

Juan de Fuca SAR comes to the rescue (leadership profile after Sooke River tragedy)

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In the aftermath of a tragic event that saw three Sooke men lose their lives earlier this month, one group distinguished itself with professionalism, skill, and compassion as it led the search and eventual recovery of the men — the Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue Service.

The JDF SAR is a group of 50 volunteers who dedicate their time to deliver search and rescue services in the region.

Whenever anyone is unaccounted for or is lost or injured in the forests, rivers, and cliffs on southern Vancouver Island or the southern Gulf Islands, SAR is there.

While the group's response area is the Juan de Fuca Electoral Area, it assisted on calls all over Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and even Washington State.

"We've been around since 1982 and the people who do this work for the community haven't changed much. They're people who have a love of and understanding of the outdoors, and deep passion for helping others. That's never changed," Vickie Webber, senior SAR manager, said.

What has changed is the approach to search and rescue methods and the training and knowledge needed to do the job.

"There was a time when we just got as many people together as possible, and we'd walk the area looking for a missing person. We don't do that anymore," Webber said.

Instead, the process has embraced technology to provide detailed maps of the search areas and mountains of data that helps to build a psychological profile of the missing person.

"We get inside their heads and figure out what they likely have done," Kathryn Farr, deputy SAR manager, said.

One of the frustrations facing the SAR team is the unrealistic expectations created by TV and movies.

"People get the idea that you just ping a cellphone and it will tell you where the missing person is. Or some people assume there's some magic satellite we can use that will give us an infrared image telling us exactly where the person is. It just doesn't work that way," Webber said.

Instead, the teams rely on sophisticated search techniques, tracking abilities, dogs and even horses to help with the search.

The SAR team is, of course, motivated by a host of personal reasons, but for Farr, Webber and assistant SAR manager Barb Broster there's a common experience.

"When someone takes your face in their hands and looks you in the eye and thanks you ... well that's something that's hard to explain," Broster said.

"In one of my first searches, I returned a seven-year-old boy to his parents. That was more than 30 years ago, but the look on their faces was something that I'll never forget," added Webber.

Farr said almost every SAR member has memories of that kind, and it keeps them coming back to train and do the job.

But, despite the best efforts of the SAR team, not all searches end in a joyful reunion.

"We're always prepared that the person may not have survived, and, when you know that you're going out to do a body recovery, it takes a very different energy. I know about SAR workers who have succumbed to that stress," said Webber.

"Although we have supports for the PTSD that can result, I've known SAR members who have had to walk away. Sometimes, it's contributed to marriage breakdowns and other lasting trauma."

But despite that, the JDF SAR service has a waiting list of people who want to become part of the team.

The successful volunteer candidates receive training in swift-water rescue, high angle rope rescues, tracking, first aid, and even working with dogs and horses.

"I've never regretted being part of this team," Farr said.

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