

# Searching Swiftwater Safely

With the recent focus on water rescue and equipping of Mountain Rescue teams my concern around searching the water margin is if anything is increasing as they find themselves increasingly involved in this area of work.

I know that we have and will continue to save lives in search situations. And, we are good at most aspects of searching as it lies at the core of what we do. I've seen many examples of first class organisation and coordination of large scale multi-agency searches, things just need a bit of tweaking in some areas. Before we go any further, let me identify some of the things I've witnessed.

- A lack of knowledge regarding water search protocols resulting in haphazard searching.
- 'Red mist' resulting in personnel taking unnecessary risks.
- Not knowing where people are within search groups.
- People operating on their own!
- Personnel with no PPE, including buoyancy aids!
- Searching at night in high risk situations.
- Searching at night in high risk situations without adequate experience or training.
- Searching at night in high risk situations without adequate experience or training or PPE!
- Lack of back up for people at the water margin.

I believe we can address many of these issues by looking at 2 key areas and a few changes have the potential to vastly increasing safety on the ground.

- 1. Effective Briefing**
- 2. Effective Group Management**

## **1. Effective Briefing**

Co-ordinating a large scale search and be fraught: phones ringing, search patterns to work out, comms to organise, interviewing and interpreting witness information, co-ordinating with multiple agencies. In my experience the quality of the briefing is vital to the success and outcome of the exercise. This is backed up by the Fire and Rescue service, who have known for some time a direct correlation between the quality of briefing and the quantity of radio traffic; the more radio traffic, the harder it is to obtain a clear picture and for key messages to get through.

Often control will assume certain things, perhaps if you're controlling a river search and dispatching a group you might assume that they would all wear adequate PPE for the conditions but clearly people choose not to.

Having a simple model to brief people can help to ensure everyone has the right information; many agencies use the SMEAC model. It's stood the test of time and pretty much all military use this model to the point that it becomes second nature.

## SMEAC

- Situation
- Mission
- Execution
- Administration
- Command, Control and Communication

By writing this information down, groups in the field have something to refer to. Having briefing sheets prepared on waterproof paper ensures you've always got the briefing sheets to hand (drop me an email for blank printable copies).

### SMEAC - Team briefing

**Situation** - What has occurred? Time, Outline, Who  
Example: Car in water, @ 16.00, missing one female, age 61, P.L.S.  
GR 467974

**Mission** - What are **you** (specific team you are briefing) going to do?  
Example: Your job is to carry out a hasty search from GR467874 -  
GR558999

**Execution** - (the plan) How will we deal with it? How many? For how long?  
Example: 4 people. Hasty search aim to be at GR558999 in 60 minutes then report back  
One searcher, one comms, 2 back up. Group leader (name)

**Administration** - What gear? Food, Water & rest?  
Example: Food available at ... take full swiftwater PPE, throwlines, radios, phone, map.

**Command & Communications & clarification** - Where will the command post be? What communication system?  
Control is situated at Sedbergh fire station, relay based at ... 'ask for radio relay' phone number 01367 27653 comms channel 63b  
Questions?

When briefing groups it is particularly important to **allocate a sub group leader** for each river group. Ensure group members know who this is. Make that person responsible for both communication and the overall safety of the group.

### Other thoughts:

- Ensure the group have a model search pattern.
- In no circumstances should people be deployed to riverside searches on their own, or without Buoyancy Aids, I'd like to see people wearing helmets and carrying throwlines.
- Many teams now have basic kit. Don't let lack of kit be an excuse, know where additional resources are and call them in as soon as possible.

Typically searches are undertaken as either a **hasty search**, or an **effective search**

Hasty searches – urgent searches to locate someone alive. Realistically these teams are someone’s best hope if they are in the water or on a disappearing island, as the water rises around them. If you’re dispatched on a hasty search you’re going to be moving fast, you’re going to be breathing hard or out of breath, it would be really good to be wearing full swiftwater PPE.

Effective searches – leaving no stone unturned so you can categorically say an area has been covered. Slower in nature.

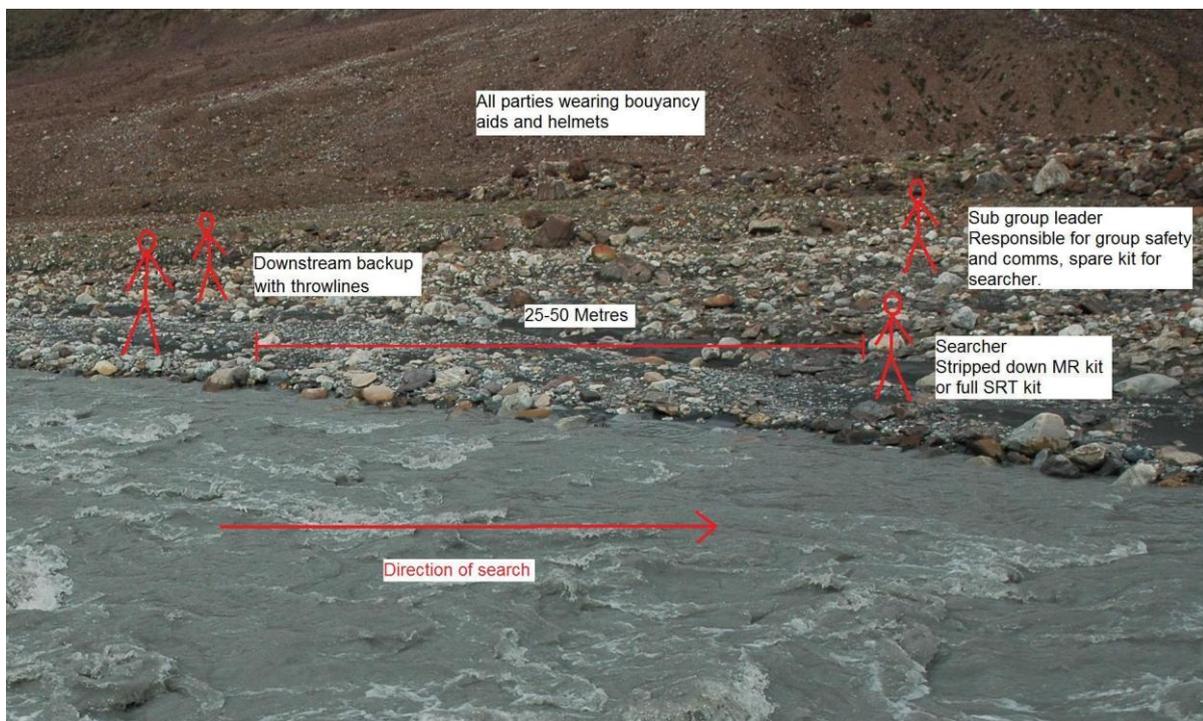
## 2. Group Management

So we’ve got a sub group leader, I’d super strongly recommend that you have a **waterside briefing before you to start to search**. This might be 2 minutes just to check that everyone knows how they are going to operate. **These 2 minutes make all the difference.**

For example

“Right John you’re going to be searcher, Tim and Sarah downstream backup. We want you about 50 metres behind us, I’ll be next to John handling comms, if feel a section is too risky we going just walk around”

Search patterns



If you don’t have system, the one shown in the photo works really, really well.

In this format everyone is in support of the searcher. Some teams deploy the searcher in striped down kit so they have a fighting chance if they fall in, others deploy in full swiftwater rescue kit. Often there is a huge amount of kit within an hour of your base; don’t try to handle things on your own.

Next to the searcher is the group leader, they're in a position to carry extra kit for the searcher. The group leader is in a position to deal with communications as they are away from the water's edge; you're never going to hear anything on the radio standing next to a rapid. The party leader is responsible for group safety, from their objective position they might be advising the searcher to skip certain bits due to safety issue or slow the search down to ensure an area is covered.

Downstream backup follows at an appropriate distance downstream. They will be carrying throwlines, 2 people provide mutual support, one person is very exposed. To be able to take a throwline a casualty must be orientated and head above the water, an appropriate distance may be 20-30 metres downstream. Backup also needs to be close enough to be able to effect a rescue before someone gets swept away from the bank.

In the above pattern the group moves upstream in a **continuous search** fashion. At some sections the group leader may decide to hold the backup in position and then bring them forward this is called **staged search** spacing is critical for the backup to be effective.

So, there's some ideas, go out and play with them, develop your own and share your findings.

**Howie Crook sits on the MR Water Safety Panel and likes writing articles and running swiftwater training courses! Thanks to Ewan Thomas for sharing ideas on search patterns. Email Howie at [howardcrook@rethinktraining.co.uk](mailto:howardcrook@rethinktraining.co.uk) to get examples of SMEAC which you can print out.**