



Wiltshire Search and Rescue

by Adrian Edwards and Sean Caine

Wiltshire Search and Rescue (UK)

The advice and support we had received during the Public Safety Cycling seminar in London was still fresh in our minds. The plans were beginning to take shape and the opinions of the sceptics were slowly beginning to change. It had taken many months of research and work to convince people that searching on mountain bikes was both effective and viable. All that was needed now was the chance to demonstrate to the sceptics that the police would agree to use the bike team on a search.

We did not have to wait too long. The call was received one Saturday morning to assist Wiltshire Police in the search for a despondent male. The initial brief indicated that the missing person had been reported missing on a previous occasion and had been located near an area known as Savernake Forest. The SAR team was deployed in two areas: the foot team to Clouts Wood and the bike team to Savernake Forest.

The bike team then deployed to the designated area where the size of the task became apparent. How do you effectively search 4500 acres of mixed woodland with just one bike team? Clearly the team were to face a baptism of fire.

It was decided to divide the forest into four sectors, each of which had many paths and tracks running through it. Each sector was to have the tracks searched by the team carrying out a "hasty route and path" search. This involves riding the tracks whilst searching inwards a distance of five meters. Where vision was restricted by foliage, the team would dismount and search on foot those areas they identified as in need of more detailed examination.

The team checked their bikes, loaded their kit, listened to their briefing and began to search.

The bike team deployed with minimum numbers, but were still able to fulfil the normal team tasks: Team Leader/Radio Operator, Navigator/Medic. The task was to search the extremities of the search areas. We were able to "route and path" the route out to our areas and feed back a rough indication of what the ground was like to the control and foot search teams.

Because the Savernake Forest is predominately comprised of manmade woods, we had good fields of view into about 40 metres off the tracks, enhanced by standing up on the pedals. The riders' skills enabled us to ride across the sectors by riding cross country down the forest runs; however, this blocked our angle bar-mounted GPS coverage. Other problems encountered were communication coverage; because of the distance covered and the density of the forest, we had to revert to mobile phones.

One point of interest to control and the police was a house with a series of outbuildings. On arrival we could de-brief that the house had been unoccupied for some time. We dismounted from the bikes and reverted to a normal foot patrol. Although we did not enter the building, we arranged to mark the entries though the wood and escort the police in to do a follow-up search if necessary. This opened our eyes to a potential new and growing ability of the bike team – route-marking and short-distance vehicle escorting.

The second search area presented us with a totally different set of challenges.

The task was to ride the perimeter of a search area which included both roads and tracks. The initial road was single track climbing steadily over a vertical gain of about 30 meters. Despite the fact that the first search had been a hard ride lasting more than four hours, the one team member who took part in both areas maintained a good pace throughout.

The climb was ridden at quite a steady pace with the team maintaining a good formation. When we came to the track, however, we encountered whole new set of problems. The first part was relatively easy



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going, but then the track became a very narrow, steep-sided gully, which meant we would have to be very careful both how we rode it and how effectively we searched. The decision was taken that one rider would ride the gully and the others would ride either side at the top of the banking.

This proved to be both the most effective and the safest as part way down, one rider was forced to dismount and walk his bike over a particularly hazardous series of obstacles. The remainder of the sector comprised narrow tracks with overhanging branches and ground level debris. The team were forced to dismount on several occasions to search dense undergrowth but these efforts all proved fruitless.

Upon returning to the ICP the bike team debriefed to the Search Controller and took a well earned break before tackling the next task, which was to search a series of paths to the north of a public park leading to a motorway bridge. The team quickly set about their search with a renewed sense of hope in finding the missing person.

This time the paths were wide with few obstacles to avoid. It took about fifteen minutes to ride the paths, and upon reaching the motorway bridge, the team decided to conduct a dismounted search around the bridge to check for any signs of track. None were found. The team then returned to the ICP, dismounting on several occasions to check dense areas of undergrowth.

Back at the ICP all the searchers were de-briefed by the Search Controller and the decision to abandon the search for the day was taken by the Police Search Advisor.

So it was that Wiltshire Search and Rescue team had deployed its bike team for the first time in support of Wiltshire Constabulary. All members of Wiltshire Search and Rescue are unpaid volunteers who give their time freely to assist in the search for missing persons.

Adrian and Sean are both members of Wiltshire Search and Rescue, a lowland search team in England. The team is a registered charity in the UK and more information can be found at www.wilsar.org.uk. Adrian can be reached at an.am@bopenworld.com and Sean can be reached at sean_caine@hotmail.com.

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