

## SURREY AMATEUR RADIO ASSISTS WITH SEARCH

On October 1, 2000, Surrey Search and Rescue (SAR) team was called out to the Cloverdale area of Surrey to aid in the search for ten year-old Heather Thomas who had been reported missing just hours before.

As the media coverage was extensive you may recall the young girl was riding her bike in the parking lot of her father's apartment complex one minute and only her bike was there the next. Amateur Radio volunteers have been working with Surrey SAR for the last year and one-half, so when the call went out for the search, Amateur Radio Volunteers responded as well. A "fan-out" plan was in place to contact other hams that started the ball rolling for scheduling communicators for what turned out to be the most extensive search in British Columbia.



After a three-day search effort by hundreds of volunteer from the community and numerous Search and Rescue teams from around the lower mainland and Fraser Valley areas the search was scaled down. The little girl still not located but the efforts were not over by a long shot.

On October 7th a plea was sent out for community volunteers to gather at the Cloverdale Fair Grounds to assist trained SAR members for in a wide area search. Search teams were called in from as far away as Washington State, Vancouver Island and the Interior to assist with the search and operations. The RCMP Air-1 helicopter was brought in as well as dive teams, professional trackers, dog teams and every other kind of team you can think of. Surrey Emergency Social Services was asked to help with the registration of the public and expected three to four hundred locals. You can bet ESS were overwhelmed when greater than 1200 showed up itching to go into the field. The Salvation Army was on hand to feed the troops as they came back from the fields and Victim Services was on hand as well. The city of Surrey and local business kicked in food, printing services and more.

Jim Hurrell, VE7HUR, was asked to join an Amateur Radio club weekly net to give a summary of the event. The information is paraphrased from his presentation - the information was excellent and useful as a guide to future deployments.

James Longley (VE7JMS) also sat in the Net Control chair during the initial call out as well as at the ensuing search. The role of the SAR Net Control for the search was to log the Search and Rescue effort. This includes logging all messages from the field teams, telephoning various agencies to advise them of a search in their area of jurisdiction and to help provide SAR with a chronological log of the search. The net controller and logger must be VERY methodical and precise as the log must be CLEAR on the instructions given, and the messages received. The operator is to pass instructions from the SAR manager to the teams in the field and to record the communications, hence logging the progress of the search.

The log aids in the clarification of search areas, evidence gathering and team deployment. All traffic is recorded with the assumption that "if it was important enough for a search team to mention on the air, it is important enough to log." This provides an overview of the progress of the search as well as a legal record if ever required. The communications log is also a useful refresher to the Search Manager as to the field team's status and search area coverage. In most cases the Search Manager is right in with the Radio Operator to facilitate an even flow of information. In the Heather Thomas case due to scope of the search,

communications to the teams was handled from a brand new, state of the art, never before tasked, \$350,000.00 vehicle provided by the North Shore Rescue Group. That in its self was a challenge but with the cooperation of the technical staff, patients and perseverance, the little glitches were worked out and hardly recognized by the search teams.

There are several advantages of using Amateur Radio Operators on SAR events. First, it frees up a trained volunteer searcher to do what they trained for, that is to be in the field searching. Secondly, Amateur Radio Operators are completely aware that others are listening. Even the tone in your voice can convey a message of concern or confusion. Finally, Amateur Radio Operators are familiar with messaging and can bring that expertise to the operation.

James Longley echoed Jim's comments and added: "Amateur Radio Operators bring a sense of calmness to the radio communications. This is important in large operations. Many SAR volunteers are HAMs, but this helps put them in the field. One thing they (the SAR field teams) often comment on is the politeness of HAMs while doing Net Control. It helps keep everything in perspective."

At the end of the Net there was the usual questions and answer period.

Q: Was APRS used in the Heather Thomas search?

A: No, APRS was not used - at times there were more than 50 teams in the field from numerous districts and trying to use APRS would have risked confusion and interference to the SAR operation itself.

Q: What frequencies were used and for what?

A: With SAR teams from all over the Province; there was some concern about frequencies usage. All the assist teams had the PEP frequencies in their radios and PEP-1 was used for the general net operation. Some teams and logistical members were using their own frequencies for a variety of tactical communications.

On August 29, 2002, a Vancouver jury convicted Shane Ertmoed a neighbor, of first-degree murder in the death of Heather Thomas. Ertmoed, then 24, was sentenced to the maximum penalty, a life sentence without parole eligibility for 25 years.