

SAR Techs

“Everything else is just transportation”

Motors whirl and clank as the CC-115 Buffalo aircraft opens its rear ramp. Two men in orange jumpsuits make their final inspections of the harnesses securing the parachute and equipment to their backs. Outside of the airplane the heavy rain will pelt them and obscure their visibility as they plummet to the ground. Hundreds of feet below, pine and spruce trees protrude from the mountainous landscape like quills on a porcupine’s back, but without hesitation they hurl themselves out of the airplane and disappear into the mist. What makes these men and women jump into conditions that could mean severe injury or worse? The answer is simple; someone in the forest below needs help.

These specialists clad in orange are members of the elite Canadian Forces team, known as SAR Techs (Search and Rescue Technicians). SAR Techs routinely put the needs of others ahead of their own safety to carry out missions that would rip the courage from most people’s hearts.

All Canadian Forces SAR Techs are trained at 19 Wing Comox at the Cpl Philip Lloyd Cyril Young Building, also known as CFSSAR, the Canadian Forces School of Search and Rescue. The building was named after a SAR Tech who lost his life while on a search mission in 1992. CFSSAR employs 23 personnel in various duties such as supply, parachute rigging, administration and, of course, instruction.

As one of the Canadian Forces’ smallest trades (approximately 130), competition to wear the coveted scarlet beret is fierce. Each year, applicants with at least four years of service and a minimum rank of Corporal put forward requests to become SAR Techs. These four years of previous experience were instituted so applicants would already have a strong military background when joining the trade; however, in 2007 a program will be trialed which will allow a select few access to try out for the trade directly after basic training. Applicants may come from any non-commissioned member trade; however, the infantry and combat engineers are usually well represented.



PHOTOS: PTE VAUGHAN LIGHTOWLER, 19 WING IMAGING

19 Wing CFSSAR Search and Rescue Instructors exit Buffalo AC 465 on static line at 3000 ft over 19 Wing Comox during confined space jump training.

Applications are reviewed by a panel of senior SAR experts and pared down to a list of 24 names. The more experience an applicant has in applicable fields, such as parachuting and diving, the more likely they are to be selected. These 24 individuals are then taken to Jarvis Lake, Alberta for a two-week pre-selection evaluation. This evaluation tests survival, physical fitness and academics.

Candidates are pushed to their physical limits, with minimal sleep, to evaluate how they react under stressful conditions. Team and individual work are assessed, looking for a combination of physical and mental abilities. The high standards for the physical fitness test are similar to that of our special forces, the JTF2. Only half of those tested will move on to CFSSAR to begin the 11-month training program.

It is apparent that course applicants must have a broad scope of ability. Not only are they incredibly physically fit, but must also have solid manual dexterity, the ability to improvise, the capacity to absorb

new knowledge quickly and the common sense to apply those skills.

The training program teaches a diverse range of skills that SAR Techs must master. These include training in emergency medicine, parachuting, diving, rappelling, mountaineering, and survival, just to name a few.

CFSSAR maintains detachments at Quadra, BC; Jarvis Lake, AB; and Resolute Bay, NWT to offer a variety of geographic training challenges. Training also takes place in Esquimalt, Victoria and Vancouver.

Training to be a SAR Tech is expansive and intensive. It takes five years to fully complete medical training conducted by the Justice Institute of B.C. and the CFSSAR staff. They learn anatomy, physiology, the treatment of trauma and medical emergencies, as well as patient stabilization (airway maintenance, medication, administration, splinting), transport, and subsequent medical treatment of victims rescued from remote wilderness areas (mountain tops, flatlands and marine

While being evaluated by CFSSAR instructor, Sgt Greg Smit, SAR student, Cpl Frank Thompson, performs tasks required in the medical training phase of the 5A SAR Tech Course on a “casualty,” another CFSSAR instructor, Sgt Dave Knubley.



PHOTO: 442 SQUADRON, COMOX, BRITISH COLUMBIA

vessels). This is complimented with in-hospital and ambulance practicums.

According to Warrant Officer Paul Fleming, an instructor at CFSSAR, one of the most common challenges is “the primary care paramedic training... that’s where most people wash out.” This training, which usually takes six months to complete, is undertaken by SAR Techs in only four months. They will continually upgrade their medical knowledge through courses, lectures and hospital placements for the duration of their career.

SAR Techs work operationally out of five primary search and rescue squadrons across Canada: 9 Wing Gander, NL; 14 Wing Greenwood, NS; 8 Wing Trenton, ON; 17 Wing Winnipeg, MB; 19 Wing Comox, BC; and three combat support squadrons: 4 Wing Cold Lake, AB; 3 Wing Bagotville, QC; and 5 Wing Goose Bay, NL.

Each of the primary SAR squadrons covers an immense expanse of land. For example, 19 Wing Comox is responsible for all of British Columbia, the Yukon and up to 300 nautical miles (555 km) out into the Pacific Ocean. The principal SAR aircraft are the CH-149 Cormorant, CC-115 Buffalo, CC-130 Hercules, and CH-146 Griffon.

According to WO Fleming, cooperation between pilots, flight engineers and SAR Techs on a crew is fantastic. “When the seas are rough and the danger goes up, that’s when the crew becomes really tight.” SAR Tech members become members of the Air Force regardless of their previous trade or force, and can stay in search and rescue for the rest of their careers. When not performing the primary function of searching and rescuing, SAR Techs may be posted as instructors, administrators, and members of rescue coordination centres.

Not many people can say that they have both the physical and mental aptitude to become a SAR Tech. Even fewer have what it takes emotionally. SAR Techs are famous for their remarkable respect for life and the generosity with which they risk their own to save others. The confidence it takes to dive into the claustrophobic confines of a capsized vessel, or rappel off of a 200-foot cliff is not something you can fully practice for, it is an innate bravery. SAR Techs must also deal with the emotions of those they save. When they descend on a scene, unfortunately the possibility of finding casualties

is ever-present. Comforting those who have witnessed the demise of a loved one, or helping those overcome with stress and fear from a lengthy ordeal in the wilderness can be an added test to an already challenging job. This however, is overshadowed by the satisfaction of saving lives. What a feeling they must get when they descend to pluck survivors from whatever horror they may have encountered and can see the relief and gratitude in their eyes.

Each SAR Tech has his or her own reason for joining the search and rescue field. For WO Fleming it was, “when I was 12 or 13 years old I saw a friend drown. I couldn’t swim at that time, and from that point on I knew I needed to do something where I could save lives.” As a whole, SAR Techs are a remarkable group of people, true Canadian heroes who dedicate their lives to helping others and enjoy doing it. For WO Fleming, “everything else is just transportation, taking me where I need to be so I can save lives.” **FL**

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National Search and Rescue Secretariat **Secrétariat national Recherche et sauvetage**

SARSCENE 2005

The annual event for frontline
SEARCH AND RESCUE
October 5-8, Charlottetown, PEI

- SARSCENE Games—teams compete in skill-testing events
- Training in canine care, HUSAR, incident command and more
- Over 60 presentations by police, volunteers, Canadian Forces, Canadian Coast Guard, researchers, avalanche experts, water and vessel safety specialists and others
- Trade show including a hands-on marine simulator, product demonstrations
- Air/marine SAR demonstrations organized by the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre Halifax
- Search and rescue awards banquet

Co-hosted with the Prince Edward Island Emergency Management Organization