

SEARCH AND RESCUE IN TASMANIA

by

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Extensive areas of rugged country in Tasmania present many difficulties which from time to time have received a good deal of attention. To minimize such problems the Hobart Walking Club has produced an excellent pamphlet called "Safety in the Bush" which is issued free by the Health Education Council of the Health Services Department in Hobart and I strongly recommend it to you if you are planning to visit some of the remoter parts of the state.

The mountain areas of western Tasmania containing most of our caves are prone to sudden, extreme changes of weather and the danger of death from exposure is an ever present hazard. The victim of exhaustion and exposure can pass with startling suddenness from a state of consciousness to unconsciousness and death particularly underground where darkness, cold and very wet conditions are often combined (commonly called the "Tasmanian effect" by local cavers). We should always take every possible precaution to reduce the risk of a search and rescue call-out. However, humans being what they are a search and rescue organization is essential.

In Tasmania the police are charged with the responsibility for land search and rescue operations and it is their duty to organize search parties. The Commissioner of Police has appointed Superintendent Tom Howard for this task and he has a small specialist body of men to effect small scale searches. In the event of a large scale search he can call upon a core of experienced members from various out-door clubs be it caving, walking, climbing, skiing, etc. In such cases the police provide mainly liaison and assistance.

Procedure

On notification from the police the civil co-ordinator moves to police headquarters where a search and rescue room is available containing telephones, maps etc. This is manned by both police and civil personnel and acts as a centre of information for parties leaving for the search area by keeping in constant touch with police already in the search area. Decisions are made here concerning the optimum size of the search party, the number of back up personnel and the kind and amount of logistical support required.

The police on the recommendation of the co-ordinator can ask for army support which usually takes the form of mobile communication units — landrovers equipped with walkie talkiesets — and supplies of field rations. Because of changeable weather conditions in Tasmania speed is essential but movement of searchers into the search area must be strictly controlled as too many well meaning but incompetent volunteers can cause loss of time.

Operational requirements

The needs for efficient operations can be seen as:

- (1) The establishment of effective communications between police headquarters and the search area.
- (2) Quick organization of a reconnaissance team to get into the search area to assess requirements of equipment and personnel.
- (3) Back up teams for relief and widening of the search.
- (4) Stretcher and track-cutting parties to assist doctor or first aid people to carry out the rescued if needed. Rain-forest and button-grass plains in remote mountain areas can pose quite a problem.
- (5) Areas remote from a road may require the establishment of road head and forward base camps and logistical support such as tents, food, cooking equipment and medical aids.
- (6) Most equipment such as ropes, ladders, climbing gear, lights, etc. is usually supplied by the clubs. Special gear, wireless communications and aircraft can be supplied on request by police, army or civil defence.
- (7) Control of the mass media. This is a job for a public relations officer or journalist who issues regular statements on behalf of the police or search and rescue co-ordinator. These must be accurate as much harm can be done by ill-informed reporting. Co-operation with the press and clear, concise statements of facts are the best way to avoid being misquoted.

Outdoor clubs can reduce the need for search and rescue by better instruction and training of their members. Make it a habit to notify your club secretary, president, family or friends where you are going, with whom you are going and when you expect to return. Remember the life you save could be your own! The keyword is PREVENTION. Remember that most search and rescue work can be avoided by training, careful planning and the application of common sense. Before going bush a little thought should be given to the simple rules laid down in "Safety in the Bush".

Why the police?

They have the organization and the ability to call on government resources as well as being in a position to obtain the release of essential search and rescue people from government — semi government —, and in some cases civil employ-

ers. All search and rescue members called out by the police are covered by workers compensation in this State and at present a system of reimbursement for loss of pay incurred by search and rescue teams is being investigated. If successful it is hoped that this will further improve the efficiency of our search and rescue efforts.

Conclusion

There will always be people who get lost or injured in the bush or in a cave but remember that a team effort of search and rescue carried out quickly and efficiently utilizing the best resources of man and woman power can frequently bring things to a successful end. Sometimes search and rescue can be a frustrating and dangerous operation and more often than not it is not a member of your club who is involved. Accidents do happen so be prepared and always have your equipment ready for immediate action.