

BSAR (WHO?) NEWS

Warren Sanders

BSAR is an acronym for **Bush Search and Rescue** – a prominent Victorian volunteer group established as a section of *The Federation of Victorian Walking Clubs* (VicWalk) inc. Since 1949 and pre-dating the Victorian Police Search and Rescue squad, the Federation has maintained this specialised section.

BSAR members come from all across Victoria from a vast array of backgrounds, but they all share a passion for the outdoors. They are content with spending anywhere from a day to multiple days searching in often hard and difficult terrain. They are equipped with specialised equipment and for most it brings great satisfaction to find a lost or injured person.

The number of callouts for BSAR members has always been high. Mobile phones have made a big difference, but with our population continuing to grow and with adventure activities becoming easier and more affordable – statistics show that the Victorian Police SAR squad get an average of 1.5 call outs per day. Their squad simply cannot keep up with the demand and therefore partner with this specialist group. Through careful structured communication BSAR volunteers are deployed by the Victorian Police.

[Locally – Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club is a part of VicWalk and maintains a strong presence within BSAR.](#) The North East BSAR group (established in 1982) is unique in that it is the only district which can be deployed alone, without the assistance of Victorian Police Search and Rescue. Local members have extensive knowledge of the Alpine National Park/ Bogong High Plains and the harsh weather conditions people tend to go missing in. Birkie Search and Rescue members have been instrumental in saving lives on both Bogong and Feathertop, as well as assisting in dozens of other searches over the years.

On the weekend of the 27th-28th July all BSAR members were invited to a Steep Snow and Ice (SSI) training weekend on Eskdale Spur – Mount Bogong. [The 'Birkie's' hosted the trip. Ian Franzke, David Panozzo, Bob Flower and Warren "Sheepy" Sanders](#) were joined by 19 other members from around the state. An early start for the Melbourne crew meant that the police bus rolled in at 8:30am to the Mountain Creek carpark. SSI equipment was distributed to all participants. This included avalanche transceivers, snow probes, radios, ice axes and rescue equipment. A busy schedule lay ahead!

The group swiftly made the steep climb to Michel Hut, where they were welcomed by three members of the Vic Police SAR squad who were assisting and overseeing safety.

Saturday's weather continued to simulate common searching conditions of high wind chill, fog and cold. The afternoon session was spent placing snow anchors, rope setups and digging snow pits to check avalanche probability around the Hells Gap area.

Upon moving to another area, unfortunately one of our members suffered a suspected fracture of the leg. What ideal company to be in for this to happen! The remainder of the weekend's SSI training was written off as all members went into rescue and evacuate mode.

The stretcher/ sled from Michel Hut was retrieved while other members cut in an appropriate trail back to the hut. I mentioned earlier that our members come from various backgrounds and professions. As it happened we had one doctor and two paramedics with us. Yes our patient was in good hands.

Moving a patient with a fracture or any serious injury/ illness takes careful planning, especially in the winter alpine environment. Just before nightfall our patient was placed in the warmth of

Michel hut, closely being monitored by the medical team. Plans can change quickly during a search or rescue and we were notified into the evening that a medical helicopter would give winching a try, if weather permitted. After four brightly coloured flares were sent skyward through thick fog, it was determined they would try again in the morning.

I slept solidly. Up at 6am, pack down and eat and ready for a 7am departure.

Hoping for clear skies and a straightforward winch operation, the conditions couldn't have been worst. Strong winds and limited visibility meant numerous attempts by the helicopter were abandoned.

Intel from further afield was that the cloud was lifting and it was a case of 'hurry up and wait'.

Our backup plan to move the patient lower down the mountain was enacted late morning. Bright SES had been contacted to assist with walking up a 'wheel' that attaches onto the bottom of the patient's sled to manoeuvre over dry terrain (no snow). Our patient was calm and collected (or drugged up) and in pretty good spirits for the trip down. Sliding down a mountain with a team of 6 rescuers by the side, controlling speed and direction is a challenging task. After a kilometre of snow travel and several hundred metres of lifting and carrying the sled over rocky terrain, once again the helicopter returned. This time able to hover 60 feet above the tree canopy to perform a confined area winch to the satisfaction of all members involved.

There is no better training than the real thing.

On return to the carpark having retrieved our own packs, praise was given to the four agencies involved and the collaboration it takes to carry out a rescue with utmost professionalism.

[NE district BSAR who are based in Mount Beauty](#) invite and encourage new members to join, anytime. You do not need to live in Mount Beauty and there is zero pressure with no assumption you can commit to every callout. You are always given the option not to attend – no reason needed. Enquiries can be made to secretary@birkebeiner.org.au - attention: Warren.

Visit the club website and look in the menu for S & R. It has information on the organisation of the group, membership, history and an honour board.

Photos courtesy of Bob Flower.



From Left: Warren Sanders & Ian Franzke



A group assessing snowpack above treeline on Eskdale Spur for avalanche risk



Bush Search and Rescue (BSAR) members transporting a patient, who is on a stretcher covered by a gold thermal blanket, for evacuation by helicopter.