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SAR centre's reach spans vast territory

By Tim Dunne

With more than 2,700 search and rescue missions last year, the Halifax-based Joint Rescue Co-ordination Centre (JRCC) is Canada's busiest. Some incidents were minor, resolved with a minimum of effort while others involved significant risks for the victims of maritime mishaps, accidents and catastrophes.

The joint military and coast guard facility, based in HMC Dockyard, is the focal point of all aeronautical and maritime SAR activity within its region. The staff tracks distress situations, arranges for rescue resources and personnel to vessels and aircraft in distress and co-ordinates the efforts of all responding resources.

Working in 12-hour shifts, SAR resources are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The staff includes an experienced Air Force SAR pilot or navigator and three Canadian Coast Guard deck officers. An assistant air co-ordinator augments the day shift and is available at other times when required. Extra personnel may be called upon to support operations when required.

The area of responsibility is immense, consisting of the lower two-thirds of Baffin Island, half of Davis Strait, the four Atlantic provinces, and stretches into the North Atlantic halfway to Europe. It is an area of 4.7 million square kilometres, with over 29,000 kilometres of coastline. Some 80 per cent of the region is covered by water.

The objective is to preserve life and prevent long-term injury.

In addition to the ships and boats of the Canadian Coast Guard, JRCC has access to the 200-member 413 Transport and Rescue Squadron from 14 Wing Greenwood, 103 Rescue Unit of 9 Wing Gander, NL and 444 Squadron of 5 Wing Goose Bay.

Nova Scotia's 413 Squadron conducts search and rescue and airlift with its Hercules aircraft and four CH-149 Cormorant helicopters. The squadron has 25 search and rescue technicians, or SAR techs, multi-skilled and highly trained rescue specialists who provide on-scene medical aid and evacuation, regardless of the conditions.

Tight-lipped about their achievements, they locate, treat and evacuate casualties. Search and rescue operations may require parachuting, mountaineering, hiking, swimming, and diving. On any given day, SAR techs could find themselves 200 miles out to sea, hoisting a casualty off a sailboat, parachuting at night into the high Arctic, diving underwater, climbing close to the edge of a glacial crevasse, or co-ordinating a mountain rescue.

They take incredible risks, so long as there is a possibility that the victims have survived their ordeal. Among the most dramatic stories is the Oct. 30, 1991, crash of a Canadian Forces Hercules aircraft on its approach to Canadian Forces Station Alert, the isolated military installation on the northernmost tip of Canada's Arctic archipelago. Five died but 13 survived. SAR techs parachuted from a Hercules SAR aircraft into a blizzard to provide vital help to the survivors.

Ten years later, almost to the day, Sgt. Janick Gilbert perished when he led a three-member team of SAR techs to rescue a young man and his father whose small open boat was stranded in ice near Hall

Bay, Nunavut. He parachuted into three-metre seas and spent five hours in icy seawater without his one-man life-raft. Within the JRCC Halifax area of responsibility, 36 coast guard and military SAR personnel have died on duty since it was established in 1947.

JRCC can call on any resource that can best meet the need, including chartered aircraft and vessels. The Shipping Act authorizes the assignment of any vessel to respond unless the ship's master believes that this would pose a danger.

"If my guys feel this is the best asset for the mission, then we have the choice. Simply stated, it is our mandate to do all we can to save lives and protect seafarers, aviators and their passengers and crew members from injury," JRCC director and former SAR pilot Maj. Ali Laaouan explained.

Canada's SAR coverage became a lot more effective when the International COSPAS-SARSAT Programme went online in 1985. The satellite-based SAR distress alert system, established by Canada, France, the United States, and the former Soviet Union, has grown to 43 nations and saves 2,000 lives annually.

SARSAT tracks signals from its emergency transmitters anywhere in the world and international agreements require the rescue centre that receives the alert to ensure that it is passed to the rescue authorities of the appropriate nation.

In an interesting turn of events, on March 4, JRCC Halifax received a distress signal that a fishing vessel was in distress and sinking off the French coast. Our Halifax-based centre passed it on to the Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centre (Centre régional opérationnel de surveillance et de sauvetage) in Corsen, France, which launched the rescue mission that saved all aboard.

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