

May 1st 2018 GSAR Mission

Tuesday 1 May 2018 was not the typical spring day at Makkovik, NL. Winds were strong from the north and it was snowing, wet snow, thick fog and low cloud cover.

No scheduled flights to the north coast were moving due to the extreme weather conditions.

At approximately 1230hrs on this day Errol Andersen, a member of the Makkovik GSART called myself to advise the will need assistance in coordinating a GSAR mission regarding a downed aircraft in the Tisialuk area about 80 KMs SE of Makkovik as the crow flies. Makkovik RCMP were notified by Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC) Halifax of a may day call with two badly injured people on board. JRCC advised that they were on the scene but the weather was very bad with zero visibility and very high winds. They asked if Makkovik GSART would attempt a rescue as they were in contact with one crew member.

Eight GSAR team members were mustered plus Cst. Henry Broomfield. A quick briefing was held at the Makkovik fire hall.

All team members were aware of the possibility of sea ice breaking up this time of year in the area of Tisialuk due to the wind direction on this day. Perry Dyson, one of the team members also has a cabin about 12 KM from the Tisialuk Hill. This would be an alternate place to wait for weather to improve if needed.

GPS waypoint for the location was loaded into the teams GPS units provided to the RCMP by JRCC. Snowmobiles were topped up with gas and rescue boggan were loaded with required gear. The team then moved to the RCMP detachment for final gear check and SPOT unit activation and put in track mode. I then setup a shared link and sent same to JRCC and Harry Blackemore of NL Search and Rescue Association (NLSARA) so they could track the progress and location of the team should they require more assistance.

Given the weather conditions, the team took equipment to prepare them for a possible overnight stay to wait out the weather. This included food, tent and wood burning stove along with the regular first aid equipment and extra gas for the snow machines.

As the team departed Makkovik the visibility was very poor in snow and blowing snow. It was not long before the team went out of sight in the snow as the entered onto Makkovik harbour.

The first challenge facing the team would be to safely cross Kill Man Neck, and treacherous high portage approximately 10km from Kill Man Pond to Big Bight back at sea level and approximately 1300ft at the highest point on the trail. To compound things in the spring time brooks are running with possibilities of water and slush to contend with. The team reported that on times all they could see was the machine in front of them on this portion of the rescue mission due to blowing snow and fog/low cloud cover.

As the team reached sea level at Big Bight SE of Makkovik conditions became a bit easier as they were out of the mountains and hills. On the sea ice they were driving blind however. They could not distinguish the sea ice from the horizon. We call this phenomenon locally as "blind driving". Difficult to tell if you are moving or not as there are no references. The team drove by GPS only for about 55 kilometers in these conditions on the sea ice. All the while making sure the were no pressure ridges in front of them or unsafe ice given it was May in Labrador.

The driving wet snow by the high winds also made it cold for the team members.

As the team approached Tisialuk, the conditions had not improved. At the bottom of Tisialuk Bay there is a large fuel cache held by the Department of National Defence, (DND) that supports the Lab 5 North Warning Site (NWS) on Tisialuk Hill, not far from the GPS coordinates given by JRCC. Canadian Ranger Errol Andersen and several other team members are very familiar with the area due to doing numerous NWS inspections over the years. They were able to pick up the road (which was used to build the site in the 1980's) from the shore through the woods for a portion of the way up the hill. This was relatively easy portion of the trip as the road is wide with lots of snow on it at that time of year. However, as the team moved up the hill the treeline quickly disappears and there is nothing but barren land and lakes with steep valleys and high snow drifts. The team had to be careful and move slowly as not to drive over a cliff or a steep snow drift bank. After the team moved out of the treeline the conditions were so bad they could only see the snowmobile in front and not anything else. Many people have been injured and killed driving over such places in these conditions.

As the team moved closer to the waypoint the terrain became very steep. The team then decided it was too dangerous to proceed any further by snowmobile and set a plan to walk up the steep mountain side towards the GPS waypoint.

Team member Roy Martin was the member calling the directions and distance to the waypoint from the GPS unit.

This was the most dangerous portion of the mission. The team members were sticking their toes into the snow and using their hands to pull themselves upward and along the side of the mountain. They could not see what was above them or below. Not knowing if a slip would lead them over a steep cliff and into rocks or trees below. This was made worst with the extreme high winds and the air was thick with moisture. Each team member had to rely on the member in front as they could not see the rear or front member the visibility was so bad.

As Roy Martin counted down the distance in meters to the waypoint the team was wondering if the waypoint was correct as it seemed like a long climb without any sign of anything at all.

When the team located the aircraft the team members down the hill about 10 meters still could not see it. As the rear team members reached the lead team with Roy one member yelled there it is, not realizing the others were stopped catching their breath after finally reaching the scene.

The team then had to assess the scene the best they could before they tried to open the aircraft doors to get the crew out. They could not risk losing the aircraft down the mountain with any wrong move given how steep the mountain side was.

Once the team gained access to the cabin they realized one of the crew was not responsive and one was relatively and surprisingly alert. The team extracted that crew member who was in a lot of pain and gave him warm clothes they had taken along to put on the best he could. Once the other crew was determined to be deceased the team extracted him from the aircraft and secured body and then slowly made their way back down the mountain side with the survivor and body.

After reaching the snowmobiles they could not get the survivor to lie down in the rescue toboggan due to the pain he was in. It was decided then that he would sit on one of the snowmobiles and they team would drive slowly back towards Makkovik as there was no chance in the weather conditions for an airlift medivac from sea level at Tisialuk Bay. All the while they were unsure if the survivor had broken ribs that could puncture his lungs etc. on the way back. The journey back to Makkovik took about four hours due to the concern for the survivor's condition.

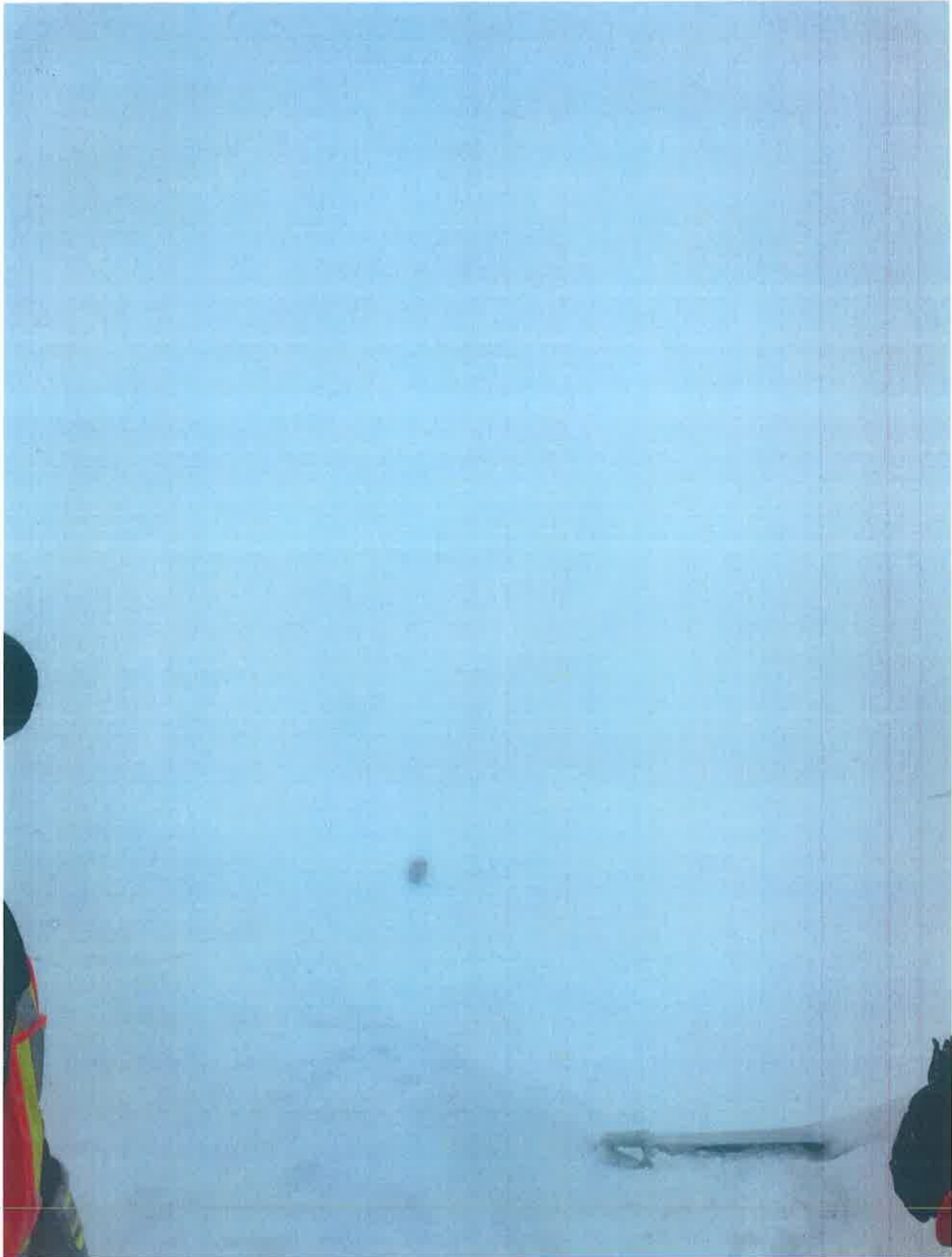
On the team arrived at Makkovik, the Makkovik clinic nurses took over the medical care of the survivor, Sam Rutherford.

He was alert but in a lot of pain. Could not lay down, however he was much more comfortable in the semi sitting position in the hospital bed.

JRCC then advised that they would attempt a medivac from Makkovik VIA helicopter 103 squadron. The weather was still very poor with low ceiling and strong winds. The rescue helicopter crew had to fly 20 nautical miles north, out to sea from Makkovik to get underneath the low clouds and severe icing conditions. The helicopter landed at Makkovik approximately 0400hrs on morning of May 02 2020.

This GSAR mission garnered national news media attention across Canada. Giving praise to the local ground search and rescue team for their bravery and traditional knowledge of the area of operation and using modern equipment such as GPS and satellite communications.





Trailing GSAR team member Robert Gear climbing the last few meters to the accident site. Approximately 5 meters away. Nearly standing upright as he ascends. Picture taken looking down on top of him.



Severely damaged aircraft. Wings folded back. Nose partially dislodged. Team working to remove aircraft crew while very careful not to move aircraft and lose it down the mountain. GSAR team could not see what was below them. Cliff, forest, rocks etc. A slip for team members could be fatal in these conditions.



Aircraft Accident site. Tisialuk Hill. 01 May 2018 (Benedict Mountain Range)

This picture was taken approximately one week after the accident. (Photo by Cst. Henry Broomfield who was on the mission as well)

Lab5 North Warning Site on the mountain top.

Canadian Ranger Errol Andersen was on this mission. He is very familiar with this area as he has done many inspections for DND on this site. Myself Barry Andersen and Errol has also done many inspections of this site by land sea and air over the years.



Makkovik GSAR team members working to free the aircraft crew. Very bad weather. Thick fog, snow and strong winds.



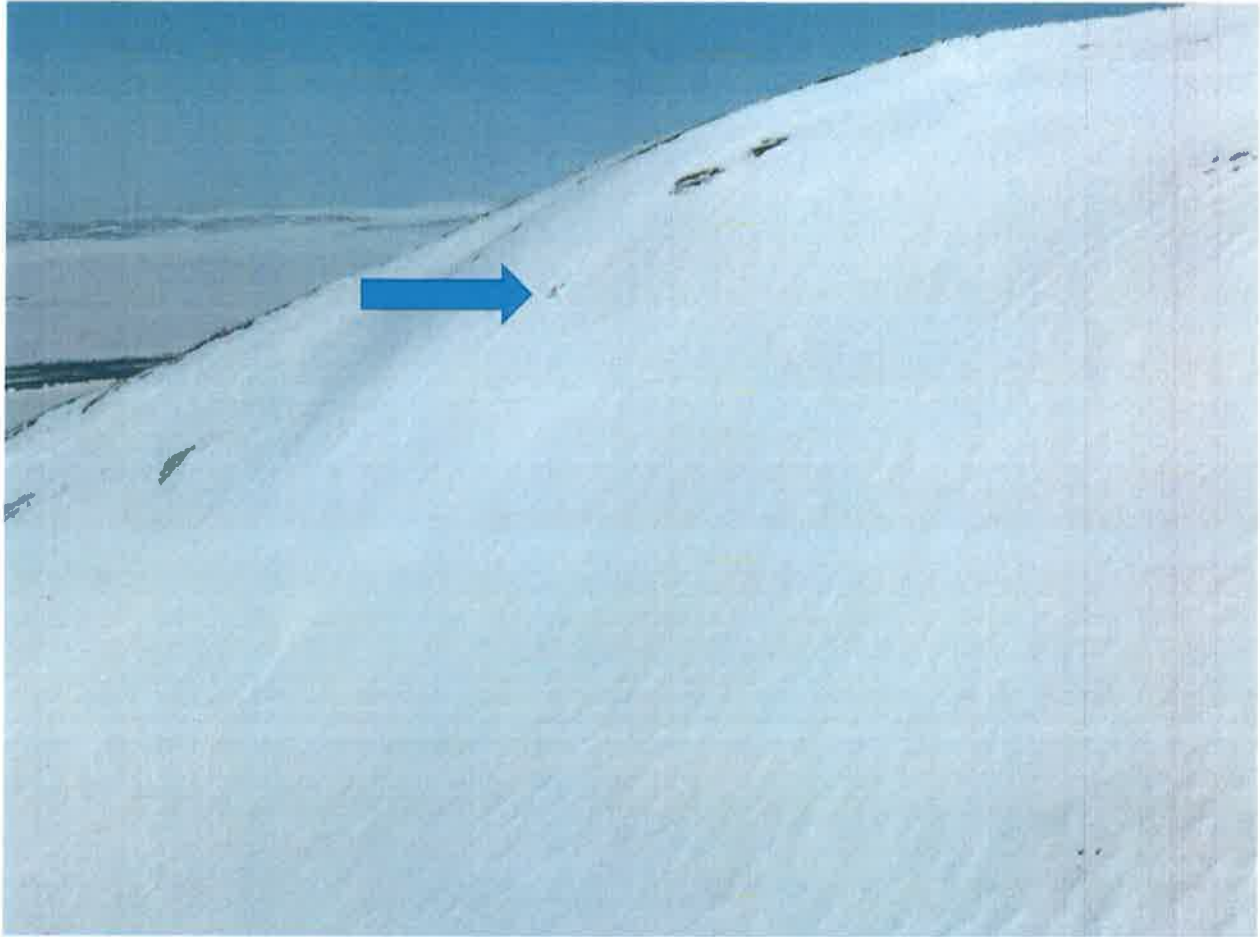
Google Earth image of route taken to the accident site by Makkovik GSART.



Aircraft location on Mountain at Tisialuk Hill. (Benedict Mountain Range)

This picture was taken approximately one week after the accident.

Lab5 North Warning Site on the mountain top.



Closer image of aircraft of mountain side.

This picture was taken approximately one week after the accident.



Note the ice and snow drifted and accumulated onto the downed aircraft.

**MAKKOVIK GROUND SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM (GSART)
BACK GROUND.**

The Makkovik GSART was stood up informally in 1994 by a group of volunteers in the community that answered the call for assistance of those overdue or in distress.

In 2002 the GSART formally stood up with the assistance of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Newfoundland and Labrador Search and Rescue Association.(NLSARA)

Today, the Makkovik GSART consists of 19 volunteers with myself as the team coordinator since 2002.

Over the years the GSART has been involved in many incidents in which the outcomes were tragic but also many more with outcomes of the lost or overdue persons were returned home by the team to their loved ones.

Several of those incidents were high profile with media attention. Three hunters rescued by the 103 Squadron as Makkovik GSART were on site in two small speed boats. CBC Land and Sea did an episode on that incident. 2010.

The tragic incident of the young person Burton Winters.

Tragic incident of missing young person Jake Basto. Later body was recovered in 2019.

Makkovik GSART members have also answered the call to assist the Natuashish Innu in efforts to locate two missing persons on two different occasions. Both those incidents had tragic outcomes. Our team members were appreciated for their efforts in these incidents.

All GSAR teams work together on the north coast of Labrador and with Upper Lake Melville team as well during winter season when many travellers use the Trans Labrador Trail system by snowmobile.

Makkovik GSART has acquired some equipment over the years with grants from the NLSARA. Tents, generators, communications vhf radios, ice rescue suits, pfd's a laptop computer and software. GSART also acquired funds in 2002 from the Makkovikimiut Trust Incorporated (MTI), a volunteer organization set up to administer funds from the Voisey's Bay Impacts and Benefits Agreement (IBA) of the Labrador Inuit Land Claim Agreement (LILCA) here at Makkovik. GSART used those funds to initially purchase three Globalstar Satellite phones for the use of the GSART in the field to communicate with much greater reliability to the command post back at Makkovik. Two of those phones were also used as a preventative measure for local hunters/travellers to sign out for free if they were going out onto the land.

Later GSART acquired more funds from MTI and GSART acquired five (5) SPOT units, two Inreach units and two more Globalstar Satellite phones plus the annual administration costs each year since to this date. The annual administration costs with bank fees are in excess of \$8000.00.

Makkovik GSART do not do any fund raising as there is already much competition in our small community for such funds.

These phones and SPOT units have proven invaluable as a preventative measure. None of this would have been available without the assistance of MTI.

The Makkovik GSART has not been able to avail of any brochures or pamphlets from the Federal Government for small boat safety since that program was discontinued by the Harper Government. Any

small boat safety initiatives now has to be purchased from Transport Canada. Thus, our GSAR team do not do anymore promotions for small boat safety.

In the past when this program was available Makkovik GSAR team would have life jackets, whistles, colouring books and throw ropes to give out as promotion/preventative items.

Boating is a huge part of life in our region. The Canadian Coast Guard is now slowly stepping up to fill in the gaps for Marine Search and Rescue by accepting smaller boats as Auxiliary Coast Guard members. Makkovik GSART continues to lobby for better VHF coverage on the north coast of Labrador given this new development. Without this coverage any mayday call for help will be pointless as it may not be heard from the many dead zones on the coast.