



Inter-agency rescue

Thousands upon thousands of missing persons reports are filed each year. **John Dean** discovers how teaming up and training with civilian organisations helps the police service's search and rescue operations

Securing outside expertise can be invaluable when officers kick off missing person searches.

Last year, 220,000 missing person reports were filed (*PR, 20 February*). While many of these people return safely, sometimes large search operations need to be launched between police forces and other search teams to find them.

Some police forces have turned to outside organisations with expertise in searching to help train officers and practice working with volunteer mountain rescue teams.

One of these organisations is the Northumberland-based Centre for Search Research which works with forces including Greater Manchester, Cumbria, Cleveland, Thames Valley, Sussex, Dumfries and Galloway and Central Scotland Police.

So what can officers learn from search experts about looking for missing people?

Search research

The Centre for Search Research was founded in 1997 as a registered charity by Dave Perkins and Pete Roberts, each of whom have been senior members of the Northumberland National Park Mountain Rescue Team for more than 35 years.

The centre offers training courses for police officers up to and including the rank of inspector. The courses cover search management in terrains from urban to wilderness where police officers can attend with volunteers from mountain rescue teams.

They go through scenarios based on previous incidents, such as missing walkers, and focuses on managing searches.

The Centre for Search Research has analysed more than 2,000 searches from the UK, as well as more from the United States since it was established. The analysis has shown 80 per cent of searches are successfully completed by rescue organisations and police forces within the first

few hours. Mr Roberts says getting the procedures right from the start helps ensure searches are concluded successfully and speedily.

Insp Andy Hanson, of the technical support group for Cumbria Constabulary, whose remit includes searches, agrees. He says the police service is the primary agency to lead a search when a missing person call comes in and there has been a growing awareness within Cumbria Constabulary that the force needs to improve the way it responds.

He says: 'It was recognised that we should get a better grip. Police have primacy in searches but work with civilian search and rescue organisations. Having that understanding of what each other does, and what we as police should be doing, is important.'

'We talk about the golden hour, that first hour of a search. It may take us an hour to get mountain search and rescue out but there are tasks that we can be doing in that first hour,



OUTSIDE EXPERTISE Civilian search and rescue organisations can offer invaluable assistance to police officers in successfully concluding a missing person operation

REFRESHING SKILLS

Northumbria Police's operations department has conducted a review of its procedures used by its police search advisers and police search trained officers.

Insp George Maratty, of the specialist skills area in the force's operations department, says: 'We conducted a review of how police search advisers and police search trained officers are deployed, trained and have their skills refreshed. I come from a firearms background where we do a lot of training and it became clear that when it comes to the search world, the training was not similar.'

'We now have a comprehensive annual four-day search exercise to re-accredit our search trained officers. A rolling programme refreshing search advisers has also been introduced, focusing on missing person investigations and involving local search and rescue.'

The first one-day training session for

search advisers took place in April and also involved senior officers who would lead a search.

Lecturers on the course included local mountain search and rescue representatives and the Centre for Search Research.

Insp Maratty says: 'We took the scenario of a 12-year-old boy going missing and his parents being concerned. It started with the people taking part being asked to determine whether it was a low to medium-risk situation or a high-risk one. Then we fed in more information, raising the pressure throughout the day until it became a high-risk situation.'

'The idea of sessions like this, and we will run others throughout the year, is to look at how we search. We are all aware of high-profile searches for missing people that have taken place nationally and we will examine how they were conducted and learn from any mistakes that were made.'

giving out that information. If they see someone they know there is a greater element of trust.'

Missing mentality

The psychology of missing people is also important for officers to understand and the centre has spent years compiling its UK Missing Person Behaviour Study, a database of incidents that helps searchers get a better understanding of how a missing person behaves.

Mr Roberts says: 'To be successful in searching for someone, we must look in the right place with the right resource right from the start.'

'Our ongoing collection and analysis of data relating to missing person behaviour is

significant to our work. By analysing data on similar searches we have been able to draw up a set of guidelines for use in such incidents.'

When someone goes missing, we can construct a scenario, saying what we think a person might do. By analysing this kind of data, we have been able to help police forces in the way they search for missing persons.

'The largest categories in this study, along with hikers, are despondent [depressed people] and sufferers of dementia of an Alzheimer's type. These are everyday people in their local community.'

'Our work in an urban setting is on the increase – a phenomena that is worldwide.'

things like making sure we have searched the house of the missing person.'

For Insp Hanson, another benefit of joint training courses is that civilian search teams become accustomed to the paperwork needed by police forces including initial reporting forms and search records.

He says: 'One of the big issues is ensuring that there is a documentation audit trail whenever a search takes place. That is important in cases which may go to hearings such as inquests. Part of our work has been to ensure that search and rescue teams understand the need.'

There are other benefits of closer working relationships with search and rescue groups. Mr Perkins says that in some missing person searches there may be sensitive information involved such as that concerning family background or a person's alleged involvement in a crime.

He explains: 'If a police officer sees an unfamiliar face, that officer may be wary about



TEAM EFFORT Dave Perkins (left) and Pete Roberts (centre) of the Centre for Search Research assist Insp Andy Hanson, of Cumbria Constabulary, also pictured above left and overleaf



RIGHT RESOURCE Search research on how missing people behave, whether in a rural or in an urban environment, gives rescue teams a head start in finding them



‘Urban settings can be a daunting and hostile environment to vulnerable young people and Alzheimers sufferers. Understanding how people react to that helps manage the search’

Indeed, the biggest proportion of searches are in urban areas and we have worked with the police in areas including allotments and countryside on the edge of towns and cities. Urban settings can be a very daunting and hostile environment to vulnerable young people and Alzheimer’s sufferers. Understanding how people react to that helps manage the search.’

Insp Hanson says: ‘Such information is very useful when organising a search. For instance, if you have someone with Alzheimer’s, we know they tend to walk in a straight line and not deviate. We know they tend to be drawn to bright lights, so you might look somewhere like a filling station. It helps you plan.’

Mr Perkins says: ‘The police service already has intelligence-led policing, where they can use data to predict where crimes will occur. Our work uses that principle for missing people.

‘For example, several years ago we had a case in Northumbria where we had a depressed person who wandered off from a sheltered home.

We knew from our research that such people often head for water. Sure enough, two hours later he was found deceased in the river.’

Another element of the training courses is ensuring that police officers and staff are able to interpret what they are being told.

Mr Perkins says: ‘You might get a walker who rings in from the hills saying they are lost and that all they can see is a fence. Well, there are a lot of fences but by knowing what questions to ask, then working out where they set out from, how fast they are likely to have travelled and where they may have taken a wrong turn, it is possible to narrow down the search area. Our work highlights the important difference between seeing something and actually detecting it as a significant clue.’

Expert advice

Bob Pattison, a centre trustee and former Northumbria Police chief superintendent who was head of operations, including searches, says: ‘If

you go back a considerable number of years, police nationally recognised that we needed a more systematic and scientific approach to searching for missing people in urban and rural environments. That is why police search advisers were created [officers who have specialist knowledge of search techniques].

‘The service recognised that with civilian search and rescue organisations, there was already a large amount of goodwill and experience. Thanks to the work being done, police forces are able to run searches in a more methodical way.’

Insp Hanson says: ‘Police have primacy in searches but we would never claim to be the experts. We need the expertise of search and rescue teams, not just in rural searches but in urban ones as well. They are the experts, they have the skills, and what we are doing is making sure we work together well.’ ■

John Dean is a freelance journalist