

SEARCH AND RESCUE COMPETITION

Reginans find a win in The Pas

By JULIE FOLK
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Four Regina pilots soared above the competition in the annual Western Canada competition for volunteer search and rescue teams.

Pilot Keith Bjorndahl, navigator Clarence Demchuk and spotters Pat Hume and Rick Barks made up the Saskatchewan Civil Air Search and Rescue Association team from Regina.

The four took part in the annual SAREX competition held at The Pas, Man., on the July 1 long weekend, coming out on top of the other nine teams in a judged search and rescue mission.

The team members are four of 30 volunteers that make up Zone 8, one of Saskatchewan's CASARA zones.

Each member must participate in a minimum amount of training hours, according to position.

"The navigator and pilot have the duty to keep us on course and the spotters are the eyes of the crew," explained Clarence Demchuk, navigator of the winning team.

"I'd rate the team at about 97 per cent," Demchuk added about the team relationship.

Demchuk described the competition, which required the nine teams to find targets placed at various locations, deliver a survival kit and complete in-flight and ground homing missions.

Teams were judged on finding the targets, which were floating in the water, in the bush, and sometimes took the form of flashing mirrors and parts of old airplanes. One target was an ultra-light float plane hidden behind an island.

Also judged was map work, accuracy, safety briefings, safety features of the aircraft and equipment carried.

The annual competition allows teams to challenge each other, improve skills and enhance practice.

"It was very rewarding from the perspective of utilizing the training that we do in a larger group operation," said Demchuk.

He said he didn't know how well his team would do, for all train independently and he wasn't sure who else would attend, but added that "everyone did what they were supposed to do and it went very well."

The Regina team found eight of 10 targets, and had the best time in the homing mission.

CASARA teams operate under the Canadian Armed Forces and the federal government, responding to RCMP missing persons cases and missing aircraft.

Saskatchewan responds to about 35 calls a year, primarily for the RCMP, said Tom Ray, training officer at the Regina Flying Club.

"We haven't had any major missing aircraft searches like they get in Alberta and B.C., because Saskatchewan is so flat, you can see them from miles away," said Ray.

If an aircraft began to rapidly decelerate, the emergency locator transmitter would send off a signal to a satellite. The signal would then be sent to a Joint Rescue Command Centre in Victoria, Trenton or Halifax.

The centre would then speak to, if it required a Saskatchewan search team, the dispatch in La Ronge. A local task force would then be sent out.