

Mounted SAR: Basic Options

by Jorene Downs

Technologies like cell phones, GPS, FMR/GMRS radios and the personal locator beacon, or PLB, are impacting Search And Rescue (SAR), including Mounted Search And Rescue (MSAR), by simplifying the search and placing more emphasis on the rescue, particularly in Wilderness SAR. Mounted SAR units should take advantage of these new capabilities to become a more versatile resource. Some units are already expanding their capabilities. This article identifies some basic options for MSAR teams to consider that would require nominal additional training and capabilities to make them a more versatile resource. These options require nominal additional training and capabilities to achieve that goal.

Effective use of MSAR is typically not fully explored in SAR. If an MSAR team is – as it should be – comprised of trained ground personnel who also have an appropriate horse or mule, that's a start. Depending on the needs of an MSAR unit's operational area and special skill sets within its ranks, it will increase its versatility and value to SAR by addressing the following issues and options:



Photo: Jorene Downs

In appropriate situations MSAR can provide Mounted Evacuation

1. Collaborate with SAR Management to identify opportunities appropriate to local needs and pursue viable options. MSAR training with ground teams will help identify these options.
2. Provide a qualified liaison at the command post to better understand the needs of various responses and see where MSAR might contribute.
3. Pursue ongoing training to improve rescue capabilities.
4. MSAR can provide transportation, or depending on the situation can be made available as an alternative to litter-carry of an injured person.
5. Keep all gear organized for fast loading, store certain gear in the horse trailer, and response time can be greatly reduced. MSAR then becomes a viable resource for the initial Hasty Team response.
6. Equip riders with supplies for several days to take advantage of the increased distance that can be covered by the MSAR team. Include the potential to be assigned overnight in the field.
7. Equip and train mounted teams for night response in various environments. (Be sure increased night visibility for the rider doesn't interfere with the horse's night vision. In some environments a red lens over the light source has been found to be effective for both horse and rider.)
8. MSAR units that provide their own Support/Logistics personnel can drive the field teams and their mounts to a drop-off point and pick up later at another location. This provides far more flexibility for the deployment of Mounted teams.
9. Acting as support personnel, MSAR can haul supplies during a longer SAR or assist with other transport. Riders can also act as couriers in less accessible areas.
10. MSAR personnel are often equipped with 4x4 or other off-highway transportation that can be incorporated as an alternative to riding.
11. Mounted personnel can aid in communications by riding to appropriate locations to establish radio relays.
12. Training in varied terrain and weather will demonstrate to SAR Management the versatility of Mounted team. There are places where a rider can go that the ground searcher would find difficult.
13. In some situations MSAR is very useful for Evidence Search. Demonstrate how visibility from the saddle is often an advantage. This is also a good opportunity to demonstrate ManTracking capability from the saddle.
14. Some riders have extra riding stock suitable for MSAR. If extra saddled mounts are routinely included they can be used to transport other searchers or a found subject, pack along extra gear even if only in traditional saddlebags, and provide a more rested ride for the Mounted searcher in the course of the day or on alternate days. The extra mount can also transport someone with specialized skill sets to a particular location.
15. With proper training, MSAR can provide mounted traffic and crowd control, perimeter security as a visible deterrent, or area containment at various types of incidents. A truck and trailer might be useful as a quick roadblock.
16. MSAR is a viable resource in many emergencies and disasters, even with no disaster-specific training.

This list is incomplete, but is intended to encourage MSAR teams and SAR Management to think outside the box. MSAR units active in the changing SAR environment can – and should - be a far more versatile resource.

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