

Rescue team important to Region's health

By Bill Hess
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Nearly two weeks have passed since anyone has seen three snowmachine riders who left Anaktuvuk Pass for Ambler. Walter Sampson, past president and still very active member of the NANA Region Search and Rescue team, is talking to someone in Barrow on the phone.

He is coordinating ground search efforts to be taken if the search and rescue team's initial attempt to locate the men fails. A Civil Air Patrol-authorized Beaver has already been dispatched to fly over the area, but it is dark and bad weather along parts of the route make the search difficult.

A straight line on a map indicates that the distance between Anaktuvuk Pass and Ambler is nearly 200 miles. Winding their way through the rugged and empty Brooks Range, the snowmachiners had futher than that to go, but could still have been expected to make it in well before this time.

Yet, Sampson is not very worried. "They're older guys," he explains. "They know how to take care of themselves. They know how to live out there." Still, Sampson believes it would be unwise to assume everything is fine and wait until it would be too late to do anything.

"Our only real concern is the possibility of an avalanche," Sampson says. "If there was fog or bad weather, they could have got confused somewhere and went off in the wrong direction, but that is not very likely."

During the NANA Regional Strategy Conference, held just prior to the launching of this latest search effort, one of the priorities of the Health and Human Services Committee's report was to provide continued support of the search and rescue effort for its ability not only to rescue people, but to reduce incidents and increase safety awareness.

With few villages, a large, remote area and virtually all travel done by snowmachine, boat, air and dogsled, there is great risk of getting lost or stranded.

Sampson is pleased to see em-

phasis on search and rescue continued, and feels the effort is well worth it. "We are the number one search and rescue organization in the state," he boasts. "We are the best. I am very proud of our organization!"

The boast is not empty; the search and rescue team has a top reputation throughout the state, and has received awards from the state Legislature and the governor.

"We do not work toward any type of awards," Sampson says. "We do this for one purpose: to save lives!"

They have saved lives; some in an undramatic situation like finding a snowmachiner broken down in the wilderness, in no real trouble—yet. Sometimes, the rescues have been more dramatic. Last year, following the Iditarod race, an airplane disappeared enroute from Nome to Ambler.

A satellite high above the earth picked up an emergency beacon signal not far from the village of Selawick. A plane was dispatched at 4 a.m., but the area was engulfed in fog, and flying was dangerous. The pilot found a small clear area near the wreckage and flew a very tight pattern to maintain support for people on the ground.

When the wreckage was spotted and one woman was seen alive, words of encouragement were spoken to her from over the airplane's public address system. "This gave her the willpower to stay alive that much longer, even though the other two people in the plane had been killed," Sampson says.

Finally, rescuers were able to reach the crash site, and the woman was saved. The NANA Search and Rescue received a Legislative award for heroism for that rescue.

Sampson credits the group's effectiveness to a high degree of cooperation between individuals, the Alaska State Troopers, the fire department, the Civil Air Patrol, the Army National Guard, the U.S. Air Force, the state Legislature, the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wild-



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Past search and rescue president Walter Sampson and a team member Warren Thompson with some equipment. Larry Westlake now serves as president.

life and other organizations.

"We all work together," he explains.

When an airplane is lost, the tab for the search operations is picked up at Elmendorf Air Force Base. When a snowmachiner or someone on the ground is lost, the Alaska State Troopers pay the bill. Still, Sampson notes, there are volunteers who search extra at their own expense. Sometimes, the search is officially called off, but the search and rescue members will continue the effort at their expense, Sampson says.

"We do not give up until we come up with something," he explains. "We will continue to search." Individuals from different villages often donate food, equipment and fuel for the search, Sampson notes. Local air transportation companies fly donated goods into a search area at no charge," he adds.

"It is part of our tradition that we as a people care about each other; the individual is part of our family group. So we go

on, whether the person is dead or alive.

"If we call an individual at two or three in the morning, and it is 50 below zero, do you think he will be too lazy? Do you think he will give us an excuse? No! Our people even leave their jobs to come and search!"

Sampson says that is what really makes him proud of the volunteers is that even if a lost person is from outside of the region, or out of state, and no one knows him, the same effort and concern is put into the search and rescue.

He recalls a case where two "floaters" from the Lower 48 disappeared on the Noatak. A very extensive search utilizing many volunteers with backups from the troopers and the National Guard was launched. One of the two was found, killed by a flash flood which sent the water 15 feet over its normal banks. The other man could not be located.

There are volunteers in every village, and there is equipment for every village. Seven pilots

are checked out with the Civil Air Patrol to fly the Beaver, and other pilots will fly their own small planes. There are snowmachines and sleds for every village, and other volunteers use their own.

They go out in pairs, in case one snowmachine should break down. Typically, if a rescue effort is underway, volunteers from the nearest villages will join in the search. The organization recently acquired a 25-foot boat with two 150 horsepower outboard motors from the state, as well as funding for several smaller river boats.

They hope to have these by Spring. They are also building emergency shelters throughout the region, and staking trails.

And whatever became of the lost snowmachiners traveling to Ambler? A group of volunteers from Ambler went up the trail and found them in fine condition where they were not lost at all but had only stopped to do some trapping.

Next time, the situation may be more dangerous.