

WESTMAN^{this} week

A weekly publication of the Brandon Sun

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A pilot is seen in the cockpit of a Hercules aircraft flying over Westman during recent training exercises held by the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association. (Supplied)

Westman hosts air search and rescue teams

BY CONNOR MCDOWELL
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE

Civilian search and rescue volunteers from around western Canada came to Brandon last week for a large training exercise that involved fake crash sites and simulated casualties.

About 78 people participated this year in the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) western Canadian search and rescue exercise. The event was hosted at the Brandon airport, with volunteers flying out to find roughly half a dozen simulated crash sites in the area, running drone exercises and some taking a ride on a Hercules plane.

Dave Simms, a volunteer search and rescuer out of Calgary, told the Sun that he took part in two exercises.

In the first exercise, Simms said his team flew from the Brandon airport and along a flight path in Westman, looking for signs of wreckage.

When they spotted a simulated crash site, his team radioed the news to headquarters and were directed to land at the Virden Regional Airport, he said. The team then drove to the site and were first to arrive, dealing with actors who pretended to be wounded.

“You know that it’s all acting, but I will tell you that when people are moaning on the ground and screaming in pain, you start to think about, ‘Yeah, I don’t want anybody to die on my watch,’” Simms said.

Some people were treated with makeup and feigned injuries at the simulated crash scenes, and acted like they had been part of the wreck.

“It’s funny. You know it’s fake, but you feel like it could be real, or you might someday be in a situation where this is exactly the real situation.”

Simms said the exercises were very well organized by the team in Brandon. The team drew two important lessons from them, he said.

For one, he said that the local team in Calgary needs to take a page from Brandon’s book and build stronger co-operation with local police and ground crews. Secondly, he said he learned the importance of training for being first-on-scene; because during the exercises, he saw what it

was like to have urgency cooked into the situation.

“Afterwards, our leader said, ‘Wow, that was intense.’ And it was.”

Volunteers from Nunavut, Saskatchewan, and other parts of Manitoba were involved as well. Seven teams came out of the province, said Lana Carnegie, the Manitoba director of the civilian association.

“It went really well,” Carnegie said. “The timing was great on all the flights and people going out. It was a lot of work. Everyone did what they were supposed to do, and the teams worked together so well. I think as long as everyone was happy with what they participated in, it’s a win.”

CASARA teams have to re-certify every 18 months, said Carnegie. Part of that means they have to keep up their skills and techniques to stay functional, and these practice exercises aid that, she said.

The search and rescue exercise is a way to bring different teams together to spread information, CASARA Manitoba president Mark Webster said. People learn and update their skills, while sharing information with other teams that may do things a different way, he said.

“There’s a whole bunch of knowledge and exchanging of information that happened over the weekend,” Webster said. “All those people are now taking that back home and hopefully building that into their training programs going forward.”

Because terrains vary across Canada, people can learn from each other when they come to together, Webster said. In the prairies, the flat land gives people experience searching in terrains they are not used to, he said. It’s one way that people gain experience travelling for the work, he said.

“People that are coming from places that have mountains come to places like Manitoba and go, ‘Wow, it’s flat here, you know,’” Webster said. “And it gives different context to the work that they do, and they can take that back home with them and share it.”

Carnegie said that the volunteer groups are always looking for more members and she encouraged anyone interested to reach out to the Brandon team.

»cmcdowell@brandonsun.com



Cathy Stevenson, a spotter, organizes a team of civilian search and rescue volunteers before the day of exercises begins. (Connor McDowell/The Brandon Sun)



LEFT: A simulated crash scene outside Brandon is marked by a blue “X,” and strewn tarps and cardboard. The scene helped civilian search and rescue volunteers practise during a weekend conference for Western Canada. (Supplied)

ABOVE: An aircraft sees the light of the morning as it is rolled out onto the tarmac ahead of CASARA exercises in Brandon. (Connor McDowell/The Brandon Sun)