

Exercise Evaluation Report

Wellington District SAREX 2025

Location: Orongorongo Valley/Wainuomata Water Catchment

Date: March 7-9 2025

Report
version: FINAL

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Executive Summary

The Annual Wellington District SAREX was held over the weekend of March 7-9 2025.

The Aim of the exercise was to conduct a real-world Search and Rescue exercise involving lost parties, Field teams and an IMT working with a remotely located Staging Area.

Newer Police Incident controllers worked alongside experienced members of the IMT to manage the real-time exercise with actual people in the field.

The IMT and Field teams were tested in a realistic setting that provided opportunities to further develop their skills and abilities.

The exercise was attended by Wellington District Police SAR Squad members and Wellington and Wairarapa LandSAR and Amateur Radio Emergency Communications (AREC) volunteers.

While the Objectives were largely met, a number of opportunities for improvement are outlined in the recommendations.

1. Recommendations

Ensure robust systems are in place to manage Fatigue Management for SAREXes and SAROPs.

Continue to develop the ability to respond quickly and efficiently to SAR events where a location has been accurately identified.

Make better use of alternative Comms (e.g. SEND devices) for SAR teams deployed to areas that have limited/no VHF coverage.

Continue to develop and mentor IMT members as part of succession planning.

Appoint a dedicated person (ideally in Operations) to manage and feed information from SARTrack to the IMT to avoid missed communications and Intel.

Ensure contingencies are available or at least running alongside computerized methods to maintain situational awareness.

Continue to investigate SAR Information management / IMT systems that all agencies can access.

Establish and test primary and secondary Comms channels prior to the SAREX.

Clarify the function and role of AREC.

Consider providing headsets for radio operators to improve the ability of comms operators to hear information from the field and enter it into the radio log

2. Introduction

Operation Night Ruru was the annual Wellington land-based Search and Rescue exercise intended to test the capability and function of an IMT working with a remotely located Staging Area.

Police and Wellington LandSAR organized the event which was managed from the Lower Hutt Police Station. A remote staging area was established where Teams were briefed and deployed.

The area of operation included the headwaters of the Wainuiomata and Orongorongo Rivers, which also provide about 15% of the Wellington metropolitan area's water supply. Access to the area is limited and hunting requires a permit. The area has limited fixed VHF radio communications

The exercise scenario involved multiple lost/missing hunters in the area.

The exercise allowed the realistic deployment of bush search teams (made up of LandSAR volunteers and Police).

The Incident Management Teams were required to plan the response; field resources (Police and LSAR) were to be tasked accordingly.

The event concluded on Sunday, with all teams extracted from the field by noon. Teams were fed, watered and debriefed.

3. Background

3.1. Background to the Exercise

Many Wellington Land SAR members are relatively new to SAR (less than 2 years). While they have undertaken SAR-specific training and courses, many have not been used in an Operational capacity.

Many of the newer Police SAR Squad members have had little experience in SAR Management.

Trends indicate that more PLB activations in the outdoors will be managed by Police, primarily due to adverse weather conditions. Such events generally require an immediate response.

A Hasty Deployment model has been developed in Wellington to address this, but is currently untested.

Land Search and Rescue introduced Fatigue Standards in 2023; these are relatively untested in the Wellington area.

This exercise was thus designed to:

- Give Land SAR volunteers an opportunity to experience the kinds of activity that they would experience in a multi-phase SAR exercise that replicates a wilderness search;
- Broaden the skill base of the Police SAR Squad and LandSAR by assigning them to IMT roles in a multi-phase SAR exercise; and
- Test the multi-agency Hasty Deployment Model and Fatigue Management processes.
- Actively manage Fatigue in accordance with LANDSAR Fatigue Standards.

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

DATE:	March 7-9 2025
LOCATIONS:	ICP – Lower Hutt Police Station Staging Area - Orongorongo Valley Water Catchment Search area – headwaters of the Wainuiomata and Orongorongo Rivers
ORGANISING AGENCIES:	NZ Police, LandSAR Wellington
KEY PEOPLE:	Constable Steve Ewart, Sgt Jonno Westrupp, Geoff Theodore (NZP), Gabby Cowsill, Julia Norton & Claire Pettigrew (Land SAR).

3.3. Participating organisations

- NZ Police – Wellington & Wairarapa SAR Squad
- Wellington LandSAR including IMT & Field personnel
- AREC Wellington

3.4. Exercise aim

To conduct a real-world Search and Rescue exercise involving lost parties, Field teams and an IMT working with a remotely located Staging Area.

3.5. Key Exercise objectives

- SAR field personnel refresh and practice SAR skills;
- The IMT effectively plans the response and resource needs;
- Capability with the IMT is developed;
- The IMT effectively manages and communicates information;
- The IMT maintains Situational Awareness;
- SAR assets are effectively tasked, coordinated and tracked;
- Risks are managed;
- Fatigue is managed;

3.6. Exercise Scenario

Seven hunters entered the Wellington Water Catchment Area and northern Orongorongo valley, intending to have a friendly 3-day hunting competition. They parked their cars near the Water Treatment Plant and then travelled by 4WD to a Weir in the middle of the catchment area.

Their intention was to exit the area and meet at the water treatment plant at 1700 on day 3.

The group separated into two smaller parties on day 2 to hunt deer, goats and pigs.

On day 4, (one day overdue) one member of the party activated a PLB due to injury. RCCNZ asked Police to lead the SAROP.

As the event progressed, it became apparent that all the hunters were lost.

4. Evaluation Methodology

4.1. The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity

Carry out observation of the Incident Management team during the SAREX and outcomes from the field teams.

Provide a report outlining observations of the SAREX in relation to the stated objectives and the KPIs.

Make recommendations based on those observations.

4.2. Evaluation scope

Evaluation of the SAREX was carried out at the ICP against Objectives and measured against the KPIs developed for the SAREX.

4.3. Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed

The IMT activity was observed personally by the evaluator; further clarification was obtained during interviews and conversations with key players.

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.

4.4. The process followed in preparing and submitting the report

This report has been prepared in conjunction with the exercise planner. Working together, the objectives were agreed on to identify opportunities for improvement.

The evaluator attended the SAREX from Friday night through to Sunday afternoon. Evidence was collected by observations and notes taken at the time.

Findings and observations were sent to the District SAR Coordinator and SAREX planner for consultation prior to this final report.

5. Findings

Day 1

The “Lost Parties” were well briefed on their roles prior to being deployed to the field; EXCON maintained contact with all parties during the SAREX.

The Exercise Controller briefed the first IMT in the Operations Room at Lower Hutt Police station after Lost Parties had been deployed.

The initial scenario involved one person who had activated a PLB. The person had managed to get one message out stating that they were “lost/hurt/send help”. An accurate location was provided. RCCNZ had handed the event over to Police.

Police and LandSAR volunteers who were relatively new in the IMT were assigned to CIMS functions. Experienced IMT members provided mentoring and coaching assistance.

An Incident Action Plan was developed; the primary focus was to prepare initial taskings intended to make contact with the PLB activator ASAP.

Information Collection Planning commenced and identified further information that was required. Requests for information from the IMT were managed by EXCON.

SARTrack was established, backed by ArcGIS (operated remotely).

There was no evidence that the IMT referred to a pre-plan which may have identified issues relevant to the area such as solutions to known Comms limitations and notes on where to find relevant information, e.g. river flows, track conditions, contact numbers for SMEs and people with up-to-date local area knowledge

3 Field Teams were equipped and briefed at the remote Staging Area. All 3 teams commenced tasking shortly after 1600hrs. One of those teams was assigned to carry in the VHF repeater.

Radio Comms were not established until around 2000hrs.

While Teams were tasked to locate the PLB activator “with haste”, it took them 7 hours to reach him - significantly longer than EXCON had anticipated. This was possibly due to a lack of local area knowledge and the teams not taking a more direct route to the given location.

Using Naismith’s calculations (taking into account the distance and ascent), it should have taken a team/person walking at 2 Km/Hr 3.5 – 4 hrs to reach HP800 then perhaps another 20-30 minutes to get to the GR provided by the beacon activation.

Once the initial response was underway, the IMT was made aware of other parties missing/overdue in the same area and possibly linked to the PLB owner.

Missing Party profiles were developed, including a comprehensive list of information required, questions to be asked from potential sources of information.

The IMT focussed well on the response to the beacon activation while gathering information about the others.

The IC made good use of a “Battle Rhythm” to hold regular IMT meetings.

EXCON continued to feed information into the IMT at suitable intervals. EXCON also actively monitored the safety and welfare of Teams and missing parties.

Comprehensive handover documents were prepared for the incoming IMT the next day.

Field Team taskings were identified for the following morning.

Field teams camped out overnight and the IMT stood down at 2200hrs.

Day 2

A new IMT of predetermined Wellington Police SAR Squad members and LandSAR volunteers commenced at 0800hrs on Day 2.

The incoming IMT reviewed the IAP along with the handover documents and tasks that had been developed by the previous IMT.

Information Collection Planning continued with requests for information delivered by EXCON. However, the Intel section appeared to struggle initially to prioritise the huge amount of information that the previous shift had identified that needed to be gathered. The slow drip of Intel also made it hard for the IMT to get a broad picture.

The first IMT meeting was held at 0930hrs.

Teams that had stayed in the field overnight were then tasked as suggested by the previous IMT.

Additional Field Team members who had assembled at the remote Staging Area at 1000hrs were not deployed to the field until Saturday afternoon. Teams commented adversely on this delay.

As the exercise progressed during the morning, the interface between AREC and the IMT (specifically Operations) seemed to deteriorate. Clues and Team Locations were not updated on the SARTrack map, and no manual backup (i.e. Whiteboard) to log Team Status/Location was maintained. The IMT was thus relying on incorrect information which compromised Situational Awareness.

The IMT had not considered using ArcGIS at this point.

Teams were supposed to check in with Operations hourly; this did not happen due to VHF contact with the field being lost for extended periods. There appeared to be no procedure in place other than 'just keep trying VHF'.

All Teams were carrying InReach devices but there was no evidence that InReach communications were being monitored.

Some of those appointed to CIMS Functions struggled, despite mentoring from experienced IMT members. Role function cards were available but not referred to.

A folder had been set up in Google Drive, intended to be the "single point of Truth". However, not all documents were filed electronically. Of note is that Police have no access to Google Drive via the Police IT Network.

A hard copy file was prepared alongside the electronic one.

A new IMT shift (consisting primarily of members from Day 1) took over at 1500hrs; handovers were primarily verbal and function to function, but the incoming IMT had a lot of catching up to do.

The incoming IMT initially focussed on tasking teams who had been waiting at the staging area since 1000hrs.

ArcGIS was re-established; Team locations and Clues were manually entered into SARTrack and ArcGIS.

Regular IMT meetings were held using a Battle Rhythm during the afternoon; scenarios were developed, analysed and reviewed appropriately. Taskings were created from those scenarios.

By 2100hrs the IMT had a good picture of where all the Teams were and tasking required to locate the remaining Missing Parties. Teams were stood down to camp in the field before the IMT closed down for the night. An overnight radio watch was maintained by AREC.

ENDEX was called at 2200hrs.

Day 3

Demobilisation planning commenced; the last “Missing” hunters walked out with SAR Teams.

All teams were debriefed and returned equipment at the Staging Area.

NOTE

There was no evidence of appropriate Fatigue management during this exercise:

- No-one was directly assigned to keep a record of individual participant fatigue and their hours of wakefulness. On Friday EXCON had implemented a rule that all personnel had started no later than 0600hrs, which obliged everyone to stand down at 2200hrs. However, no checks were made to as to whether anyone had woken prior to 0600. On Saturday no guidelines were put in place by EXCON and no fatigue monitoring took place.
- Information entered onto T-Cards regarding participant fatigue was not reviewed by any IMT members;
- The Fatigue management spreadsheet was not used.

6. Conclusions

This highly detailed and well-considered SAREX plan led to a successful weekend with all personnel actively involved throughout the weekend.

The SAREX provided learning opportunities for people 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 within Police and LandSAR.

While the Objectives were largely met, further learnings for future SAROPs were identified as detailed in the findings and recommendations.

7. Appendix A : Key Performance Indicators

EXERCISE EVALUATION AGAINST OBJECTIVES / KPIs

The SAREX was evaluated against Objectives and KPIs which were

- Achieved
- Partly achieved
- Not achieved

SAR field personnel refresh and practice SAR skills

KPI		Evaluator Observations
SAR teams apply appropriate search techniques	Achieved	Teams used sound & purposeful wandering to locate the PLB activator on day 1. Teams used a variety of techniques the following day.
SAR teams provide accurate and timely information to the IMT	Partly achieved	The area of operation has limited fixed VHF Repeater coverage; this affected the ability of teams to deliver updates until the portable repeater network was established. Contact was lost with some teams for extended periods, with no procedure in place for teams to use alternative Comms All teams were carrying InReach devices that were not used to their potential.
Missing parties are located	Partly achieved	First Lost party was located by search teams late in the evening of the first day Teams were tasked appropriately and were on task to locate other lost parties when the exercise was concluded by EXCON

The IMT effectively plans the response and resource needs

KPI		Evaluator Observations
An Incident Action Plan is agreed, established and updated for each Operational Period	Achieved	IAPs were written for each Operational Period. Action Plans were reviewed and updated by each incoming IMT Note: Area Pre- plans were neither evident nor referred to during the exercise
The Hasty mixed agency deployment is tested	Partly Achieved	It took close to 7 hours for Teams to get to the known beacon location on day 1; this was significantly longer than EXCON had anticipated.
SMART Objectives are developed	Achieved	Guidance was initially required to develop SMART Objectives; this improved significantly over the duration of the exercise
Taskings are appropriate to the resources available	Achieved	Taskings were generally of a good standard with a clear start point, finish point and required actions. The number and composition of the Field Teams matched new members with experienced members.
Tasking is supported by missing person behaviour	Achieved	IMT initially used the Hiker LPB profile, revised to Hunter once more intel was gathered. MPs were assumed to be mobile and, responsive.
IAP review meetings are conducted	Achieved	Both ICs kept to the agreed "Battle Rhythm" timings for IMT meetings
Only required personal are in the IMT room especially during meetings.	Achieved	
Planning decisions, actions and other activities are recorded	Achieved	A master file was created in Google Drive, intended to be the "single point of truth". The intention was for IMT members to load individual jobsheets and logs to the Drive. A hard copy file was also prepared that contained relevant paperwork Note: Police cannot access Google Drive via the Police IT network

Capability with the IMT is developed

KPI		Evaluator Observations
Inexperienced Incident Controllers are given time to lead.	Achieved	Newer Police SAR Squad members were mentored by experienced IMT members.
Inexperienced IMT members are given exposure to the IMT	Achieved	Experienced IMT members provided support for some members appointed to IMT functional roles. However, not all those who were appointed to functions appeared to understand the outputs required. Role function cards were available but not referred to.

The IMT effectively manages and communicates information

KPI		Evaluator Observations
IMT completes a timely and appropriate Initial assessment	Achieved	The response to the initial call was appropriate; the IMT focused on developing and allocating initial Team taskings intended to quickly locate the first MP.
An Intelligence Collection Plan is developed and maintained	Achieved	A comprehensive Intel Summary was prepared by the First Operational Period Intel manager; this summarised known facts and Information Gaps. The "Plan" itself was a combination of whiteboards and a Google Drive spreadsheet.
Requests for information are prioritised and actioned	Partly achieved	The huge amount of information to be absorbed in a short period of time on Day 2 was a challenge for the incoming Intel person. A mentor was eventually appointed to help and prioritise crucial information that was needed.
Communication lines between IMT and field teams operate effectively	Partly achieved	Comms were problematic due to the canopy and terrain until the SAR VHF Repeaters were in place. All Teams had InReach devices – better use should have been made of these to communicate back to the IMT. Field Teams were supposed to contact Operations every hour. However, contact with some teams was lost for extended periods, with no procedure in place other than 'just keep trying VHF'.
Accurate information is communicated within and across agencies	Achieved	Intelligence products included MP Profile, Association Chart, Intel Summary, ArcGIS were prepared and updated. Comprehensive handover documents were prepared for the incoming shift for the second Operational Period
IC leads regular IMT briefings/meetings	Achieved	The IC used a "Battle Rhythm" schedule to lead regular IMT meetings Each IMT function manager contributed to those meetings to ensure all participants were on the same page.
Decisions, actions and other activities are recorded	Achieved	Folders were set up in Google Drive to store documents from the SAREX. Individual Logs & Jobsheets were scanned to relevant folders A hard copy Desk File was prepared in addition to the electronic file.

The IMT maintains Situational Awareness

KPI		Evaluator Observations
IMT is continuously aware of resource progress, welfare and activities	Partly achieved	<p>The VHF Radio network was not established until around 2000hrs on day 1; as a result, the IMT did not have up to date information on the Status and Location of Teams. Teams did not use alternative Comms (InReach) as directed.</p> <p>Team Locations were not being updated in SARTrack on Day 2, and there was no manual backup (i.e. Whiteboard) to log Team Status/Location. The IMT was thus relying on incorrect information which compromised Situational Awareness.</p> <p>There appeared to be no method to check and confirm that information/taskings had been passed on, updated, and closed out.</p> <p>SARTrack information regarding Field team status and location was not current, due in part to the use of 2 different radio channels. A robust manual system was not maintained, which compromised situational awareness.</p> <p>The incoming IMT on Day 2 recognised the issues and manually updated SARtrack. An IMT member working remotely used ArcGIS to also pass accurate information quickly to the IMT</p>
Information for next operational period is established	Achieved	<p>The first IMT meeting on Friday identified further information that was required. Comprehensive handover documents specified information that was still required. This was collated on the Information Plan and tasked appropriately.</p>

SAR assets are effectively tasked, coordinated and tracked

KPI		Evaluator Observations
SAR Assets are tasked and briefed	Achieved	Taskings were emailed to the Team Leaders along with a map of the Area and a briefing that was delivered by the Staging Area manager.
All clues and POI from field teams are recorded in SAR track without delay	Achieved	Clues were also photographed in the field and emailed to the Operation Gmail address. Clues were logged onto a Spreadsheet However, there were delays in passing information from the SARTrack log to the IMT on Day 2.
SAR Assets are tracked	Partly achieved	There were delays in logging up to date location of Teams in SARTrack on Day 2. The Team Status/locations board was not used as a backup. ArcGIS was set up by a remote operator who consistently provided timely and accurate information including Team location
Task execution is monitored	Partly achieved	Refer above comment Teams were frustrated by having to wait up to 4 hours. to be tasked after arriving at the Staging area on Saturday morning
Radio logs are maintained	Achieved	While logs were maintained, the delays in passing information from the SARTrack log to the IMT affected Situational Awareness
All Tasked SAR Assets are debriefed on completion of exercise	Achieved	All Teams were debriefed using the Search Effort Evaluation format at the conclusion of the Exercise

Risks are managed

KPI		Evaluator Observations
Operational risks are identified and analysed	Achieved	A comprehensive Safety Plan was written prior to the exercise and communicated to all participants. Risk management board was in full view for teams entering the Staging Area
Immediate and ongoing measures are determined to eliminate or minimise risks	Achieved	Refer above
Briefings appropriately address identified risks and response to a “No Duff” situation	Achieved	All briefings reinforced hazards and expectations of the IMT for all field team members to operate safely. Team Leaders conducted pre-deployment checks with their Team members (SEARCHERS format).
All participants understand their personal responsibilities in regard to risks	Achieved	Team Leaders monitored the safety and well-being of teams during the exercise. No incidents to Team members were reported.
IMT monitors Safety appropriately	Achieved	EXCON completed Safety Checks for each Operational period

Fatigue is managed

KPI		Evaluator Observations
IMT monitors fatigue appropriately	Not Achieved	<p>There was no evidence of anyone being assigned to specifically manage Fatigue.</p> <p>No records were kept to actively record information about participant fatigue and their hours of wakefulness.</p> <p>The Fatigue management spreadsheet was not used.</p> <p>T-Cards were completed but not reviewed.</p> <p>It was assumed that all IMT personnel started at 0600hrs, which obliged everyone to stand down at 2200hrs.</p>
All Persons to Operate within LANDSAR Fatigue Policy.	Partly Achieved	<p>While this KPI was largely achieved, there was no evidence that the IMT considered that some teams could have continued tasks past 17 hours.</p>

8. Appendix B: Images

TIME/DATE MISSING 7-Mar-25		LKP PLB 1769288E, 5427389N Vehicle		MISSION Locate party → Return to safe	
		TFFS	MP MATRIX MGR	PHASE third phase 1800 — 1500 9/3	
MP DETAILS		OBJECTIVES	STRATEGIES		TO DO
EMMA (40F) & Chris (47M)		1) Continue to develop mmp	Liase with Family RLO		- Create Scenarios, to scenario weighing.
Jake (43M) & Henry (47M)		2) Search intended route of Tommy + David & adjacent lineal features by 1300	Field Teams		
David (52M) & Tommy (17M)		3) Search intended route of Jake + Henry & adjacent lineal features by 1300	Field Teams		
		4) Search intended route of Emma + Chris & adjacent lineal features by 1300	Field Teams		
Jill [FOUND]		5) Plan for demobilisation + next shift by 2100			
NOK/CONTACT PERSON(S)				TIME 1800 DATE 8/3/25 OP PERIOD 3	
WEATHER		COMMS PLAN	COMMAND		RESCUE PLAN Saved in drone - stretcher extraction
		MEDIA UPDATE			

BATTLE RHYTHM	
TIME	WHAT?
0600	-
0700	-
0800	-
0900	-
1000	-
1100	-
1200	-
1300	-
1400	-
1500	-
1600	-
1700	-
1800	- Stand up.
1900	-
2000	- Stand up
2100	-
2200	- IMT close.
2300	-
0000	-
0100	-
0200	-
0300	-
0400	-
0500	-

SEARCH & RESCUE

LAND SAR

WELLINGTON

RAPA TAIWHENUA

Handover Summary

Operation Name	EXERCISE NIGHT-RURU
Handover From	Outgoing IMT
Handover To	Incoming IMT
Date and Time	2142hr, Friday 7th March 2025

Situation

IMT called in for 1x PLB activation (Jill) near HP800 on East Whakanui track. Additional intelligence points towards a further 5x pax overdue, assumed all six entered the bush together. One MP has a specific hunting block, this is in the intel folder and marked on ArcGIS map.

Until Jill is located we have no evidence to point towards further search activity, except for checking the Deer Cullers hut one MP is known to have used. Tasking for that is in draft.

Actions Completed

- Located 1 of 6 (possibly more) missing persons.
- Teams have gone up Whakanui Track to near HP 800. Camping at various locations overnight (precise locations yet to be determined, option given to stay on tops or head to river near Puketaha River)
- Repeater established at HP 800
- First IAP completed
- Safety, hazards, risks board
- Missing person profiles (but living documents)
- Association chart
- Draft taskings for incoming IMT
- Draft rescue plan

Actions Outstanding

- Process info received from Jill (MP)
- Establish FLO with various NOK
- Determine action plan and tasks for next operational period
- Update GSMEAC

Critical Issues and Risks

- Up to 6 identified missing persons. We have assumed that all are part of one party that entered the bush together (although since split up). This assumption needs confirming.
- We have limited intel and details on intentions of parties, which is making search planning difficult. This would be helped by determining intended start/end point of trip & hunting intentions.

Intel key points

Refer to separate [Intelligence Summary](#)

- Maintain Intelligence Products (Missing Persons Profile, Association Chart, Info Collection Plan, Intelligence Summary, ArcGIS)
- Follow up on status of outstanding intel collection plan tasks/questions

TO DO

TIME 213
 DATE 7/3
 OP PERIOD 1.

Intel - Missing pers summaries
 Timeline needs to be done
 Association Chart
 Collection Plan

Establish FLO w Various NOK

Process info received from MP/J:V

Determine action plan & tasks

Update GSMEAC

4x Teams at Staging

3x Teams bedded down

Shed at 1000

*Field Team - 3 to
 via radio 0830

Handover document
 on centre table

Ongoing

Safety, Hazards, Risks

Fatigue - Implement LandsAR fatigue management plan - all awake as of 0600

- IMT - stand down at 2200 to self-drive home within window
- Field - Make camp, advise AREC when camped down - AREC notify Ecom if no check in.
 - Arise after 7 hours rest.

Safety standards - Off track ops

- Health & Fitness for SAR
- On-Road driving
- Off-Road driving
- River Crossing & Water

