

CASARA volunteers train with Hercules aircraft

This touring reporter donned headphones and boarded a National Defense Hercules aircraft joining Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) volunteers on a spotter training mission to Stony Rapids March 4.

The Hercules is stationed in Winnipeg and geared to air search and rescue across the three Prairie provinces, the Northwest Territories and parts of Nunavut.

On the first leg of our trip 15 CASARA members and this reporter flew directly to Stony Rapids. Standing in the cockpit of the plane gave me a wonderful view of the countryside below.

I learned the Hercules, better known as Herc for short, is one of the largest aircrafts owned and operated by the Canadian military. Flying at a height of just over 11,000 ft, it seemed the aircraft was suspended above ground, while, in fact, we were moving at speeds of just over 300 nautical miles per hour, or more than 500 km/hour.

The pilot, Capt. Kashe Bryngelson has over six years experience flying the Herc; Bryngelson say, he likes flying the Herc because of it's flexibility – you never know what you will be doing, or where you will be going, he said. This particular Herc, one of approximately 32 belong to National Defence Canada, is just 17 years old, while many of the aircrafts are closer to 40; the aircraft is usually used for air search and rescue training, but, may, at any time, be called into service in an actual search and rescue mission.

Normally the Herc has a five-person crew, a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, flight engineer and second navigator. For this training event the Herc had two other crew members, a Search and Resuce Technician (SARTECH) and an instructor.

The crew members for the Herc were: Bryngelson, Capt. Corey Csada, co-pilot; Capt. Jeff Huner, navigator; Capt. Vince Otterson, flight engineer; Warrant officer Barry Neeve, second navigator; Captain Scuz (yes, his complete name) Loadmaster and Master Corporal Dietz. Master Corp. Ernie Whelan, SARTECH and Capt. Ben Toenders, CASARA Liaison Officer. The Herc and crew are based in Winnipeg.

The Herc is equipped with emergency equipment for the use of the crew, but on an actual search and rescue mission, the plane would hold all the equipment needed for the mission, such as parachutes, medical equipment, tents and toboggans.

The Herc could at any time be called into action in a search and rescue mission, the people on board would either be taken along or left at another site until the mission's completed and they would be returned home, in our case back to La Ronge.



The Hercules aircraft rolls onto the tarmac at the La Ronge Airport March 4.



Capt. Ben Toenders assists CASARA volunteer Tonia Logan with spotting training during exercises between La Ronge and Stony Rapids March 4.

At Stony Rapids some of us left the aircraft while CASARA members from Stony Rapids boarded the Herc and completed training exercises before returning.

We again boarded the Herc and headed back to La Range.

On the return flight from Stony Rapids, each of the CASARA members participated in "spotter" training; this reporter also had the opportunity to sit in the spotter seat.

The Herc is equipped with two doorways on either side of the plane near the rear, the doorways are covered with plexiglass; the plexiglass is designed to bubble out from the side of the aircraft. There is a seat, which can be manoevered back and forth, in which a spotter sits. For the training purposes, each spotter is given a landmark on the horizon and requested to direct the pilot, through the headphone/speaker communication equipment, to bring the aircraft on top of the target.

The spotter is required to sit as far forward as possible, with knees against the plexiglass in order to keep the target in view.

The exercise gives CASARA members experience in an aspect of search and rescue operations they may be called to carry out.

According to Ron Pratt, fire chief for the Town of La Ronge and a CASARA member, the spotter training is done regularly with the use of smaller aircrafts and approximately every 18 months to two years with the Herc.

CASARA members from the La Ronge area, which is part of Zone 2, could be called on to assist with search and rescue operations within the area which extends from the north side of Prince Albert to half-way up South Indian Lake; they could also be called into the more northerly part of the province as there are not enough volunteers in the north to maintain a unit, said Rusty Gardiner, the unit's commander.

CASARA has 26 units in the area, which includes Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, the Northwest Territories and part of Nunavut, Toender's said.

The military is in control of all search and rescue operations, he said.

"These CASARA units are volunteers, but they fall under us. We have to make sure they have the training to be certified," he said, adding the members could be called upon to take part in a search at any time as long as it's known there are spotters in the area.

The volunteers are valuable to CASARA, Toenders said.

"The annual budget for CASARA is \$2.7 million, but they (the volunteers) save the military \$10 million annually," he said.

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