

Ruth Hjorth Search 2010 09 19

By: Graig Pearen

Prince George Amateur Radio Club, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Sunday September 19th started with a midnight call-out to some of our members to help with a search for a missing couple near Prince George. A few hours later, our Emergency Communication Trailer and staff were requested to assist with a search for 83 year old Ruth Hjorth in a remote off-grid location north west of Quesnel. Bill, VE7WBF and Graig, VE7EAP were the only two who were readily available at that time.

The trip took us south to Quesnel where we crossed the Fraser River then headed north and west on muddy logging roads to the Hjorth ranch, also known locally as Grannie's Ranch. Navigation assistance over the 256km route was provided by friends following our progress using APRS (www.aprs.fi) and relaying instructions over the repeater network. APRS is a system developed by Amateur Radio (Ham Radio) people that uses GPS, radios, mountain top repeaters (digipeaters), and internet gateways (I-gate) to plot our location on Google Maps.

When we arrived at about 10PM, the SAR people had gone home for the night so we made contact with the family, set up camp, tested the radios, and went to bed in the trailer. The Salvation Army mobile kitchen arrived at about midnight.



The work days started at 07:00 when the SAR people started arriving and continued until well after dark when the searchers had left for the day. The primary task for the next two days was to maintain communication with the ten or more search teams in the field using the commercial radios in our trailer. We handled the radio communication between the search managers and the search teams in the field as well as the RCMP dog team, a fixed wing aircraft, a rented helicopter, and the RCMP helicopter with the FLIR equipment. We used the Amateur Radio repeater network to talk to several Prince George Amateurs to exchange messages with the PREOC (Provincial Regional Emergency Operations Centre) in Prince George, the Salvation Army, and other resources.

At times it was very busy. Chatter on the repeater network made it necessary to turn down the volume so we could hear the SAR radio clearly. At one point, we forgot that the 2M radio was turned down which caused a delay in getting a message from Prince George to the search site. We have developed a plan to prevent this error in the future.

Radio operators Bill and Graig plus Paul, the Salvation Army cook, stayed on-site, sleeping in the PGARC trailer. Searchers came from Quesnel, Williams Lake, Prince George, and Vanderhoof. Search teams were composed of trained searchers working with untrained 'convergent volunteers'. Counting the searchers, the Hjorth family, and their friends and neighbours, there were fifty to sixty people on site each day with a creek for the only water supply and just one outhouse.

Late Tuesday, the official search was called off but family and friends found the deceased lady the next day.



Left to right: Quesnel SAR vehicle & tents, PGARC emergency communication trailer & tow vehicle



The search camp site on the Hjorth Ranch

More information about the Prince George Amateur Radio Club emergency response and community event activities is available at www.pgarc.org.