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Chair

The Honourable Maxime Bernier

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• (1535)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Maxime Bernier (Beauce, CPC)): Good day everyone and welcome to the 27th meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence. Pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2) and to the motion passed by the committee on Monday, February 23, 2009, we continue today our study of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

[English]

We have with us two witnesses. We have with us Mr. John R. Davidson, president of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association. We also have with us Colonel P. Drover, director of air force readiness and chief of air staff, from the Department of National Defence.

Thank you both for being with us.

We will start with Mr. Davidson, for seven minutes.

Mr. John R. Davidson (President, Civil Air Search and Rescue Association): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Civil Air Search and Rescue Association, or CASARA, was established in 1986 as a Canada-wide volunteer association dedicated to the promotion of aviation safety and the provision of air search support services to the national search and rescue program. Our volunteers use their own aircraft or vehicles to provide this service and are reimbursed for their expenses.

CASARA is funded by a contribution agreement through Treasury Board and managed by DND. The contribution agreement is a five-year agreement outlining the services to be provided and the funding authorized for those services.

CASARA provides annual financial statements reviewed by our auditor. To date, all financial statements are unqualified and without opinion. This speaks very well of a volunteer organization that is managing public funds today.

We have member organizations in every province and territory. Our membership this past fiscal year was approximately 2,997, and members have contributed approximately 124,701 hours in volunteer time, training, and hosting safety seminars. Across this country, our volunteers have also participated in 254 actual SAR missions and 137 air and 117 ground taskings, involving some 4,577 volunteer hours.

These volunteers actively augment the Canadian Forces primary search and rescue assets during SAR missions by supplying spotters from military search aircraft and by providing pilots, navigators,

spotters, and aircraft when called upon to do so by any of the three joint rescue coordination centres in Canada. We also aid local police and emergency management organizations with humanitarian assistance in looking for lost persons.

CASARA is managed by a volunteer board of 13 members. They are elected from each member organization in the country. This board is responsible for setting policy, managing our financial responsibilities, and setting training standards. The board meets twice a year to fulfill these responsibilities for our day-to-day running. The four-member board executive that is charged with the responsibility meets four times a year or as otherwise needed.

CASARA has developed our own training programs based upon the national SAR manual. Along with these training programs, we have set training standards and currency standards that our volunteers must meet before being authorized to work on actual SAR missions. We have developed certain training courses for each of our pilot, navigator, spotter, and search coordinator roles.

In order to be successful, CASARA uses a structure that breaks each member organization into zones and areas as needed. CASARA has approximately 104 zones across the country. A zone is the level at which all operations occur. Our certification, training, currency, and crewing all occur there. To ensure that each zone is compliant with our training certification and currency requirements, DND evaluates each zone. Our CASARA liaison officers assigned from the SAR squadrons are given this responsibility. On average, we successfully pass our zone evaluations approximately 97% of the time, and the other 3% are successful with immediate retraining.

We have developed an electronic computer-based CASARA management system to retain all of our data regarding our volunteers, their training records, and their currency status. As we work with a rolling 365 currency period, our volunteers' currency is continually being monitored, and training is adjusted to match the training needed. Appropriate courses are scheduled to ensure that everyone is provided the opportunity to maintain their currency.

All CASARA volunteers are certified to ensure that a high level of service can be provided to the Canadian Forces, but also to ensure that those in need have high-quality professionals searching for them. CASARA volunteers willingly agree to participate in searches where environments are challenging.

One of CASARA's greatest contributions to the Canadian Forces SAR assets is the local knowledge that pilots, navigators, spotters, ground personnel, and coordinators have of their respective areas. Our members might know of an airplane in an area, so that if an emergency locator transmitter alarms, we would have a good idea of where to look. This local knowledge may have the effect of quickly ending a search or allowing Canadian Forces aircraft to not participate, thereby reducing the workload on the SAR squadrons.

• (1540)

CASARA has developed an insurance program to provide protection for our volunteers. This program covers liability, accidents, injury on duty, and secondary aircraft hull insurance. This program will ensure that our volunteers are not left to their own resources, should they be injured during the course of their missions.

Complementing our insurance program are workers compensation boards. In almost all provinces and territories, our volunteers are recognized as emergency services workers, thus allowing the WCB in a province or territory to provide financial support should an unfortunate incident occur. We are still negotiating with one or two provinces or territories who are still reluctant to provide this coverage, even though the federal government will ultimately cover 75% of the cost of any claims.

The chief of review services, DND'S internal program auditor, has recently completed an audit of the CASARA program within DND. The chief determined that CASARA is a cost-effective program that saves both funds and scarce DND equipment and personnel resources. For example, since 2005 the cost of CASARA in support of SAR has been \$85.20 per hour in the Halifax search and rescue region; \$65.82 per hour in the Trenton search and rescue region; and \$447.51 in the Victoria search and rescue region.

CASARA is involved in approximately 25% of the SAR cases, and we were reimbursed approximately \$1 million for these efforts. However, if DND had performed these operations without the benefit of our CASARA volunteers and their aircraft, it would have cost about \$30 million. These figures alone demonstrate the value the CASARA volunteer program brings to the SAR program. The cost of the CASARA program is 1.9% of the DND program costs for SAR.

Throughout the report, those interviewed rated the CASARA program as either indispensable or very relevant, which is a very positive endorsement of a civilian volunteer organization.

In fiscal years 2005 to 2009, we participated in 32 actual SAR incidents in the Arctic and Northwest Territories, 11 of them on the ground, for 1,250 hours of volunteer time; in Nunavut, in 20 air incidents, two of them on the ground, for 1,400 hours in total; and in the Yukon, in nine air incidents, four of them on the ground, for a total of 226 hours.

So we are available. We are out there and can provide any assistance that DND or emergency measures organizations request of us.

Thanks for the opportunity to present the story of CASARA.

Your questions will follow, I assume.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Davidson.

Now we'll give the floor to Mr. Drover, please.

Colonel P. Drover (Director, Air Force Readiness, Chief of Air Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

I was asked to speak today about search and rescue in the north. I'll start with a brief presentation on CF roles, responsibilities, and posture, and show you the activity rates we have recorded in recent years. I will be referring to search and rescue as SAR during my presentation.

I should mention there are multiple organizations and agencies involved in SAR response. The Canadian Forces and Canadian Coast Guard are responsible for aircraft and vessels in distress within coastal and marine waters. Parks Canada is responsible for lost and missing persons within national park boundaries. Each territory has the mandate for ground SAR—that is, the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, respectively. Volunteers play a significant role, as Mr. Davidson just pointed out. We rely heavily on CASARA to assist in our SAR operations.

I'd like to refer now to the slide deck I provided you, and I'm just going to make some brief comments on the various slides. The first one is entitled "Search and Rescue Regions and MRSC Locations". We have three rescue coordinating centres serving Canada, depicted here at Victoria, Trenton, and Halifax. The area we're talking about includes offshore waters as well. We have 15 million square kilometres of area we are responsible for in search and rescue. This area essentially runs from the U.S. border to the North Pole, and 1,100 kilometres west of Vancouver and 1,600 kilometres east of Newfoundland. Three of our centres are co-manned by Canadian Forces and Canadian Coast Guard personnel, who are highly trained in search and rescue operations.

A SAR operation will start with notification. Notification passed to any of these rescue coordinating centres will trigger a series of events that ultimately will conclude with a successful or unsuccessful SAR mission, depending. Notification will come from various sources, such as NavCan, next of kin, or emergency locator transmitters, ELTs. I can elaborate on these later, if required.

The coordinating centres will task the most appropriate asset. It may be a Canadian Forces aircraft; it could be a coast guard vessel; and the navy may be involved, and other government department assets too, such as Transport Canada, and provincial and territorial assets. We often charter commercial helicopters, if they are the most logical and convenient resource to use. We use CASARA, as mentioned, and the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary. Often there's more than one search and rescue asset tasked in any particular search.

The next chart shows you where our bases are located. We're across the country, from Comox in the west to Gander in Newfoundland. We have primary bases, where our aircraft are on standby 24 hours, seven days a week; and we have secondary capability, such as at Cold Lake, Bagotville, and Goose Bay, where we have some search and rescue capability.

The next chart will show you the primary SAR aircraft resources we now employ and where they are based. These aircraft are all specially equipped for SAR operations, with electronic capability as well as air-dropable rescue equipment, such as pumps, rafts, medical supplies, and shelter; and the load can be tailored depending on the mission specifications. Each aircraft is crewed, in addition to the pilots, of course, with two SAR techs—search and rescue technicians—who are trained in advance trauma, life support, land and sea survival, and specialized rescue techniques, including Arctic rescue, parachuting, diving, and mountain climbing. They're the full rescue capability.

The next chart I'd like to speak to briefly is of the COSPAS/SARSAT system. The notification of an incident is the key to SAR response. Back in the early eighties, Canada was one of the founding member nations to develop COSPAS/SARSAT. Essentially it's a satellite-based detection system for distress beacons. Since we've used SARSAT and COSPAS, we have substantially reduced search times, because we get very rapid location and information, allowing us to pick the appropriate SAR response.

Quite recently, we've actually improved the capability of the COSPAS/SARSAT system, as we converted to 406 megahertz technology, a digital capability with beacons, which now gives us very precise location and very quick alerting capability, and a number of details about the registration of the aircraft and the number of people involved. It helps us greatly in planning the initial stages of any search operation.

• (1545)

As an example, a twin-engine airplane crashed in Iqaluit in December with two people on board. They were both saved. We got a 406 alert, which triggered the system and gave us vital information that allowed us to do a very prompt and quick search and rescue operation.

The next chart is on MAJAID, or major air response capability. It's for an airline-sized air disaster in a remote area. We have pre-prepared and ready-for-dispatch MAJAID kits that contain shelters, provisions, and medical supplies. They're rigged for immediate dispatch and can be rapidly deployed and aerially delivered to the scene of the crash.

The MAJAID kits themselves are just one component of our major air disaster capability. Initially we would launch our primary aircraft, which have some capability to provide shelter and medical aid to people on the ground. We'd follow with MAJAID kits. We'd deploy a forward medical facility, and then we'd start the medical evacuation. We have a plan to support MAJAID that includes not only the military, but territorial responsibilities and other government agencies. Canada is the only nation with such a capability.

In addition to MAJAID, we have caches of survival equipment throughout the north. They contain clothing and shelters, and can be picked up and dispatched to an incident site as required.

The next two slides list statistics on the number of incidents we have recorded by region for a five-year period. The trend has not changed dramatically over the number of years that we've been tracking this data. These are all types of incidents, from false alerts to actual incidents.

The next one, which is more pertinent to our discussion today, shows incidents that have occurred north of 55 for the last five years. We've recorded incidents from the various rescue coordinating centres. These are categories one and two, which means we actually launched SAR assets on the cases. That doesn't necessarily mean they were distresses, but we had no other choice but to launch. You can see that the numbers are fairly small.

Finally is the chart that illustrates incident distribution. Superimposed on that we have our primary source squadrons and secondary squadrons. I think this chart really illustrates that a preponderance of incidents occur where we are based, and there is no particular part of the north where a large number of incidents take place.

Mr. Chairman, I will conclude my remarks there. I look forward to the discussion.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Drover.

Now I will give the floor to Mr. Bryon Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Arctic sovereignty is best if defended with a clear and consistent policy supported by the appropriate resources in order to demonstrate one's national interest and sovereignty.

Mr. Davidson, given the level of Canada's search and rescue program, will it be capable of responding to increasing needs in the coming years? As a volunteer-based organization, if the government came to you for increased assistance, would you be able to provide it?

Mr. John R. Davidson: It would be a challenge, but we have members currently in Resolute Bay, Cambridge Bay, Baker Lake, Rankin Inlet, and Iqaluit, so it would not take any great effort to extend beyond that into the other communities. It would not be easy, because of the size of the Arctic.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: To both gentlemen, I was disturbed to read in the findings of the Senate Committee on National Security and Defence that only half of our surveillance aircraft and rescue helicopters are able to report for duty. Could you comment on that issue of readiness?

Col P. Drover: I can speak to the readiness issue. Our standby posture is maintained 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That does not necessarily mean they're the only aircraft on base. In fact, normally there are backups for those aircraft. The statistics may be misleading, in that the situation doesn't impact on our readiness posture or our level of service delivery. But as in all fleets, maintenance issues pop up from time to time.

• (1555)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Chairman, in 2006, as part of the strategic mandate of SAR, it was stated in regard to northern SAR, "To review existing services and recommend possible adjustments in the approach to SAR service delivery, given increasing activity in the North". Has this occurred within the organization?

The working group was supposed to consist of federal, territorial, and municipal actors when it was formed. It was mandated to produce a report on northern SAR strategy. The mandate included a three-year timetable. Can you give this committee a status report on the report? If the report has been concluded, what are the recommendations?

Col P. Drover: I'm not in a position to respond directly to that question because I'm not totally familiar with the report you're referring to. I certainly did not participate in any interdepartmental discussions.

I will offer, though, that currently, from what we've seen in terms of activity levels, our posture is optimized to provide the maximum capability to the greatest number of incidents in the whole of Canada.

I am familiar with the report we did in 2005, when we looked at basing for our resources. It was concluded at that time that our basing posture is correct as it stands now. That does not necessarily mean that at some time, if the need increases, we would not revisit that. It's part of our responsibility to provide the proper formula for the basing.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Following up on that, how is SAR dealing with the anticipated increase in traffic throughout the Arctic, and how has the response training and mandate been adjusted?

Col P. Drover: Again, I can report that we are aware of some trends in the Arctic that indicate there is going to be more activity both on the ground and in the air. We have not seen, in any of our trend analyses, that this has driven a greater requirement for search and rescue forces.

On another note, in the north we do work with our northern command, with the Rangers, and with CASARA, and we actually do exercises as well in SAR in the north, so I think we're staying attuned to the situation in the north. We are probably well positioned should it be demonstrated that more attention from a SAR perspective is required. Then we would react accordingly.

I also would like to state that it's not the presence of SAR in the north, but the capability in the north, and I think we've demonstrated that we have that capability. The MAJAID is a good example for the airliner scenario. We can respond fairly rapidly to an incident in the north. We are providing SAR coverage.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: On the issue of coordination, one of the recommendations in the Senate report was "...that the Government of

Canada consider Goose Bay, Labrador, as a sub-Arctic staging area for the coordination and support of Coast Guard, fisheries, search and rescue, surveillance and other Arctic activities."

Could either of you gentlemen comment on that?

Col P. Drover: We do have a unit in Goose Bay that performs search and rescue duties. The airfield, of course, is available if we need to base out of there for search and rescue operations. There are no immediate plans that I am aware of that would propose to put a SAR unit per se in Goose Bay at this time.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: In terms of the economic maritime shipping activities in the north, obviously Canadian Forces are going to be required to provide more support, particularly in search and rescue. Where could we beef up planes, personnel, surveillance, and so on, in terms of making sure that we have resources for the future, given some of the current trends in foreign activity and foreign pronouncements with regard to the north?

• (1600)

Col P. Drover: I am not in a position to comment on the surveillance or the sovereignty issue. Strictly from a search and rescue perspective, as I mentioned a little while ago, we continue to make sure that we have the proper basing to support the requirements, and we have not seen changes that would drive any significant change at this time.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

You are up next, Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our two witnesses for their presentations.

My first question is directed to Mr. Davidson and concerns the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association of Manitoba, or CASARA Manitoba. I couldn't help but think of the Minuteman Project where volunteers patrol the Mexican-US border with their guns and rifles to maintain law and order.

Mind you, I am not trying to compare CASARA-Manitoba with the Minuteman Project, but what about proper certification? Did you say that National Defence was responsible for the certification process? I would imagine that a person can't simply take their old 1950s airplane out of its hangar and take to the skies to answer a distress call. I would imagine your pilots must be certified. What does the certification process entail? If an old airplane crashes, we have two problems, not just one.

[English]

Mr. John R. Davidson: Thank you, sir.

No. I guarantee you that we will not become the Minuteman of the north for CASARA Manitoba.

In terms of our certification, we have developed our own training programs in conjunction with the national search and rescue manual. That has been approved and vetted through the Department of National Defence. It's the old scenario, where we as the contractor, if you will, will provide the quality control. The CASARA liaison officers will provide the quality assurance. We ensure ourselves that our members are properly trained. We do our own training. We do our own check rides. We do our own internal reviews of our capabilities.

Each and every member must pass a number of requirements. There's a four-hour requirement for academic training for the navigators, a three-hour for the pilot, and a two-hour for the spotters, for instance. Then each one of them must perform the search patterns we have that were taken from the national SAR manual and must be competent in performing those things.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Do people supply their own equipment? By equipment, I mostly mean the aircraft. Do they supply their own airplane and do they decide to take to the skies? What guarantee do you have that these aircraft have been properly maintained? Could someone possibly fail to keep his aircraft in proper working order and in the process cause a problem?

[English]

Mr. John R. Davidson: No. It's never been an issue with our members. What we've found is that CASARA has generated such a sense of duty, pride, and respect that our members will not bring an aircraft that is poorly maintained.

Transport Canada has the responsibility to maintain the regulations for private aircraft, but we will not allow uncertified airplanes or poorly maintained and unsafe aircraft. It's too much of a risk for us to do that. We have three other members of our association sitting in that airplane. I'm not prepared to risk their lives on something that is of minor cost to maintain properly.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: My next question is directed to both of the witnesses.

Mr. Davidson, you seem to be in a preparatory mode of sorts. We hear a great deal these days about the possibility of privatizing search and rescue operations. I'd also like to get Colonel Drover's opinion on this subject, since many people have told me that SAR responsibility should remain in the hands of the military because not only do its members have more training, they are also dedicated to their work. Yet, others have said to me that perhaps it would be a good idea to privatize search and rescue operations. That would create an opportunity for you to secure a federal government contract for the privatization of such operations. I'm interested in hearing your views on the possible privatization of search and rescue operations.

• (1605)

[English]

Mr. John R. Davidson: I can't speak directly to the privatization of the search and rescue services. However, if the privatization did occur, our members are solely and strictly volunteers, so for us to take on a contract and be responsible, the volunteerism would

disappear, because we then would have a responsibility to be there 24/7. It would change the whole flavour of the organization.

We would still be able to provide our services to a third party if the services were contracted. That would not be our preference, of course, but right now I would not want to see CASARA undertake contract relationships with the federal government to provide that service. It would destroy the current organization the way it is under volunteerism.

The Chair: Colonel Drover.

Col P. Drover: Thank you, sir.

First of all, let me respond to the previous question that John answered. We, the military, are the sponsor of CASARA, and we have every confidence that the membership are very skilled and very capable. What we ask them to do is not out of line. They're not doing certain things that our SAR forces are doing, understandably. What they do with their own equipment and their own time is certainly something that we have found to be very valuable. There's no issue of confidence within our rescue coordinating centres; they will, believe me, task the CASARA if that aircraft or that crew can respond more quickly. It may be not the only one, and they don't do aerial delivery, and they don't do a lot of things, but what they do is tremendously advantageous.

We try to avoid searches. For early detection we use satellite to beacon, but occasionally those measures will fail, and we end up in a search scenario. A search can be a very arduous, difficult exercise, and to have the spotters that they provide to help us search is a tremendous advantage.

The Chair: Thank you.

Allez-y.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Could you provide me with a written response to the privatization question? I think it is a very important question. If the colonel does not have the time to answer right now, I would appreciate it if he could forward a written response to the clerk who could then circulate it to committee members.

[English]

The Chair: If you could just send your answer about privatization to the clerk, we would appreciate that, and the clerk will circulate that to every member.

Thank you very much, Colonel Drover.

Now we'll give the floor to Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both for your presentations.

Colonel Drover, I'm interested in the same question that was previously asked, based on the Canadian Press report that only seven of the 14 Cormorant search and rescue helicopters are available at any given time to be called upon for duty. How would you characterize that? Is it that we only need seven, so we have 14? We don't have enough because we don't have enough capability to keep them flying? What is the situation? How would you characterize it? Are you short of them, or was it designed for seven availability?

Col P. Drover: That's a good question, sir. No, we expect an availability greater than seven. I'm not sure whether when that report was written it was a snapshot or a longer-term issue. There's no question that we've had some difficulty with the availability of the aircraft for a number of reasons. We have taken steps to improve the availability of that fleet, bearing in mind that the more work it does, the more you have to take certain of that number offline for routine maintenance and those sorts of things. Those seven do not represent our daily statistics; they are higher than that. I'm not sure how much higher. It is a challenge for us to improve that to the extent possible.

Mr. Jack Harris: Are you able to give us a report that shows something different from that? This was in the Canadian Press story on June 2. I don't know what it's based on, but are you able to give us a report that shows better numbers than that?

• (1610)

Col P. Drover: I would absolutely give you a report. I can't say, because I don't have the numbers here, what those numbers would be, but if you're asking whether we can provide—

Mr. Jack Harris: Can you supply the committee with one?

Col P. Drover: Absolutely.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

I appreciate that you have to make plans based on your determination of what the needs are, but I do understand that the basic test of need is the number of incidents you have, the number of times you're called upon to provide services. There is, throughout some of the literature that I've been reading, another way of looking at this: it's the kind of emergency you have to deal with, as opposed to the number of actual responses. While the number of incidents in the Arctic, as you've noted here, is relatively small compared to the number of other operations, the response time, the kinds of incidents you could have, and the number of people who could be involved might indeed call for greater or closer capability than you have right now. For example, this may be exceptional, but in 1991 a Canadian Air Force CC-130 Hercules went down, and it took 30 hours to actually get to that particular craft—I know there were bad weather conditions—and that was several miles from Alert. To what extent is the nature of the adversity you might be dealing with an issue when determining how close you should be to a potential disaster?

Col P. Drover: By and large, if you have the worst-case scenario and you place it in a very remote area, it's going to take a certain amount of time to respond. The transit time, the difference between the departure from my base and the actual crash site, may not be the determining factor in all missions.

What's more important, especially when we're talking about major disasters, the MAJAID that I briefed, is that if we located it in the north, for instance, we would lose time, because there's no dedicated aircraft that supports that package. That's an additional aircraft, in addition to our primary SAR aircraft. Those are based in Trenton. That's also where our medical folks are. These kits have to be renewed occasionally, with medical stuff in the kits. So there are all sorts of reasons why it's more efficient to base that there.

In terms of what you would put in the north to cater to a very challenging multi-passenger situation, sometimes having a helicopter might make sense, but sometimes a local commercial helicopter might be more appropriate, depending on the scene.

Just as a brief point on the C-130 crash, in that scenario the weather closed in so rapidly that it would have been a challenge no matter where you were based in the north. As it turned out, we had aircraft overhead of that incident site for hours. When our SAR techs don't jump out of an aircraft.... You almost have to tie them down. So there was a great desire to do something, but they were way beyond their safety margins. When they did do it, it was borderline.

We also, in that particular case, mounted a ground-party search for the aircraft, and we pretty well knew where it was. They also took 30 hours to get there.

I would suggest that was very exceptional—challenging and rather tragic—and unfortunately, it was our own people as well.

Mr. Jack Harris: I'd certainly accept that.

Tell me, you referred to a basing review done in 2005. Could you make a copy of that available to the committee for review?

Col P. Drover: Yes, sir, we can.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

I was interested in your comments. I am, of course, aware of the 444 Squadron in Goose Bay. I was intrigued by your statement that there are no plans to have a SAR unit per se in Goose Bay. I thought it was.

Col P. Drover: The mission is not primarily SAR. They have SAR techs and they have a SAR-equipped helicopter, but they are not in the same posture as Trenton would be, or the coast.

Mr. Jack Harris: So what's the primary mission of 444?

Col P. Drover: They're in support of military operations, but they're available for SAR.

Mr. Jack Harris: But they have the same capabilities now. Those choppers and the SAR techs are as trained and as capable as all of the others.

Col P. Drover: Absolutely, sir. They're the same SAR techs.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

The MAJAID kits you refer to, we've seen a picture here of one or two. I don't know quite how to phrase this. It's great to have kits, but how many injured people or how many passengers or individuals could be managed in a major air disaster or other major disaster?

•(1615)

Col P. Drover: The kits can accommodate shelter and things for 320, plus all the kit that I could provide in three Hercules, a wide-body.

Mr. Jack Harris: So we're talking about a serious response capability.

Col P. Drover: And as I mentioned, it's the only capability of any nation in the world that I'm aware of.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now I will give the floor to Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you both for being here.

First of all, Colonel Drover, the air force refers to SAR as a no-fail mission. Is that a true statement?

Col P. Drover: Absolutely, sir.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So failure is not acceptable.

On the privatization question—and I'll ask this of either one or both of you—can you describe the command and control challenge you would have with CASARA or a similar organization in trying to manage a privatized SAR capability? It doesn't have to be a long answer.

Col P. Drover: Thank you for the offer.

Actually, the whole privatization of SAR has been looked at before—some portions of it, all of it, none of it—and the way it's established right now, with the network of players, the coordination centres, the dedicated units, I would speculate that the private corporations could replicate some, if not all of it, but I think it would be prohibitively costly to do it that way.

One of the things the military offers to this kind of mission is that we have depth. We can sustain operations and it doesn't cost any more. It's an expensive proposition, the command and control aspects of it. Again, it's extensive and in-depth, and it's coordinated. It would be interesting and difficult to develop a concept for a capable privatized SAR that's less expensive than what we have right now.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: The preponderance of incidents, of course, happened south of 55, as you've said, with 67 incidents out of 8,500 north of 55. Can you comment on the impact on the 99% of incidents in the south that would potentially occur if we were to permanently station assets north of 55 to handle the less than 1% of incidents that occur up there?

Col P. Drover: There are two approaches to that. If we were to add additional resources, that wouldn't have much impact on the south, but it would have a significant impact on the costs associated with SAR. It's not inexpensive to establish a 24 and 7 operation given the training requirement and the crewing requirement.

If we're looking, instead, to move a base from south to north, then what you'll find is that the aircraft stationed in the north will be going longer distances to the south to respond to the same incidents that they are now capable of responding to. That's the fundamental premise for our basing: where we can get the most response to the

most incidents in the least amount of flying time. It would increase the transit time in a number of incidents, more so than the ones that would be shortened.

If you look at the Arctic, there's no real good place that speaks to a logical place, because, if you notice, the dot plot puts it throughout the Arctic.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: There's some talk of moving resources from Gander—I'm talking Cormorants—permanently to St. John's. Can you comment on the operating differences between Gander and St. John's?

Also, I think some people may be under the impression that if you put on an airplane and a crew, you have 24 and 7 covered. What would it take to establish 24/7 coverage at a place like St. John's and what are the differences in operating out of the two places?

Col P. Drover: That's a reasonable question.

First of all, establishing any 24 and 7 operation requires 5.5 or 6 crew and several aircraft, because you have to do recurrent training.

•(1620)

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Is that complete crews?

Col P. Drover: Absolutely. That's complete crews. It's just a function of how long a shift it is until you're time-expired and then have to do rests. There's leave and all those sorts of things. So it's not a matter of moving one aircraft to a location. Even seasonally, it becomes very difficult to come up with that.

Our basing study in 2005, the one we referred to, clearly indicated that Gander is a better location, and for a number of reasons. If you look at where the SAR operations out of Gander occur, you see that it's not predominantly offshore. It is throughout the island and up the north shore of the island.

Gander is by far a better weather operating base. In St. John's, you can have times when no air traffic is moving—"zero-zero", we call it—and Gander very rarely gets that. So you could have cases, if you were based in St. John's and there was a fisherman in distress in Port aux Basques, where you couldn't launch. You couldn't take off.

Those are the basic reasons why we're comfortable that Gander makes more sense operationally.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I want to re-emphasize a statement you made that Canada is the only country in the world with a MAJAID capability.

Col P. Drover: That is correct.

In fact, we do an international exercise called Arctic SAREX with Russia and the United States Alaskan Command. In the last one we did, we actually used MAJAID as the centrepiece, because they sort of identify this capability as unique and not unwanted. It's just that their structures are different from ours and they don't have it.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Is it safe to say that at CF and CASARA the whole SAR community is prepared to respond to changes, that if there is more traffic, if the situation changes, the CF will be prepared to respond? Is that a fair statement?

Col P. Drover: It's absolutely fair. I think it's part of our responsibility to provide the monitoring operational necessity. My mandate is to deliver a SAR service. It's our organization that determines there's a requirement to ship the resources or indeed to get additional resources. It's our obligation to present that to the leadership and take it from there.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Davidson, CASARA is obviously a great organization. You're in contact with similar organizations in the U.S. or other parts of the world. Are there similar organizations in the U.S., for example? And I don't mean Minuteman.

Mr. John R. Davidson: There is the Civil Air Patrol in the U.S. It is significantly different from CASARA, in that it deals with cadets as well. It has three major arms. One is education. One is cadets. One is the surveillance search and rescue side of it. They are a little bit different. They are an arm of the military, whereas we're not. We're a totally arm's-length, volunteer, not-for-profit corporation.

We're trying to develop closer ties with the Civil Air Patrol to exchange methods, improve ourselves, and help them if we can. And I don't see why we can't. I think we have a pretty good system.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Davidson.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Bagnell for five minutes.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank you for coming. It's a big help

Colonel, I think you put your finger on the problem when you said, in response to Jack, that there are no dedicated aircraft in the north.

I have a question related to incidents. A lot of searches are done by the RCMP, the rangers, and other local forces and services, such as the fire department. Does anyone keep track of all the search incidents that are actually done?

Col P. Drover: The statistics that we showed you are basically from our database, but it's the rescue coordinating centres that tabulate those. They are tasked with that. Each incident generates a SAR report, and it's all captured in there.

As I mentioned earlier in our briefing, sometimes it is the territorial RCMP's responsibility to go out and look for the lost hunter. We may, in our response, provide a Hercules because there are no assets available, or it may go to the provincial authorities. That is ongoing every day. I think that's really what makes our system very robust, in that our rescue coordinating centres have the authority, without going any higher, to make decisions. They can contract, and they have a network of contacts, such as EMOs, local police, and all sorts of things.

•(1625)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Are all those on the incident report, on this map you gave us?

Col P. Drover: Yes, sir, I would assume so. That's a representative thing over several years. But yes, if they recorded an incident, it's in the database.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: If the RCMP search for someone, or the fire department, or the rangers, then it's on one of those maps?

Col P. Drover: The exception is if it was a community activity that didn't reach our rescue coordinating centre for involvement. In other words, if it was something that was dealt with in the local area, it probably would not be, but if it was anything significant that had a federal resource, it certainly would be. When I say "federal resource", I'm referring to our rescue control centre's involvement, which would be part of that.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: The 90,000 passengers taking a plane every day over the poles are lightly dressed. How long do you calculate somebody would last at minus 30 or minus 40 degrees? How long would someone in a boat sprayed with water last in the cold Arctic temperatures?

Col P. Drover: In my personal view, not very long. I often wonder, when I'm flying in a commercial aircraft, what the chance of survival would be.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Can you tell me how long it may take MAJAID to get to a crash in the vicinity in the Northwest Passage?

Col P. Drover: It's within 24 hours, for sure. It will take up to 12 hours to mobilize capability, then the flying time, and the drop into the site. That is very reasonable when you consider the requirements. We have to rig a special aircraft, get the crew organized. What's significant is that prior to that MAJAID kit arriving, we would have up to three Hercules with additional SAR techs and additional tents and clothing that they would throw to the site.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: How long does it take to get out there?

Col P. Drover: It wouldn't take any longer than 12 hours, depending on where we're going. It could be eight hours or less.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I don't think people would survive in those two situations.

We've been talking about new planes for a long time. I forget the names of the companies—we're lobbied every day—but are those two outside planes the only two that could do the job?

Col P. Drover: The replacement isn't my portfolio. I will limit my comment to the fact that we have the Hercules and the Buffalo that need to be replaced. The aircraft are very old and very expensive to maintain. What they do serves our requirements, so we're looking to replace them. I can't comment on the actual specifications and performance.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I have one very quick question. I noticed on your incident map that there are lots of incidents. The entire cities of Montreal, Quebec, Halifax, St. John's, and Windsor are covered. Are people lost in those cities a lot?

Col P. Drover: Small map, big picture, I guess.

We do a tremendous number of medical evacuations, and those are in there too. Some of it is urban, some of it is a little bit offshore. It's the way it's depicted there, sir.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, Mr. Boughen for five minutes.

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Let me add my voice to my colleagues in welcoming you here. Thank you for taking time away from your busy schedules to meet with us.

I have a couple of things. Maybe you could share with us what happens in terms of cooperation with Canada and the U.S., particularly SAR as it refers to the north and Alaska territory, looking at that. Could you let us know how that is working? How do you see it continuing to develop?

Col P. Drover: We actually have a very good working relationship with our northern neighbours, both Russia and the U.S. Our control centres and their control centres are in daily communication. Often we will use one of our SAR resources on the Great Lakes and in the Michigan area, areas in their territory. And in the north especially, part of the MAJAID plan is that we would notify the rescue coordination centre in Alaska. Undoubtedly, they would provide assistance, as we would if they had an incident in Alaska. As I say, we exercise this annually with those members. We do a communications check with Russia because they have limited English-speaking controllers, but they have enough that we can communicate as well.

•(1630)

Mr. Ray Boughen: If either one of you gentlemen could answer this, or perhaps both of you, if you like, what would be the ideal complement of machines and people that you would need to cover all the bases? I'm looking at your draft and your density of action in the southern part of Canada as well as what's happening in the northern part of Canada. We've heard that there's cooperation between the U.S. and ourselves, so that helps to extend our facilities and ability to react. But what's the optimum number?

I'm concerned that we have a reliance on volunteers. The volunteers do a great job, but they're still volunteers, and I'm wondering if we're relying too much on that phase. Are we okay with that?

Mr. John R. Davidson: As far as the volunteers are concerned, yes, it is a challenge to maintain them. That's just part of volunteerism. Today, generation X and generation Y personnel are not as easily swayed to volunteer. So yes, there are those challenges. But the return that you get from helping your fellow man who is in distress.... This country has wonderful areas that few people get to see, but things do go wrong. The volunteer is a big component of this. In my mind, we can do a lot, and we are doing a lot. I feel that the volunteer has a very important part, but of course I'm prejudiced. It's how we're going to operate in the future. I think the amount of manpower we can bring to bear will offset what has to be fixed, has to be manned. It's going to be a fact of life.

Col P. Drover: If I may just add, from our resource mix, I think we got where we are through a number of years of experience. Looking at the level of service that we're providing the government and the Canadian population, it is proper at this time; it is efficient. But that's with respect to the other players in the game, like the volunteer agencies and other government departments that share the burdens and responsibilities. Again, it's much larger than the CF. We haven't mentioned, for instance, the coast guard, and they spend an

awful lot on SAR resources and activities off the coast. Again, we couldn't do that. Our navy is not mandated to that, so we can use them. The coast guard is a very important player.

Mr. Ray Boughen: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Paillé.

Mr. Pascal-Pierre Paillé (Louis-Hébert, BQ): Thank you for coming here.

Mr. Chair, I will be sharing my time with Mr. Bachand.

My first question came to me out of the blue. When you are one of the last persons to speak, many questions have already been answered.

I noticed on your incident map that some of the incidents occurred rather far away. The committee is currently looking at the borders in northern Canada that are defended. Is there a line or boundary within which search and rescue operations are truly Canada's responsibility? Is the territory beyond these boundaries considered to be an international zone? That is an issue that is currently being debated. With respect to SAR missions, have you determined with other countries what your intervention boundaries should be?

[English]

Col P. Drover: The responsibility for SAR actually is kind of coordinated through an organization—ICAO. We are a member of that organization. Basically, all ICAO members agree on search and rescue boundaries. Those are not sovereign boundaries; those are totally different. So in the case of Canada, it's very clear: it's the American border and the North Pole, but on both coasts it actually extends beyond Vancouver Island for 1,100 kilometres and on the east coast it goes out to sea for 1,600 kilometres.

Basically, what that says is that in those defined boxes Canada has agreed to take the search and rescue responsibility. So if you have a vessel that's sailing across to England and it's in distress 300 or 400 miles from Halifax, it's our responsibility. Now, I think it's important to point out that if you're a Canadian registered ship and you're off the coast of Bermuda—I'm not sure if it's Bermuda, probably the U.S. or whoever owns that piece—it's an international agreement that your national flag doesn't matter. In SAR, it's humanitarian. We have this responsibility and we execute that responsibility.

•(1635)

[Translation]

Mr. Pascal-Pierre Paillé: We hear a great deal about incident responses. For example, Coast Guard vessels are occasionally on patrol. Do either the Canadian Forces, or certain volunteer groups, take preventative action when there is more air traffic or more cruise ships on the water in high season? Is any preventative action taken to demonstrate a Canadian presence in the North?

[English]

Col P. Drover: That's an excellent question, sir. Prevention is a very important aspect.

I spoke and John spoke a little bit about SAR response, but for the prevention program actually Transport Canada has the lead responsibility, and they do it through regulations. They have regional officers that teach aviation safety, similar to the coast guard and its responsibility for prevention.

With organizations like CASARA, there's a value to their program that's not in dollars, because you can't break it out, but they are community leaders. They actually are respected in the aviation communities and they are big on the whole prevention aspect.

There are certain licensing requirements, such as the requirements for life jackets in boats, and all those activities. One—and it's not prevention, but it speaks to that—is the beacons that I mentioned earlier. If all else fails, at least you've given yourself an opportunity to be helped in a very rapid manner. That's an education piece—more education than prevention, I guess.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Colonel Drover, you may not have time to answer my question, but do you have an operations plan ready for the day the government purchases 14 search and rescue aircraft? For the benefit of my colleague, I am talking about Alenia or CASA. Fourteen aircraft are set to be delivered. Where will they be based? Wouldn't this be a good opportunity to locate a base a little further north?

[English]

Col P. Drover: It's too bad we don't have more time.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Can you send it in writing, then?

Col P. Drover: I can answer the question. It's fairly straightforward. Yes.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Payne.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Davidson and Colonel Drover, for attending today. The information you're providing is obviously very important to us.

There are a couple of things I would like to find out. First of all, Colonel, we've heard about the potential of a crash in the north and getting there. If in fact that did happen, can you ever be close enough?

Col P. Drover: It's difficult to presuppose where you should be at any given time in this business. This is a no-notice operation we're dealing with here. You may be fortunate to find your assets are in the proximity and you can respond faster, but most likely that's not going to be the case.

I think that speaks to what we talked about in terms of where we are based. In fact, those basing locations put you where the activity is

most likely to occur. Now, I agree, it does not address the idea that you're not in the north, but assets in the north right now would be terribly underutilized or would have to come south, as we discussed. So it's difficult to predict where it would have to be.

• (1640)

Mr. LaVar Payne: Also, Colonel, could you maybe expand upon the capabilities of the coast guard and the coverage it has?

Col P. Drover: I'd prefer not to describe at great length the coast guard capabilities. Other than that, I did mention that we are co-located with coast guard personnel in the RCCs, the rescue coordination centres. I think it's significant that with the coast guard in a controlling agency with the military folks, they are in the very good position to decide what coast guard assets might be available, where they might be available, and how to use them. They have primary SAR vessels, but I would defer to them to describe their vessels.

Be assured that in our coordinating centres, the coast guard representatives will be able to decide the appropriate coast guard response. It's a very robust and coordinated system they have.

Mr. LaVar Payne: The other thing is Mr. Bachand asked you a question regarding the Alenia. Maybe you could just actually respond to that question, and maybe save yourself from writing a report on it.

Col P. Drover: Which question, the fixed-wing SAR base? You mentioned aircraft, but I knew you were referring to the fixed-wing SAR basing. Again, I'm not familiar with the program. As it stands, my understanding is that we were replacing certain fleets, the Buffalo and the Hercules. I would assume that probably the basing plan would remain the same, because it's the replacement of an aircraft, not changing the capability, not increasing or decreasing the level of service.

Mr. LaVar Payne: Do I still have time left?

The Chair: You still have one minute.

Mr. LaVar Payne: Okay, excellent.

I have a question for both of you. I'd just like to go back around the training that's required. How often do people have to upgrade their training, both on the volunteer basis and also as part of the SAR personnel?

Mr. John R. Davidson: Well, from the volunteer side of it, we're typically training every month. Our members are out there once or twice a month, going through the certification process and the re-currency process. As I said, we maintain our records on our CASARA management system. It allows us to program each and every member's training requirements so that he maintains the currency needed to be active. We will not task any of our members if they're not current. We will send the current members on the actual tasking; training is something else.

Col P. Drover: From a military perspective, there is a fairly significant training build, and it starts with the operational training units, where they actually convert from their other aircraft, whatever they've flown—or in the SAR techs from their schools—into the aircraft that will be their SAR platform. And it only starts there. The recurrent requirements are continuous. To hone all those skills, the night hoist of a vessel that's tossing, with night vision goggles, is something that has to be constantly.... The other point I would make is that we also need to upgrade the folks. They don't stay in the business for their whole career. Some of us would like to fly more than be staff officers, but that's not the way it works, unfortunately.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I will give the floor to our last member, Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): I don't know whether I have five minutes' worth or not, but let me just ask you about MAJAID. Mr. Hawn referred to it as the only one in the world. I'd like to know how often it's been deployed, where it's been used and in what circumstances, the tenure of it, how long you will use it for. And does it have applicability in situations other than search and rescue?

•(1645)

Col P. Drover: Excellent questions.

The good news, I think, is that we have never deployed it operationally, and that means we haven't had a situation requiring it. That doesn't mean it wasn't available. The last time that I'm aware we had it on alert and preparing it was Swissair 111, which is the aircraft that crashed off the coast of Nova Scotia. We were prepared to launch the MAJAID and then it was determined that this was a marine recovery, as opposed to a rescue operation, and it didn't have any impact.

You bring up a very good question, in that I did not mention other applications, but this has applications beyond strictly an air disaster. If a marine ship runs aground and you've got 1,600 folks on a cruise vessel that goes aground and is floundering and you get all those folks off on to some permafrost or rugged environment, it will take you a long time to evacuate that many people via the helicopter or whatever means. The MAJAID is a fly-away air-dropable capability. Each kit has tentage, for instance, for 80 people, and we have four kits. So to get this into a sparsely populated area.... And it doesn't have to be the Arctic, either; it can certainly be any part, because there are parts of a lot of northern provinces that would be equally applicable. It's scalable, so you don't have to have the whole exercise.

We also have a 12-man army paratroop team that are trained to go with this, so they can provide assistance on the ground, survival techniques, and our SAR techs, of course, who have medical capability. So it has more versatility than strictly one-time in the Arctic.

Hon. Anita Neville: So you're saying it's never been used. I see.

What are the various components of it?

Col P. Drover: The kit itself is about 11,000 pounds of tentage, with heaters and generators. So it's a very capable winter shelter with medical supplies, provisions, food, and some other things you need in a survival scenario. Once it's parachuted in with our army paratrooping team, they can set up a sheltered, heated facility very quickly.

Hon. Anita Neville: Just as a last question, how long can it be sustained?

Col P. Drover: Sustainment is not a problem, once we get this on the ground, and there are anchors, so it's not going to blow away in the Arctic gales and things. The whole notion is this is the first step in bringing somebody, especially the injured, to a medical facility. The limiting factor there may well be the lack of helicopters because of weather or whatever, but we have the capability of air-supplying sustainment, and we can air-supply medical expertise. It would probably not be too difficult to keep it running for quite some time.

Hon. Anita Neville: My mind is working in a number of ways.

What is the cost of using it for a given period of time? What I'm hearing is that it could very well have civilian use as well.

Col P. Drover: In terms of cost, I have no idea what the dollar figure is to stand it up. There's a maintenance cost to sustain just the capability, to make sure it's primed and ready to go. Once deployed in a real-world scenario, a lot of the materials would not be recovered, so I don't know about that aspect.

In terms of application for another interested party, I've never seen any interest in that sort of thing, so I can't answer you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to thank our witnesses, Colonel Drover and Mr. Davidson, for taking part in these proceedings. As you can see from the members' questions, your work is very important to us. We appreciated the opportunity to talk to you this afternoon. Thank you very much.

I will now suspend the meeting for a few minutes. We will continue with an

•(1650)

[*English*]

in camera session two minutes from now.

Merci bien.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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