



**Public Inquiry Respecting Ground Search and  
Rescue for Lost and Missing Persons**

**TESTIMONIALS FROM NUNATUKAVUT MEMBERS**

**November 8, 2021**

### **The Importance of Time and History of SAR Missions in our Communities**

Multiple times in discussions with members regarding SAR missions the concern with time continually comes to the forefront. It takes time today for organizations to be tasked which can result in a delay in the search beginning. Concerns are that such a delay can mean to difference between a rescue and a recovery. In the past if someone was lost the community members conducted the search. If someone got a call, they gathered up immediately and went out on the land or water to start the search. Time of was of the essence and being able to start so quickly resulted in many individuals being rescued who were close to losing their lives. It is believed that if the community members had to wait to be tasked then individuals would have died. It has also expressed by members that there should never be a difference is timing of being tasking between GSAR and Maritime SAR – both processes should run efficiently, and the tasking of organizations should be done quickly.

Please note that the examples given below occurred prior to the existence of the current SAR regimes but are shared to demonstrate that many members and families in our communities have been impacted by SAR missions and they rely on each other for assistance.

- John Larkham and Herman Penney. Both individuals were rescued by community members. When found they were hallucinating. They were brought to the clinic in Charlottetown for treatment and had to have their clothes and boots cut off them because everything was frozen on them. If they had not been found when they had been they would have died.
- John Campbell. Left Port Hope Simpson to go to Pinsent's Arm and got lost on snowmobile in a storm. He was disorientated and hallucinating when found by community members.

In one family, over the past 50 years, there have been three community lead SAR missions conducted to search for multiple generations:

- Bill Dyson and his children were travelling from Cartwright to Black Tickle on their snowmobiles and visibility became difficult. Mr. Dyson, in fear of becoming separated from his son (who was driving the second snowmobile) decided to stop and wait out the weather. They set up a small pup tent and covered it in snow for insulation. Fortunately, they were found by family and friends three days later – many had thought they would be found deceased due to the extreme cold and stormy weather.
- Mr. Dyson's brother-in-law, Arthur Keefe, was travelling with Bill Neville by snowmobiles from Black Tickle to Charlottetown and went through the ice near Seal Island. Mr. Neville was able to crawl up on the ice and got to a cabin on shore

and lit a lamp. The lamp was seen across the bay, and he was rescued. Unfortunately, Mr. Keefe was never found.

- Mr. Dyson's father-in-law, Reuben Dyson, was hunting by dog team and went missing. There was a search conducted and he was found with his dogs unfortunately frozen to death.

### Interview with Jeffrey Keefe, NCC member, Black Tickle

#### Background on the community of Black Tickle

Black Tickle is a fishing community located on an island on the southeast coast of Labrador. It has less than one hundred residents and is isolated. There are no commercial flights to Black Tickle, no road in, and a weekly coastal boat that only operates in the summer and fall months. The only access to air transportation is via medical flights. If there is room you can book a seat, but you can be bumped at the last minute.

Internet is largely inaccessible, and no one has access to running water. The island has a barren landscape and thus residents conduct traditional harvesting off island which involves travelling via boat or snowmobile surrounding bays and land. Travel to Cartwright via boat or snowmobile for goods does often occur.

#### Search and Rescue in Black Tickle

In the past, prior to the existence of the current search and rescue regime, residents of Black Tickle were the search and rescue teams. Often a family member noted that someone did not return to the community in the time they were expected, and the community gathered to go out and look for them. In addition, there was a hardiness to the older generation where often they would patch themselves up and then travel home instead of waiting for assistance to come. Once time Mr. Keefe's father cut his leg with a chainsaw while harvesting off the land. He sewed up his own leg with supplies from his first aid kit and then travelled back to Black Tickle. Today, the community still volunteers for searches but now the Canadian Rangers are seen as the lead responsibility. "It is assumed we will do it, no matter the situation it goes to us".

Today, the Canadian Rangers are the only available resource to the community of Black Tickle and thus they are tasked for both ground and maritime SAR. There are no police, no provincial conservation officers, no fishery officers, no CCG, no GSAR unit, and no CCG Auxiliary. If there is a need for a ground or maritime search and rescue, then the Canadian Rangers are tasked, and community members assist on their own time and dime. "We are all family here so even if the Canadian Rangers were not tasked, we would assist but not wear our uniforms."

The Canadian Rangers must travel over sea ice in the winter and by boat in open water season in order to reach the land that must be searched. Ground Search and Rescues missions occur mostly due to people getting lost in snowstorms.

In his role with the Canadian Rangers, Mr. Keefe feels that the safest way to conduct a search is with two boats. But he feels that there is only one reliable boat available to him (which is his own) as one of the two boats available for this purpose often cannot be relied on to be ready to go or is not available. **Mr. Keefe strongly feels that a search and rescue boat is a necessary asset in the community considering the lack of boats available for missions. Such an asset would allow for more comprehensive and timely SAR missions.**

This past winter there was a snowstorm where people got lost. They were building a cabin in Porcupine Bay and were travelling from Cartwright with supplies to drop off on site and then were coming to stay in Black Tickle as their base. No one knew the land as none were from the community. Mr. Keefe received a call from a family member that they had failed to check in and he called DND in Gander to inform them of the situation and waited to be tasked. In the meantime, the Canadian Rangers in Black Tickle started to get ready and geared up so when they were tasked, they would be ready to go. It took around 45 min to receive the tasking and start the search and rescue mission. To get to Porcupine Bay the Canadian Rangers travelled 15 km to get to the end of the island and then they travelled over 4 km of sea ice. The crew was found and rescued.

That particular SAR was successful however Mr. Keefe did recall one situation where this was not the case. Edward Joseph, his uncle, was a SAR that became a recovery. A few winters ago, Mr. Joseph went sealing by snowmobile and he failed to return to Black Tickle. A SAR mission was executed, and his snowmobile was found on land and his body was floating in the water and recovered. Mr. Keefe was transported via snowmobile by the Canadian Rangers to the community clinic and they stored his body there for a few days waiting for the RCMP could arrive. His death was declared a drowning, but no autopsy occurred. To this day this is a concern as Mr. Keefe believes it was not a drowning but that his uncle had a heart attack and fell in the water. Mr. Joseph had complained about chest pains earlier in the day. Mr. Keefe feels that an autopsy should have occurred, and it would have provided some closure and given some medical info to the family.

Mental health of the community is a concern of Mr. Keefe's. He stated that support is provided to the Canadian Rangers after SAR and/or recovery missions to which they are tasked. However, there are community members and family and friends that are impacted greatly when someone requires SAR and when a mission becomes a recovery. In addition, because there are no funeral homes/ clergy/ police / medical personnel etc to deal or assist with the passing of community members and their remains, the responsibility falls on the community members themselves. The loss of human lives has touched and will continue to impact all who live in Black Tickle – "We are always seeing it, but no one comes in to talk with us".

Regarding CCG Auxiliary and Ground Search and Rescue teams, Mr. Keefe stated that they would be of assistance in his community. He is unsure of why neither exists but the benefits of having more people with training, access to more assets, and access to more knowledge from such individuals would be helpful.

**Interview with Chad Strugnell- NCC member, CCG Auxiliary, Fisherman,  
Resident of St. Lewis**

Chad Strugnell has been a member of the CCG Auxiliary for a number of years. The CCG Auxiliary is a group of volunteers that aid maritime search and rescue missions when tasked by the JRCC. The only condition to be a member of the CCG Auxiliary is that you must keep your vessel up to date with regulations. When tasked by the JRCC, fuel utilized in a search is reimbursed. Training occurs once or twice a year and often later in the fall (which avoids commercial fishing open times so that fisherman can participate if they choose). The training is only offered in St. John's and Mr. Strugnell feels that participation in training opportunities would be greater if it was offered on the south coast because it would be more accessible, less demanding on people due to the decrease in travel time required which would result in more people being able to attend.

Most communities on the south coast have residents that are part of the CCG Auxiliary and Mr. Strugnell has been tasked in the past to assist with search and rescue missions. One that he mentioned occurred in the past while fishing for shrimp. Another fishing vessel had lost a man overboard and Mr. Strugnell was tasked by JRCC to assist as he was the closest vessel. He steamed for 5 to 6 hrs for two to three days and then it was switched to a recovery.

Recently Mr. Strugnell was involved in searching for the lost vessel *Island Lady* and its crew Marc Russell and Joey Jenkins. Mr. Strugnell received a call from Dwight Russell (father of Marc Russell) stating that the vessel and its crew did not return to port as expected. Mr. Russell asking for his assistance in conducting a search and Mr. Strugnell, along with the others began to search. Approximately 2 – 3 hours after he had begun searching on the water. Mr. Strugnell received a call from JRCC looking to task him to the SAR. Mr. Strugnell's participation in the search, as was many others' participation, was the result of the community coming together – no one was tasked, and they continued their search even after the CCG said they were standing down and it was now a recovery mission.

Mr. Strugnell feels that there was a "lack of common sense" in the search and an inappropriate sole reliance on technology, and a lack of understanding on the importance of local knowledge and the difference it can make to determining search areas. Mr. Strugnell gave two examples that demonstrated his statement:

- "We were told to search against the wind. When I called JRCC and told them that this did not make sense they said they were directing us based on the data coming from buoys/beacons installed locally. I told them there is a difference between a piece of equipment that is partially underwater and a boat and how the boat is being directed by wind and waves. JRCC listened to what my observations were about the direction any debris would be moving, the search area changed, and we started to find debris."

- “A plane flew overhead and reported a debris field. We were directed to the area but there was no debris – only a large flock of turrs. When I reported back to JRCC I told them what was there and asked what was used to determine it was a debris field. I was told equipment (sonar) was used. There was no visual observation made and it was daytime. We wasted time travelling to the site.”

Mr. Strugnell feels that local knowledge is important and needs to be incorporated into the process and procedures.

Regarding telecommunication, Mr. Strugnell noted that his fishing vessel has a satellite phone, VHF, and internet but this is not the case for all fishing vessels nor for those travelling on land. Almost everyone has cells and would be able to make a distress call or text. Mr. Strugnell feels that if cell coverage was good in the Mary's Harbour area there would have been a different outcome to the recent tragedy involving the *Island Lady* and her crew. He used the following examples for how cell towers on Newfoundland provide cell coverage offshore in areas he has fished and has allowed for increased communication:

- When fishing off Fogo, there is cell coverage 50 miles offshore
- When fishing off Black Tickle, cell coverage has been picked up from the cell tower in Raleigh

The crew of the *Island Lady* made two calls in the late afternoon (around 4 pm) on the day they were returning to port from fishing. The people on the receiving end of the satellite calls could not understand what was being said and the connection did not last very long as the calls were dropped. Mr. Strugnell believes those calls were distress calls and if they had not been dropped or garbled then someone would have got the message that the boys were in distress. He believes they would have been saved because a search would have been launched immediately and they would have been reached quickly because it would have been known where to look and because they were not fishing too far offshore from the community of Mary's Harbour. **Mr. Strugnell believes a cell tower is required to improve all search and rescue missions in Mary's Harbour and the surrounding communities.**

**Regarding air support, Mr. Strugnell believes there should be a DND search and rescue unit based in Goose Bay.** It is his understanding that currently such support for Labrador comes from Greenwood, Nova Scotia, which is too far. Labrador needs to access air support quickly and support assets and equipment s need the have the capability to operated in the dark.

**Regarding CCG support, Mr. Strugnell believes that the south coast and the north coast needs a rescue boat with dedicated personnel.** He referred to the CCG setup in the community of St. Anthony where there are dedicated personnel 24 hrs/ 7 days a week and a fully ready operational rescue boat that can travel quickly. Mr. Strugnell noted that his response time for his fishing vessel is almost double of that of the CCG rescue boats

such as the one stationed in St. Anthony. He believes that they can travel 25 miles/hr and such a time difference to provide assistance will save lives.

In the past two years, there has been a significant increase in recreational boaters and in commercial fishing boats. The demand for better SAR services is reasonable. "The Government of Canada should not put a price tag on someone."



**An overview of Canadian Rangers on the south coast and concerns about current SAR situation on the coast**

Canadian Rangers are present in all NunatuKavut communities. Recruitment and retention are not an issue. All Rangers get paid during the training and when they are tasked to search and rescue missions. Training includes wilderness first aid, map and compass, GPS, and mock search and rescue missions to name a few. Equipment is top notch and any requests for equipment are usually accommodated by DND. In addition, training is usually provided locally with necessary courses and their trainers travelling to the coast when required.

Members in the Canadian Rangers are diverse in their experience on the land, sea, education, and employment. There is always someone with local knowledge and expertise that is utilized in any search and rescue mission. The Canadian Rangers is a well-run team with all members understanding their roles and responsibilities and the chain of command. The Rangers operate within well established processes and procedures. They are funded by the federal government and the whole team considers themselves a unit.

The Canadian Rangers can be tasked for ground and maritime search and rescue missions however their primary area of expertise is for land/inland missions. Of course, how they are tasked and how they participate in a search and rescue mission depends on whether it is a ground or a maritime.

For ground search and rescue missions, the Canadian Rangers on the south coast of Labrador are tasked by Derek Burden – Sergeant, Canadian Rangers, Labrador. Sergeant Burden is tasked by DND in Gander. Often the Canadian Rangers will contact Sergeant Burden, or he will himself find out about the need for a search and rescue locally from family members of a lost person or from communications from a community member and will contact DND asking to be tasked. Once tasked the Canadian Rangers become involved in the search and rescue. In regard to a maritime search and rescue the Canadian Rangers take a back seat, the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) Auxiliary take the front lead in the communities. If the search and rescue changes to a recovery, then the RCMP on the coast become the lead for the search and the Canadian Rangers have to wait to be tasked by the RCMP to become involved. In regard to the maritime search and rescue this Fall for the crew of FV Island Lady off the coast of Mary's Harbour – the Canadian Rangers were not tasked for the search and rescue mission nor the recovery mission.

Concerns noted regarding the current search and rescue situation on the south coast of Labrador:

- Lack of CCG presence
- Lack of telecommunications

In regard to the CCG, the response time for them to get to the south coast of Labrador is lacking. The coastline of Labrador is enormous and very few people realize that just north

of Cartwright is the halfway point between St. John's and the northern tip of Labrador. Labrador needs a permanent CCG presence.

In regard to telecommunications, the lack of service in areas is a big issue. The Town Council of Mary's Harbour has been lobbying for the installation of a cell tower on the hill at St. Lewis. Such a tower installation would result in a great increase in coverage and would have major safety implications. It would allow anyone needing help at sea or on land and opportunity to make an emergency call. It is believed it could reach the crab grounds that fisherman in the area are known to fish on. It may have made a difference in the recent tragedy.

In regard to the establishment of ground search and rescue units and what the thoughts are on why there are none on the south coast, community members don't recall every being asked or approached to establish such units. It is believed that the Canadian Rangers would do the same activities as a ground search and rescue unit.

### **Overview of discussion on Ground Search and Rescue (GSAR) in Goose Bay**

There is a GSAR team located in Goose Bay with approximately 20 individuals, who are all volunteers. Assets are unknown by NCC, but the unit does keep a record of their inventory. The team does receive funding from the province (amount is unknown by NCC ) however it is not enough to purchase and maintain equipment and thus the team has to fundraise.

It is difficult to get new members due to fundraising and lack of leave from their employers. Many of the volunteers must take personal/vacation leave to participate in a search and rescue. Often members can only participate in a search if it is during their non work hours. It is important to note that NCC does not give leave for search and rescue volunteers to participate in searches.

The GSAR unit is tasked by the RCMP - they can not go on a search until the RCMP contacts them and gives them direction. The GSAR team based in Goose Bay, in addition to conducting searches in Upper Lake Melville, has been tasked by the RCMP to assist with GSAR on the North Coast as well as Maritime SAR.

There have been instances of the GSAR unit being contacted directly by community members who have been upset that they are not searching for a missing person or feel that the search is occurring in the wrong area. The GSAR unit have been on the receiving end of much frustration. The public does not understand that the GSAR unit can not begin a search until tasked and does not have a say on where they go to conduct a search. Once tasked, the GSAR team are told where to go by the RCMP - only when the original search area is exhausted does the team get asked by the RCMP for input/ideas on where else can searched.

Once a search or a recovery has been complete, the GSAR team meets to debrief and discuss possible improvements that could be implemented for the next time. The debriefing is lead by the SAR coordinator – Keith Pye. Sometimes the debriefing has RCMP presence but often it is only the GSAR team of volunteers.

Recommendation: meet with Keith Pye, GSAR Coordinator, to discuss the status of GSAR in Labrador.