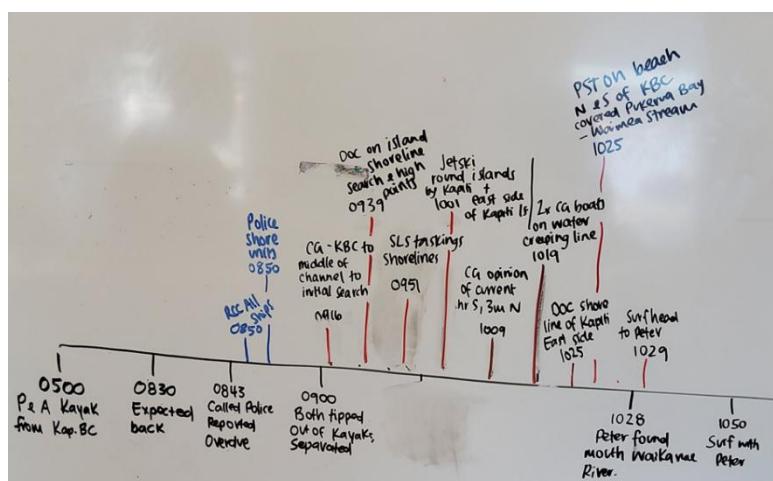
Area of operations



Whiteboard Communications Plan.

Taskings	
Walkanaa	1.5 nm - Creeping line North to south towards Island
Surf	Shoreline search from Kapiti Boating Club 1x heading N until Paua Delta, 1x South to Pauwai South RWC around Aeroplane, Browns, 2 Fishermans Island followed by Shoreline search of Kapiti Island East side
Pol Shore units	2x unit - 1x at van 1x Searching coast from beach
DOC Kapiti	Shoreline search of East side of Island (land)

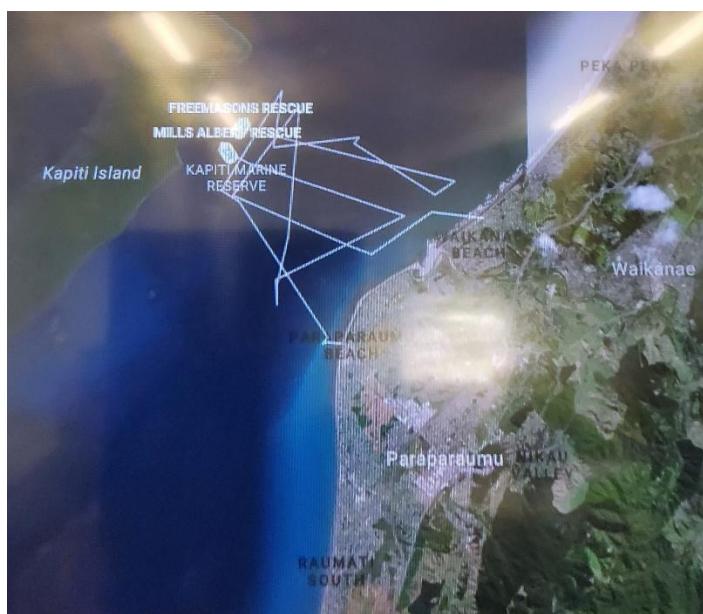
Taskings



ICP Operations Timeline



Search Plan



Tasked Resource Tracking.



IMT at work.