

TOGETHER BUILDING A BETTER, STRONGER COMMUNITY

Risking their lives to save others

Comox Valley men and women volunteers go through rigorous training so they can respond to various emergency situations

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Record Staff

“At times when you search for days and find nothing it’s a huge sense of defeat,” reveals Paul Berry, search manager and president of the Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue.

The contrary is true when they find or rescue the object of their search.

Mike Fournier and Ruth Masters founded the Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue (CVGSAR) in 1974 after many tragic events in the Valley.

“There was a need for an emergency services organization that fell outside the traditional police, fire and ambulance,” Berry explains.

“For the Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce and local municipalities, the backcountry and the environment is a huge draw for tourism. It is a popular destination for outdoor pursuits,” Berry says.

The newly-formed society teamed with Emergency B.C. (EMBC, formerly known as Provincial Emergency Preparedness) to develop the required skills and build an inventory of equipment to respond to wilderness searches and swift-water rescues.

Since then, the number of people using the Comox Valley’s backcountry and the number of events responded to have increased significantly — 41 tasks last year.

Now 60 members strong, the men and women range in age from 19 to 82. All members are volunteers; all are highly trained and highly qualified.

“Unpaid professionals is what they really are,” quips Berry.

Initially each member spends approximately four months training as a ground search and rescue technician. Once certification is attained, the member can further train to specialize as a technician in swift-water rescue, avalanche rescue, rope rescue, tracking, communications, and canine. CVGSAR members may also aim their sights at becoming a team lead or a search manager.

In the Comox Valley, helicopter training for all members is warranted due to the steep and rugged terrain.

Training happens at the local,



A GOOD MAP (above) aids in searches. President Paul Berry (right) shows off Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue’s new mobile command unit.

PHOTOS BY JANICE HAYWARD

regional and provincial levels with local funds raised or through EMBC and the B.C. Search and Rescue Association.

Now in its 39th year, CVGSAR is celebrating the acquisition, design, and build of a new incident command unit, a 26-foot trailer that will go places their previous command unit could not.

“It was vitally important to put this together and bring it to fruition,” Berry says. “It serves as the hub for any large-scale operation.”

“Men and women volunteer because there is a real sense of service in the team. They arrive no matter the time or the weather. We are a team but we are also a family.”

— Paul Berry

On such an operation, it is not uncommon to find numerous agencies, CVGSAR, RCMP, Fish and Wildlife, and Emergency Social Services, for example, co-operating within the confines of the hub.

The mobile command unit, commissioned with state-of-the-art communications, touch-screen computers, and mapping systems, cost CVGSAR close to \$80,000.

It is unique to the Comox Valley. The CVGSAR can be tasked by any one of a number of organiza-

tions: the RCMP, B.C. Ambulance Service, the Coroner’s Service of British Columbia, Canadian Coast Guard, BC Parks, Parks Canada, the new Independent Investigations office of B.C., as well as the individual municipalities.

“People do not realize that a team like CVGSAR can be asked to go most anywhere in the province ... we often operate in rugged alpine terrain. We also support teams to the north and south of us: Queen Charlotte Islands, Kimberley, North Shore, Squamish, and Pemberton to name a few,” explains Berry.

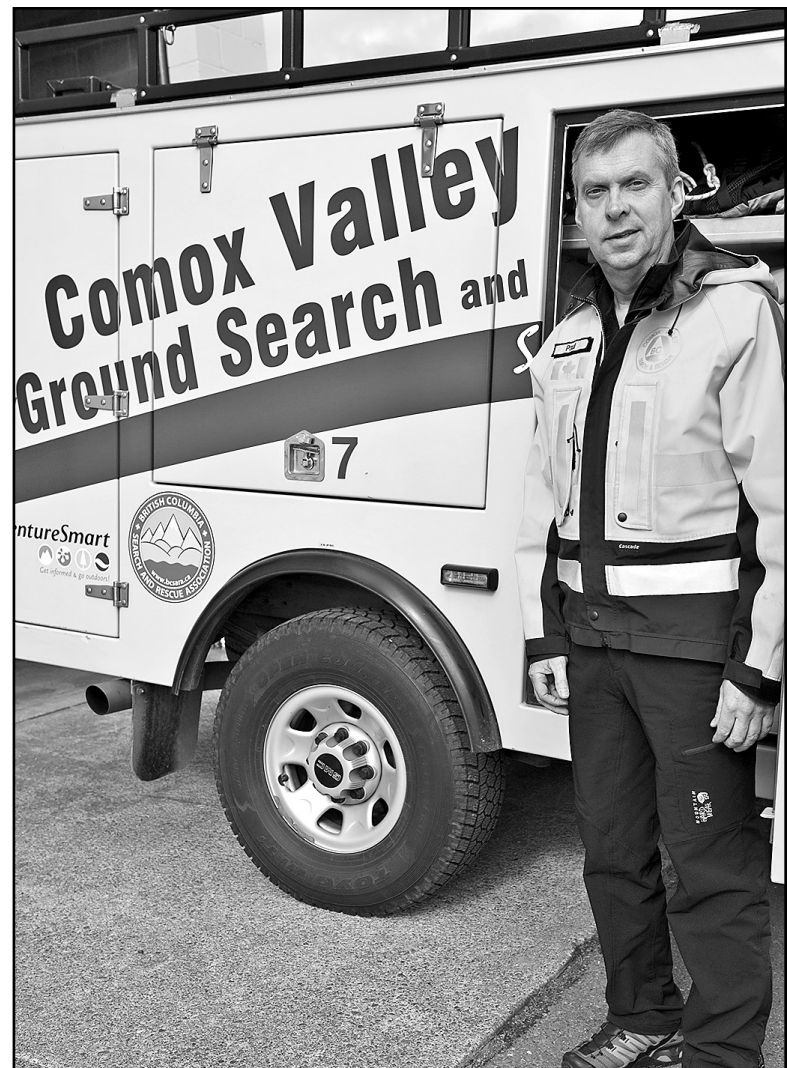
Of 41 tasks last year, they averaged between seven and eight hours and some were multi-day tasks.

Calls can come at any time of the day or week. It is not uncommon for members to respond to a call late in the day or night then return home the next morning in time to shower and go to work.

Besides relying on dedicated volunteers, each task requires equipment — helmets, climbing gear, boats, motors, radios and specialized suits, to name a few. Wear and tear, outdated technology or an expiration date dictates when the equipment needs to be replaced.

The next items to be replaced, in Berry’s opinion, are the avalanche beacons.

“They are close to 10 years old and what exists today is far more efficient,” he says, adding that it would cost about \$5,000 to replace 10 units.



Equipment and training costs money, money that is difficult to come by for most non-profit societies. The CVGSAR receives an annual operating grant through the Comox Valley Regional District. This grant money is made up of amounts contributed by each of the municipalities.

They also produce a local community map that is sold through the Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce. CVGSAR applies for local, provincial and federal grant money where applicable, they sell gift cards for Thrifty Foods, and they hold raffles, such as the current raffle for a Denis Mayer Jr. painting donated by the Comox District Fish & Game Association.

Last year the team, as a unit, spent 18,000 hours attending operations and public events.

When a call comes in, there is always a level of risk. B.C. rescue technicians have perished during rescue operations. The safety of all members is paramount.

Berry recalls the swift-water rescue of a young woman in the Puntledge River. She was trapped on a log midstream at very high water levels. The upstream and downstream hazards presented real danger to the members and to the woman.

After a number of attempts to reach her, CVGSAR called in the 442 Transport and Rescue Squadron (CFB Comox) to hoist her off the log. The danger ceased only when she and all members were safe.

“Men and women volunteer because there is a real sense of service in the team. They arrive no matter the time or the weather,” Berry articulates.

“We are a team but we are also a family.”

Donations are greatly appreciated and recruits are always welcome.

For more information, contact Paul Berry at 250-338-5217 or e-mail info@cvgsar.com.

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