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Flying to the RESCUE

JEREMY FRANCHUK

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF CASARA LETHBRIDGE

Since 2014, the volunteers of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) Lethbridge have been on call to serve as eyes in the sky when emergencies transpire.

IN CANADA, air search and rescue operations are primarily the responsibility of the Canadian Armed Forces. Aircrews operating out of Winnipeg and Trenton are responsible for an area of more than 10 million square kilometres, including Ontario, Quebec, the three prairie provinces, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, as well as Hudson's Bay, James Bay, and the Canadian Great Lakes and the Arctic Ocean. Covering such a vast territory and ensuring a rapid response to emergencies can be both challenging and costly, which is where CASARA comes in.



C130 Hercules arriving
at Lethbridge Airport



Left Photo: CASARA members of Zone 1 Lethbridge preparing to board a C130 Hercules for Military Spotter Training.

Top Right Photo: CASARA members engage in flight exercise on Hercules Spotter training day.

Middle Right Photo: A SarTech checking a crash victim in a mock exercise created by CASARA Lethbridge.

Bottom Right Photo: SarTechs preparing to assist injured person in a mock exercise.

"The military money using large operations. They discovered it to get civilians to help because they says Sandi Blakely, Zone Commander, CASARA Lethbridge. "Plus, using small planes means we can fly lower and get there a lot faster."

was spending a lot of planes on search and rescue would be to everyone's benefit know their own backyards better,"

CASARA Canada is a national not-for-profit organization with 59 active zones across Canada, with representation in every province and territory. Alberta is divided into six zones, with Lethbridge being the newest. Previously, the Lethbridge zone (which covers an area roughly from Vulcan to the U.S border and from B.C. to Saskatchewan) was the responsibility of CASARA Calgary, but local sport flyer Martin Nordstrom saw an opportunity to change that.

"I attended a fly-in breakfast in Medicine Hat in 2010 with some CASARA people from Calgary and decided to see if we could reorganize it here," says Martin, founding Zone Commander and current Vice President of CASARA Lethbridge. "Being a recreational flyer is a great privilege, and I was always looking for a way to give back. This is a way to actually put some of those skills to work to actually go and help people."

However, starting a local CASARA Zone isn't as simple or as easy as filling out an application.

"To become a functional zone, you need to have trained spotters, navigators and pilots," explains Martin. "We started from scratch, but after two years we had enough people trained that we passed a zone evaluation and were certified."

Initially, CASARA Lethbridge was made up of 13 volunteers mainly drawn from the ranks of the Lethbridge Sport Flyers. Today, that number has grown to include 32 volunteers ready to take to the skies.

All CASARA volunteers start off as spotters, the training for which requires three hours of classroom time and two flights for certification.

"You're looking a mile out for anything that shouldn't be there like trees

All CASARA volunteers start off as spotters, the training for which requires three hours of classroom time and two flights for certification.

being knocked down, a fire, anything that looks out of place," explains Sandi.

From there, a spotter can complete further training to become a navigator with the responsibilities of planning out flight plans, search patterns and fuel use, and for directing the aircraft in flight. This means an additional four hours of classroom time and four hours in the air. Pilots are required to have at least 200 hours in the air as well as to undergo spotter and navigator training. CASARA members also have opportunities to participate in military training, including regional and national search and rescue exercises. In addition to supporting training, the military pays for the costs of CASARA aircraft flight times, which still represents a significant cost saving compared to the cost of operating a military helicopter or Hercules aircraft.

Beyond the cost savings, Sandi says having a local organization responsible for search and rescue operations has other advantages.

"It's peace of mind for a pilot going out, that if something goes wrong


there's a better chance of them being found than if they depended just on the military," she mentions. "We can be up in the air in an hour, so we save a lot of time."

Initially, emergency calls are routed through the military's Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC), which calls the relevant CASARA zone, whose volunteers fly into action. To date, CASARA Lethbridge has responded to five alerts triggered by Emergency Locator Transmitters (ELT) installed in all aircraft, and a missing person search near Medicine Hat. One of those alerts happened at the recent Lethbridge Air Show, a false alarm that provided a bonus training opportunity for CASARA Lethbridge.

"One of the military helicopters at the air show forgot to disable their ELT and it went off and was reported to the JRCC in Trenton and we got the call," recalls Nordstrom. "We had two groups walking across the tarmac with our locaters and they found it at exactly the same time."

Having established a strong volunteer base, Martin says the next step for CASARA is getting involved in more operations. He explains that the organization has signed a memorandum of understanding with Lethbridge Police Services, and is looking at working with CASARA's on-the-ground equivalent, the Lethbridge and Area Search and Rescue Association (LASARA).

"We're trying to reach out to other organizations where we can be useful and help raise awareness and foster relationships," says Martin. "We want to combine forces so we can hit a search with better coordination and as much resources as we can put into it."

Residents of Southern Alberta can be at ease knowing there are groups like CASARA watching the skies. 

Visit www.casara lethbridge.com
for more information, or to become a CASARA volunteer.