



# Teesdale & Weardale Search & Mountain Rescue Team

## Newsletter - Summer 2020

Welcome to the summer edition of the newsletter. It is hardly believable what changes we have all had to make over the past few months. For this edition I have asked some of the Team officers and trainee members to give an insight into the changes that the Team have had to make, and the developments within the Team required to cope with the pandemic.

Chris Roberts

### Team Leader's perspective

Steve Owers (Team Leader)

Who would have thought reading our last newsletter how dramatically things would change before the this one came out, not only for the Team but the whole world? COVID-19 has presented us with some big challenges but I am proud and impressed with the way the Team has met them.

Right from the start our aim was to try to maintain our core services while keeping our Team members safe. Unfortunately some Team members with underlying medical conditions were asked to stand down from callouts, Team members were given the option not to attend callouts if they felt they were putting themselves or their families at risk and all our 'face to face' training stopped.

A great deal of work went on behind the scenes to put procedures in place for callouts to protect Team members from contacting the virus from our casualties and indeed from one another. This has meant at all times when social distancing cannot be maintained, casualty care and stretcher carrying are examples when it's not possible, then PPE of full waterproofs, eye protection, face mask and surgical gloves must be worn. Imagine carrying a casualty on a stretcher on a sunny day with all that PPE on. We have had to do it on a number of occasions and it's not easy. These procedures are still in place and are likely to remain for the next few months. Callouts have continued throughout the crisis with 7 callouts in a 2-week period when the lockdown was being relaxed.

Like all charities many of our funding streams have dried up over the last few months. We have not been eligible for any Government Grants and the committee took the decision that during the height of the crisis we would not seek money from local organisations when the need for this money was obviously greater for charities dealing more directly with the COVID crisis. We estimate this year to be at least £17,000 short in income, half of our annual operating costs. Looking for new funding streams will be very important over the coming months.

Looking forward we are recommencing limited 'face to face' training in September with many social distancing procedures in place. This will start bringing the Team back together.

I hope all our supporters are keeping safe and well and will continue your support as we go forward in these uncertain times.



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## The role of IT

Mark Colledge (IT & Communications Lead)

In 2019 the Team decided to move to Microsoft Office 365 with the primary focus on Team email address and a central data storage area. The data storage area allows all Team members to access important Team documents online and most importantly, with ease.

Late 2019, County Durham and Darlington Fire Rescue Service donated 4 desktop computers to the Team. Two of these are in our incident command room at Durham and allows the Search Management Group to remotely work on incidents if required. There are incidents where a search manager isn't always required on the ground and this facility allows us to collaborate perfectly with other teams and services. I would like to thank the Fire Service again for their ongoing support and donation to the Team.

At the start of this year, after months of building, testing and future proofing the data storage system, we released it to all Team members. Alongside the data storage system, Team members can now access Microsoft office online, allowing them to plan and prepare training along with other administrative duties.

As COVID-19 was worsening, it was decided that all 'face to face' training would cease to reduce the risk of infection. The main effort now was to keep the Team fully available for callouts. We quickly launched Microsoft Teams throughout to enable us to host virtual meetings and training. Andy Bottrill (Training Officer) has worked tirelessly to prepare and plan virtual training webinars for Team members, all hosted through Microsoft Teams. This has been a fantastic asset and allows Team members to attend training from home.

The Search Management Team now hold a virtual meeting prior to every callout to discuss the situation and to initiate the planning process. By holding these meetings, it allows us to share the jobs that need doing whilst remaining socially distant. Our primary task is to keep all Team members safe and by planning and preparing prior to arriving at a callout, it reduces the time Team members are stood waiting at the RV point.

As well as the future proofing of the IT systems, the radio network has been continuing to grow. Recently a repeater has been installed next to Hamsterley Forest, thank you to the farmer for allowing us to install one! Each year the Team responds to multiple callouts in Hamsterley Forest, usually assisting the North East Ambulance Service. In the past we have always had to ensure the control vehicle was on scene to provide us with comms in the forest. By having the new repeater, it saves us having to bring that vehicle and allows Team members to report back to the incident manager from scene. Phone signal is very poor within the forest and this repeater will improve the way the Team works within.

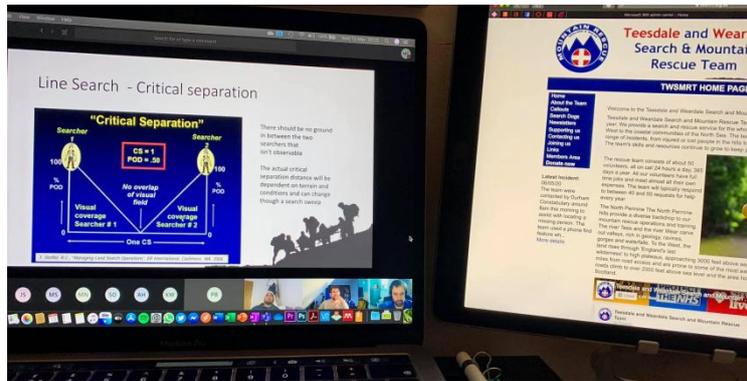
Finally I would also like to thank the IT and radio engineers at Durham Constabulary for their continued support.



## Training limitations

Andy Bottrill (Training Officer)

When I volunteered to be Training Lead I did suspect to end up with a few challenging and at times downright strange tasks. However, I don't think anyone predicted the task of trying to keep the training program running during a global pandemic. Initially, as the situation with COVID-19 became apparent the Team suspended all face-to-face activities and implemented new PPE + cleaning procedures to keep Team members safe. This presented unique challenges in training Team members in these new procedures without being able to meet in person. However, I'm glad to report that Team members have embraced video conferencing and even some of our more technophobic members have been seen to appear in our virtual training session.



Online training and webinars

The other innovation we have introduced during lock-down is a wheel that fits out stretchers. It is hoped that this not only makes carrying the stretcher easier but also make it easier for team members to more easily socially distance while carrying a patient off. Now that lock-down has eased and we have restarted practical training in small groups all Team members are getting a chance to practice using the wheel with our two different stretchers.

## New Equipment

Eric Gilhooley (Equipment Officer)

### A 'WHEELY' GOOD IDEA!

Many a mountaineer or walker has imagined themselves as a member of a group of people stoically and effortlessly marching down a mountain helping to carry a stretcher loaded with a grateful casualty. This is a romanticised view of the reality. A stretcher and its load are very heavy, around 100 kg. To carry it is hard work, usually requiring a group of 10 carriers working harmoniously in close proximity. The work is often hindered by the presence of the rucksack of personal equipment which each Team member carries. Stretcher carrying is



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very tiring and on rough terrain it requires concentration to keep progress as smooth as possible for the casualty. To carry a loaded stretcher any significant distance requires a relay of carriers with frequent changes of personnel to maintain the rate of progress. From a distance it may look 'glamorous', but it is hard, exhausting work.

Detachable stretcher wheels are available and are used by some Rescue Teams. We had considered purchasing one for a while but there were some reservations about their suitability on some of the moorland terrain in our area. When the coronavirus 'arrived' a lot of time was spent considering how we could minimise the risks that it posed to Team members engaged on callouts. Stretcher carrying was seen as a high-risk activity with at least 10 carriers working in close proximity. The exertion required often increases breathing rates and therefore infection risk. We realised that a stretcher with a wheel attached would be much easier to move and would require four to six fewer carriers. There would also be less need for carrier changeovers as most of the load was taken by the wheel. The greater separation between carriers, less exertion and fewer changeovers would reduce the chance of virus transmission between Team members. We immediately decided to purchase a wheel for Team use.

The manufacturers of the wheel were very helpful, they had been affected by the lockdown and sent us their only available wheel. When the wheel arrived, senior Team members got together and familiarised themselves with its use. They then produced a training video which was used in an on-line training session to show the rest of the Team how the wheel should be assembled and used. The wheel was then introduced into service.



The wheel got its first use on the 20<sup>th</sup> August when the Team helped recover an injured walker near Consett. Once at the accident scene the stretcher was assembled, and the casualty loaded onto it. The wheel was attached to the stretcher and the casualty rapidly wheeled to a waiting ambulance. A significant part of the carry was along a narrow, enclosed path with fences on each side. Without the wheel this obstacle would have made progress slow and awkward; with the wheel it was almost as easily as using a wheelbarrow!



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The Team members involved in the callout were all impressed with the use of the wheel. It was easily attached to the stretcher and the movement of the casualty was significantly easier and more rapid compared to without the wheel. As with most specialist Team equipment the stretcher wheel cost an eye watering sum (for a wheel)! However, from the experience of its first use everyone involved agreed that it was a valuable asset which will help the Team operate more effectively in the future.

### Team Callouts (late February - August)

18.20 23/02/2020	The Team were called out by Durham Police at 18:20 on the 23rd February to assist with the search of a missing person in Bishop Auckland.
09.00 24/02/2020	Team continued search for missing teenager along River Wear near Bishop Auckland. The Canoe group searching downstream from the bridge located a body near where the Team search dogs had indicated
08.33 01/03/2020	Team called to assist 8 members of the public in 4 vehicles stuck in snow on track in upper Teesdale.
13.00 04/03/2020	We were called out by NEAS to assist with the extraction of a patient who had fallen from her horse. Shortly after deploying we were stood down from the incident.
13.00 22/03/2020	The Team we called out to assist NEAS with a patient who had collapsed in some woodland near Barnard Castle.
14.00 23/04/2020	Team placed on standby for about an hour after a report of a despondent male missing from his home in Lanchester.
14.00 27/04/2020	The Team were callout around 2pm to assist with the search of a missing person in the area of Sherburn Village, Durham.
08.00 06/05/2020	The Team were contacted by Durham Constabulary around 8am this morning to assist with locating a missing person. The Team used a phone find feature which sends the person a text message. Once the message is opened and the link clicked, the Team can view that persons location.



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13.30 18/05/2020	The Team were contacted by Durham Constabulary at 13:30 to assist with a search of a missing person in the Hamsterley Forest area. 20 Team members and 3 search dogs deployed in total to search the woodland and tracks. As the Team were searching, the missing person was located safe and well.
21.45 18/05/2020	The Team were contacted by Durham Police at 9:45 pm to assist with the search for a missing 16-year-old in the Barnard Castle area. As the Team were deploying, the missing person returned home safe and well.
05.30 21/05/2020	Team called out to a search in Coxhoe for a missing child. Stood down when child found safe and well at friend's house
13.15 21/05/2020	The Team were asked to assist NEAS with a patient who had collapsed on a disused railway path in Langley Park. Team members were stood down shortly after arriving on scene.
16.30 25/05/2020	The Team were contacted by NEAS at 16:30 today to help extract a patient from a difficult to access path near Barnard castle. Team members carried the patient on our stretcher 400m to our Landrover to be transported to a nearby ambulance. Team members followed all covid-19 protocols and PPE was donned on arriving at the incident site.
09.00 30/05/2020	The Team were called out this afternoon by NEAS to assist with the extraction of a patient who fell off a waterfall at Low Force. Fortunately, the patient was able to walk with assistance to the awaiting ambulance.
08.00 30/05/2020	The Team have been assisting Durham Police in the East Durham area. 9 Team members supported the police whilst working on steep ground.
14.25 09/06/2020	The Team were called by NEAS to assist in locating an injured mountain biker in Hamsterley Forest. The mountain biker made contact with the ambulance crew as the Team were starting our search of the forest tracks.
16.45 21/06/2020	The Team was deployed following a report of a missing male from Leadgate and a sighting of a male in a distressed state at nearby Pontop Pike. 15 Team members and two search dogs searched local farmland and woodland in the vicinity of the sighting but were stood down when it was confirmed the sighting related a different individual.
09.00 06/07/2020	As part of joint resilience, the Team were alerted by the fire brigade about a potential water incident near Ebchester. Fortunately the incident did not materialise and the Team were not deployed.
13.30 19/07/2020	The Team were contacted by Durham Police at 13:30 today to help assist with locating a missing person from the South Hetton area. The Team deployed 14 people in total and 2 search dogs. As the Team were searching, the missing person was located outside of our search sector safe and well.



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16.00 06/08/2020	The Team completed a number of focused search tasks of wooded areas around Trimdon Colliery looking for a missing 30-year-old male. Since a number of the Team dogs were away at a national training event two search dogs from Swaledale Team came up to assist. Nothing was found and the search was stood down after about 5 hours to await further information from the police.
11.00 14/08/2020	Team put on standby for a missing male in the Wingate area
17.00 17/08/2020	The Team have been deployed on a multi-agency incident in Darlington for a male who entered the river tees.
17.20 18/08/2020	Team were called out to a report of a female who had fallen at Cauldron Spout waterfall and was injured. 15 Team members responded. Because of her injuries and the difficulty of extraction from the base of Cauldron Snout a Coast Guard helicopter was requested. After being treated by our medics the helicopter transported her to James Cook Hospital
15.50 20/08/2020	At 15:50 we were contacted by NEAS to assist with the extrication of a lady who slipped, injuring her ankle on a track near Allensford. Using our new stretcher wheel, the patient was extracted a short distance to a nearby ambulance.
17.30 25/08/2020	Team called to reports of a canoe drifting down the River Wear in Stanhope in very high water levels. The Team assembled along with 4 members of the Teams Canoe section but when a missing boat was identified at a local outdoor centre the search was stood down.
18.30 25/08/2020	Team briefly on standby for missing person in Gainford area. Team stood down when missing person found.

**To date the Team have dealt with 33 callouts this year**



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In action at Cauldron Snout

### **A Trainee's perspective**

Jamie Siddle

Up until the coronavirus lockdowns hit, we as trainees, were attending monthly Sunday exercises and twice monthly Wednesday evening training sessions. We had covered many of the core areas in our training, were starting to get to know the team and were eager to learn more. All this stopped almost overnight. Face-to-face training was off the cards, due to social distancing considerations and even our personal jaunts into the fells for exercise/fun/navigation practice was limited to one hour per day. Des and Andy, our trainers, foresaw this issue and kept in contact with us via email, messages and phone calls, and the Team moved the Wednesday night training sessions from our Durham base to Zoom. These efforts helped keep our moral up, as well as aid our training. Amongst the backdrop of horrible news headlines, we got the news that due to the possibility of Team members isolating/shielding/being busy as keyworkers, we as trainees were being given the opportunity to attend callouts to assist the full Team members. To be honest, that was quite a shock. Suddenly, the training on first aid, land navigation and was put into perspective and our knowledge of where the kit on the vehicles was stowed went from interesting, to imperative.

So far, I have attended six callouts and learned an awful lot about the importance of good teamwork from these. Everyone looks out for each other on searches, with effective and easy communication essential within the group. I've observed the close relationship needed between search managers and police / paramedics / firefighters / coastguard and how TWSMRT are held in high regard.



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Having attended two callouts where medical intervention was required on a casualty, I learned the importance of confident, professional casualty care. Seeing the Team applying all the techniques I have been learning was invaluable in cementing the knowledge from training sessions. Despite the seriousness of the situations encountered, not once was the stress of the occasion allowed to transfer to the casualty. Geniality, chattiness and laughter (probably smiles, too, though not so obvious behind masks and goggles) were used to calm and reassure the casualties – something that seemed to come naturally to the casualty carers. All in all, it has been a fantastic experience that has allowed me to fast forward many aspects of my training, and pinpoint weaknesses in my own knowledge. We, as trainees, are looking forward to restarting our team training and becoming full Team members. Plus, I must say, it was very cool being part of a callout where a helicopter extraction was used!

### **A funny old year**

Jeanette Hutchinson

It's been a funny old year...2020. A pandemic, no live sport, Zoom, furlough, online shopping like never before AND my first Teesdale and Weardale Search and Mountain Rescue Team callout!

Myself and the other 3 trainees were still in basic training when Covid-19 came to call and our training plan took a bit of a U turn; we were still engaged in online and desk top training and kept in touch with each other and the Team, but it's not the same as the 'hands on experience'. We had just begun night navigation and were enjoying the variety of Sunday and Wednesday evening sessions at Base and getting to know the experienced team members.

Being put on the call out list before your final assessment is unusual but we had done some key skills before lockdown and many team members are front line NHS professionals, so it was thought we were able at least to be an extra pair of hands/eyes/ ears/feet. It has been a great learning experience for us. We would all say at this point that it's been more of a 'get' than a 'give' but it has been very useful in our MR journey.



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It was a really nice May week day and I was just finishing an 8 mile dog walk in Hamsterley Forest when my phone pinged, fairly unusual as the signal is notoriously poor in the area. And...there it was a SARCALL full team stand by text.

I responded to the call saying I was available....jogged the dog back to the car and went home. Luckily, I only live 4 miles from the forest and the call out was in...Hamsterley Forest! So I pick up my sack which was already packed adding my water bottle and some food, pop on my team clothing, grab my radio from the charger and head back to the Forest for the second time that day to the specific rendezvous. I did leave a note telling my husband to make his own tea and feed the cats!

Lots of detailed online training had happened since March to this point and I knew the strict Covid protocols for a Team call out in the current situation. This callout was to help locate a missing male thought to be in the Forest.

There was a large police presence, a helicopter, the Team dogs with their handlers ,and the Mountain Rescue Team Vehicles. There were also a few members of the public who wanted to help.

We were briefed by the Incident Manager and I was deployed to a small team of 3 and we were tasked to searching a small sector of Hamsterley Forest, other teams were also searching their specific zones. I know the Forest really well but that's not the same as searching an area the size of about 2 football pitches properly! We had done some search technique training on a Wednesday night session which was helpful but Hamsterley had lots of new things to teach me!

It was really warm but full body cover was required as was a helmet and eye protection as the Forest is really dense making it impenetrable in places! The gradient can be quite challenging and covering even a small area is time consuming and tiring. Radio coverage was a bit sketchy in the area we were in!

There are branches to poke you quite viciously at your shins, at your ribs and definitely in the eye...hence the eye protection. It's really hard to walk in a straight line on a steep gradient with fallen trees, broken walls and mini sink holes and keep your teammates in sight. This is whilst you are actively searching, that means 100% concentration, keep looking back, keep talking to your team, keep focused. We searched our first zone and found nothing of note...we did get excited at one point when we spotted something blue in the darkness of the pine trees but that turned out to be a pheasant feeder!

We reported back to the Incident Manager and were given a second zone, so following both Covid protocols, and using proven search techniques, we repeated our search exercise. By then we had pine needles in every pocket, in our hair (even though wearing a helmet), up your nose...everywhere, and it was very, very warm.

Thankfully, just as we were ending our second search zone we picked up a message on the radio that the missing male had been located and we should relocate back to the Incident Manager. We were debriefed by the Police and due to Covid protocols we all went home so no real chance to chat or socialise with the others except online later.



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So that was my first call out...about 4 hours with a positive ending for the man and his family and LOTS of key learning for me to think about and use on the next call out!

PS Still finding pine needles in my kit now!

### **On becoming a new recruit**

Mark Sauer

When you join the Teesdale & Weardale Search and Mountain Rescue Team the first year is what they call your probationary year. It is a year of quite intense training covering all areas that you will need to know as a full hill team member. At the end of the year you have a final assessment which you then need to pass. This is not the end of training; training is constant, and you can also then specialise in specific areas!

The commitment from team members to attend calls is impressive. The Team drop everything when that call comes through, and I think this commitment is what most people think of when they think of Mountain Rescue. What people outside of Mountain Rescue do not see though is the commitment required for training and maintaining the exceptionally high skill level required. It is just as significant.

Firstly to join the Team you must be an experienced outdoor person and have the basic skills to navigate on the fells and be able to look after yourself. If you pass the induction assessment you then move onto your probationary year where you cover all the basic training requirements.

The training schedule for the first 12 months is just over 200hrs. If this was a 9-5 job that would work out at probably around a month and a half of basic training for the first year. This does not include the additional sessions that are put on by team members specifically for the trainees. Then there is the time you personally put in honing your skills and practicing what you have learned which requires again a great amount of commitment.

Navigation is a key basic training requirement which you must cover in your first year on top of all the other training. You can understand why. We sometimes need to find casualties or missing individuals fast, but we also need to make sure we do not get lost ourselves or if we do, we quickly have the skills to find where we are and get back on track. There is nobody to rescue us if we get lost on the hills! Yes, we use digital mapping software, but these can, and do, fail. We must be able to use a map & compass and it is a skill that has to be learned and practiced.

I have always used maps when out walking, never really used digital maps and only had a basic GPS that would if needed give a 6-digit grid reference. I thought before joining the team that my navigation skills were good, in fact I would say better than good. How very wrong I was. The standard you need to become a full team member as with all the other required skills is exceptionally high and being an average navigator is not good enough.

Part of our assessment is to be able to navigate at night, in terrible conditions (the assessors will deliberately pick an awful night!) and in the bleakest areas possible. We will be asked to find locations using nothing more than gradients on a map, navigate to locations at almost pinpoint accuracy using all the skills we have learned over the year. Within the first 3 months of joining the Team on top of the standard training requirements, as a trainee, I had an additional 4 navigation sessions 3 of which were at night with a further 2 scheduled to occur close to our assessment dates. That is just for navigation.



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The skill level of the Team is understandably exceptionally high, and the Team requires you to meet this as quickly as possible. It's not possible to learn everything in the first year, but the basics need to be set to build upon once you are accepted as a full team member. As a full Team member you can then specialise in multiple different areas such as crag, rope work, casualty care and water to name just a few.

Add to all of this, which will also resonate with other team members, I have a full-time job and a family (a 2 & 5 year old) and not forgetting a very understanding wife who also works full time. We also own our own business so neither of us have 9-5 jobs!

The commitment required for training alone is immense which is in addition to the call out requirements. It also does not stop, its required year on year.

We are also all volunteers, that do not get paid for the work we do for the team and fund the majority of our personal kit which gets a massive bashing! Not to forget travel expenses to training and callouts.

This year as everyone knows, has not been a normal year with Covid-19. Trying to complete all of this training has been and will continue to be challenging. We have had a break from training during the worst of the lock-down and as of the start of August a rush of training sessions has been restarted. This though all now needs to be done wearing full PPE which for ourselves means wearing goggles, face masks, gloves and full waterproofs so quite warm and uncomfortable. It has also been quite sunny!

Why do we do it? It's all great fun of course and when we do get that callout, we are providing something back to the hill-walking community and know we have the skills to meet that commitment.

### **New Base Leases**

Andy NEILL (Hon. Secretary)

And some good news. If a little belated. Most of you will know that we moved into our new Bases in Durham and Barnard Castle a few years ago now. Unfortunately, because of a legal conundrum the County Durham & Darlington Fire Service were not in a position to give us the formal lease arrangements that they wanted to give us and that we wanted to have. This agreement would have given us security of tenure for 50 years. Without it our position would have been precarious.

However, I am now glad to report that, after a lot of hard work and good will by both parties, the impediment has finally been overcome. We signed the 50-year leases for both Bases on 21<sup>st</sup> July this year.

This has also enabled us to surrender the lease for our old Base at Bede Kirk, Barnard Castle. For safety's sake we had retained this until the other leases had been secured.

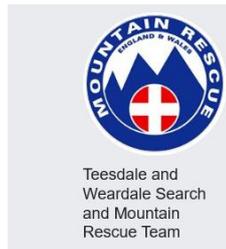


## Teesdale & Weardale Search & Mountain Rescue Team

### Fundraising

A big thank you to everyone that donates money to the Team - without you we would not be able to operate.

### Follow the Team on Facebook



### Associate Members

Thank you for your continued support of the Team.

Please feel free to contact me with suggestions regarding the newsletter, or possible events for the coming year.

**Chris Roberts**  
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