

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Guard Black Hawk crew support search and rescue training

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Demonstrating the value the National Guard brings to local communities, a Wisconsin Army National Guard helicopter crew recently took part in a collaborative first responder search and rescue training exercise in southern Lincoln County.

According to Maj. Don Graham, commander of the West Bend, Wisconsin-based Army Aviation Support Facility #1, the Jan. 14 missing persons training scenario involved ground teams from the Trail Ambassador Program — part of a national organization promoting recreational vehicle and trail use — and representatives from the Merrill Fire Department, Russell Fire Department, Lincoln County Sheriff's Department, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

"Teams got a chance to work on air-ground communications and development of a common operating picture for coordinating search efforts," Graham explained. "Our aircrew benefitted from the live 'targets' at the search location, which allowed them to use our forward-looking infrared system during the search."

Forward-looking infrared is a thermal imaging camera that detects infrared radiation, normally from a heat source, and can display that information as video imagery.

Adam Harden, deputy administrator of the Sheboygan-based Trail Ambassador Program, said the Black Hawk crew found the missing persons — two lost fishermen without cell phones, in the scenario — within 10 minutes of beginning their search. This was much faster than the ground search conducted in the morning by crews covering a large remote area with all-terrain vehicles without the benefit of thermal

imaging.

Harden said they used a drone to simulate the Black Hawk during the morning training scenario. The Russell Fire Department assisted in a simulated extraction with their tracked utility terrain vehicle (UTV).

“The exercise was prolonged without the air assets,” Harden said, “but was a very valuable training for our ground teams. This adjustment was a great chance for command and search-and-rescue teams to think on their feet, and provided for extra radio communications training due to additional movements needed for the search.”

The afternoon scenario was a simulated roll-over accident involving a UTV placed slightly off the trail, making it more difficult for ground rescue teams to locate the victims. The ground teams advanced on the location of the roll-over by heading in the direction of the hovering Black Hawk helicopter and adjusting their GPS coordinates.

“This type of quick response from an air asset is key to future search and rescue emergencies, as it drives the ‘call early’ part home,” Harden said, citing the value of Wisconsin Emergency Management’s air coordination group.

“One phone call is all that’s needed,” Harden said. “While the Black Hawk couldn’t get there right away, once they did they made quick work finding the victims.”

Poor weather kept the Black Hawk from flying earlier in the day, but even that setback proved valuable for its crew. They coordinated with Harden to modify the training, and calculated how much fuel they would have available to conduct training.

“When the aircraft launched, we weren’t sure we could get a hoist demonstration in, but they made it work the best they could with the time available,” Graham said. “The crew was calculating fuel while Sgt. Patrick Blaesing, the medic, worked with the EMS teams on the ground and stayed as long as they could before departing.”

The original training plan called for searching for lost fishermen in the morning, and evacuating an injured trail rider trapped under an overturned recreational vehicle in the afternoon.

Graham said the Black Hawk crew simulated a hoist rescue at the target location so

ground crews could understand the wind and noise associated with such rescues. They also conducted a live hoist demonstration, and trained with local first responders on how to prepare a patient for hoist and air transport, and how to offload a patient from a helicopter for ground transport.

Harden said the hoist demonstration was “fantastic,” as Blaesing was lowered 75 feet from the Black Hawk to render life-saving medical care to the casualty. Once on the ground, he approached the first responders who had a training dummy to simulate the casualty requiring a medical evacuation. Responders learned how to prevent the litter-bound casualty from spinning as they were hoisted up to the Black Hawk.

“The morning search was impacted by weather, but overall it was a very successful training event,” Graham said.