Ready for take-off

By editorial
Monday, 16 March 2009 - 1:05pm.

2009 Images

—Duane Hicks photo

Navigator Al Fraser (front seat), pilot John Hall (background), and spotters Grace Shedler and Tom Park (rear seats), with the Winnipeg Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) team, got ready for take-off Saturday morning at the Fort Frances Airport. Two CASARA teams out of Thunder Bay and four from Winnipeg convened at the Fort Frances Airport for a joint search-and-rescue exercise which saw them taking to the sky and testing their skills.

Plotting Search

By editorial
Wednesday, 18 March 2009 - 1:16pm.

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Al Fraser, a navigator with CASARA Winnipeg, plotted out search patterns before the exercises began Saturday morning at the Fort Frances Airport.

Search-and-rescue exercise held here

By editorial
Wednesday, 18 March 2009 - 1:11pm.

People

By Duane Hicks, Staff writer

Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) teams out of Thunder Bay and Winnipeg convened at the Fort Frances Airport on Saturday to participate in a day-long joint search-and-rescue exercise.
Search-and-rescue volunteers fulfilling several roles met before 10 a.m. and were given co-ordinates and mission briefings before departing only about an hour later.

"We're simulating various several basic taskings and emergencies, so we've got several areas set up with various missions for the crews," explained search co-ordinator Jason Hughes, who also is president of the Northwestern Ontario Aerial Search and Rescue Association (NOASARA)—the Thunder Bay CASARA group—prior to the day's activities.
"For example, two areas have an emergency beacon which our crews will be homing in on," he noted. "Two locations will have ground people which are from [the] Fort Frances Fire and Rescue Service simulating distressed people.
"Then we've got one area where we're simulating a lost aircraft, so we're setting up an aircraft to pretend they're lost, then we're sending another aircraft to find them.
"And we also have an area where we're doing an accuracy challenge, a search pattern accuracy challenge."
All exercises took place within a 20-mile radius of the airport, on the Canadian side of the border.
Flight crews in a total of four planes from Winnipeg and two from Thunder Bay participated in all six exercises, as did CASARA ground and communication volunteers, including some members of the local ham radio club.
Hughes noted each plane carries a pilot, navigator, and two spotters in the back seat.
"The pilot flies that aircraft. It's imperative that is their sole job," Hughes said. "The navigator takes the pilot from where they are to where they need to be, and back again.
"Navigators also operate our emergency beacon homing equipment," he added, noting all aircraft have emergency location transmitters (ELTs) in them which give off a signal for searchers to home in on.
"Then our spotters are focused 100 percent on the spotting," he remarked. "The most important job in our organization is the spotter. Everything we do is to get that aircraft up for the spotting.
"It's a very important job and it's not an easy job," Hughes said. "If they are doing it right, it's very exhausting.
"Typically they're scanning for a mile from the aircraft in, and the search plane is usually 500-1,500 ft. above the ground."
If a spotter were to see something while in the air, the navigator marks it on their GPS immediately and the plane will fly in for a closer look.
The search team then would relay information back to the military or police (the OPP in Ontario and RCMP in Manitoba) to move onto the site.
"We can stay on-site until we get low on our fuel," said Hughes. "CASARA is actually developing a device that we can throw from the aircraft, which provides a radio and basic survival gear.
"Basically, our job is to find and get a helicopter in or a ground party to do a rescue.
"We're very effective for certain things," he explained. "Like if there's a missing aircraft or downed aircraft, we can be effective in that kind of search.
"We can be very effective in a search for a missing boater or a snowmachine because they leave tracks (in the latter case) or are very visible from the air."
Hughes said the CASARA teams also have a ground component, who search solely for emergency beacons.
"We don't do searches for lost people on the ground. There are other volunteer groups that do that," he clarified.
Flight operations officer Melesa Hane explained that once a team completed a training mission on Saturday, they would return to her and turn in their GPS to compare how close they came to their projected search pattern.
They then went out on another tasking.
This is the first time CASARA has held a joint exercise in Fort Frances. The groups decided to have the exercise here not only because of the central location, but also because "Fort Frances has a great airport with a lot of services," Hughes had said previously.
According to its website, CASARA incorporated independent provincial and regional groups to form a national organization in April, 1986. Presently, CASARA operates in all 13 provinces and territories, has access to roughly 375 aircraft, and has 2,596 certified pilots, navigators, and spotters.
CASARA volunteers annually devote more than 188,000 hours to help in the aid of others.
Hughes noted there seems to be a handful of searches in the district every year, and CASARA usually is involved in about 25 percent of them.
The mission of CASARA is to support Canada's Search and Rescue (SAR) program and to promote aviation safety. Membership is open to aircraft owners and pilots, as well as to those who wish to receive training as spotters and navigators.
Members receive training in fields such as aviation safety, meteorology, survival awareness search techniques, and procedures.