

## A Brief Overview of the Norwegian

# SEARCH & RESCUE

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**T**HE MAIN PURPOSE for the Norwegian Search and Rescue (SAR) service is to handle situations that require a: "Publicly organized immediate action from more than one party to save people from death or injuries caused by sudden accidents or dangerous situations, which are not handled by established special units. The rescue mission is carried out as a cooperation between public services, non-profit organizations and private enterprises, under the management and coordination of the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre and rescue sub-centres."

This definition, given by the Government, is the trigger for establishing the SAR service. Like many other services, SAR is also part of the total defence concept.

The Norwegian SAR Service, as we know it today, was established on September 1, 1970. Ten years later, more specifically on July 4, 1980, the first royal decree describing the service was issued. The latest update of the royal decree was made on December 5, 2019.

The two Joint Rescue Coordination

Centres (JRCCs) were also established in 1970. JRCC North Norway is located in Bodø, and JRCC South Norway is located in Sola, which is not far from the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC).

The two joint rescue coordination centres have the overall coordination responsibility for all search and rescue operations within their Search and Rescue Regions (SRRs).

Norway has a fully integrated SAR service, including maritime, air, and land operations. As part of the Global Maritime Distress Safety System (GMDSS), and in accordance with international agreements and conventions, the Norwegian JRCCs are also involved in SAR operations all over the world, if needed.

As a standard operating procedure, domestic SAR operations are delegated to one of the 12 rescue sub-centres, one in each police district. The collective SAR management team at each rescue coordination centre consists of representatives from the public, commercial and non-profit services with a key role in SAR, such as Avinor (air traffic services), the Armed Forces, the Police Directorate, Telenor Coastal Radio, the Directorate for Civil Protection and

Emergency Planning, the Norwegian Coastal Administration, the Norwegian Communication Authority, the Directorate of Health, the Civil Aviation Authority, the Maritime Authority, and the Sea Rescue Society and other non-profit SAR initiatives. This joint strategic team is led by the Chief of Police, located in Bodø and Stavanger. The additional function of leading this team is specifically given by the Government and includes the operational responsibility at the JRCC. The day-to-day responsibility, meanwhile, lies with the SAR mission coordinators (SMCs) at the JRCCs. These are highly skilled individuals with an operational leadership background, either within maritime, civil, or military aviation, from the Royal Army or from the Police.

The main purpose of the collective SAR management team is to prepare for search and rescue by developing the SAR service with a long-term perspective. In the very rare cases of a complex or long-lasting operation, the team may be required to lead the operation at a strategic level. The main purpose is to support the SMC, and to ensure medium- to long-term



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ABOVE: Viking Sky, copyright Action Press/Daily Mail

planning. As an example, my most significant experience with the SAR management team is from the intense rescue mission of "Viking Sky" on March 23, 2019. The JRCC is led by a director who is responsible for all activities, except for the operational responsibility, which lies with the Chief of Police.

## The Principles

The Norwegian SAR Service is not an organizational body, but rather a function based on four main principles:

**Cooperation:** The Norwegian SAR Service is performed as a cooperative endeavour, involving a number of public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private enterprises that work together to provide life-saving services. This means that private and non-profit organizations do not only cover their own expenses in connection with a search and rescue operation, but they also serve in a consultative capacity in that they provide the RSCs and JRCCs with data, etc., at no charge. The JRCC, on the other hand, covers all the actual operating costs for a rescue mission through government funding.

**Responsibility:** Whoever is in charge of a field of work under normal circumstances will also be responsible for managing serious or major incidents and crises within the particular field. This is closely connected to another point,

which is not a principle, but nevertheless very important, and that is "similarity". In military terms this would be "train as you fight"; meaning, organize yourselves the same way in crises as in a normal state. It is also very important that even serious or major incidents must be managed at the lowest possible level.

**Integration:** The Norwegian SAR Service is fully integrated and includes sea, air, and land. This cooperation prevents discussions and disagreement between different services, and helps us remain focused on the main purpose, which is to employ the best means to search for and provide aid to people who are in distress or imminent danger.

**Coordination:** All SAR operations are coordinated either directly from the JRCCs, or from one of the sub-centres. The term coordinated should not be confused with "command and control", which probably will surprise some of the military readers. This principle must be regarded in connection with the first, and in my opinion, the most important principle of cooperation. This principle is not limited to how we work together, but rather it is concerned with how we interact while accomplishing a mission, so to say. I will elaborate on this in the following paragraph.



Photo by Mats Grimsæth, Forsvaret

BELOW: The Director General of the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB), Ms Elisabeth Aarsæther, accompanied by her Deputy and Specialist Director, visited the JWC on May 26, 2020. DSB reports to the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and its mission is to maintain a complete overview of various risks and vulnerability, including national preparedness. Photo by JWC PAO





**ABOVE:** Cooperation between the JWC and South-Western Police District, here, Rear Admiral Jan C. Kaack with Hans Vik, photo by South-Western Police District. **RIGHT:** Hans Vik and Norwegian Minister of Defence, Frank Bakke-Jensen, at the JWC to celebrate the Centre's 15th anniversary, October 23, 2018. Photo by JWC PAO

**Reflecting on the Model and the Principles**

For those who are used to stringent structures of quite similar units under a strong command and control, our principle of cooperation may seem complicated, unusual, or even useless. One could even argue that this does not work in theory, but in my real-world experience, it has certainly worked. Under the cultural prerequisites of our society, cooperation works because of the strong and motivated community. What could be more meaningful than participating in saving lives? Looking closer at my introduction above, you will notice that the participants in the Norwegian SAR Service can be divided into three categories.

One such category is that of the public services, like the police, fire brigades, the public health services, or civil defence. Another category is comprised of all the different non-profit organizations, like Red Cross, Norwegian Alpine Rescue, the Sea Rescue Society, Norwegian People's Aid, Norwegian Radio Relay League, and many others. These are participating with their broad knowledge and competencies. On land, the non-profit organizations constitute the backbone of the accountable capacities.

I still remember when I was a boy and my father, who was a farmer, went out on rainy

nights together with his fellow citizens to search for someone who had gone missing, either it was a hunter or berry picker in the mountains. These attitudes and capabilities are also an important part of the total defence concept.

The last category is the commercial enterprises, like private helicopter companies, maritime vessels, and so on.

The two last categories do not have an obligation to participate, while the public services are obligated to participate under a royal decree. Here you have one of the answers to the question why it works. None of these participants do this for profit. The state covers their expenses, but nothing more. They do it because it makes sense.

And this is the reason why cooperation, from our point of view, is more appropriate than "command and control". Having said this, good cooperation is very much dependent on good coordination. This concept poses no challenges even for the military participants; hence the SAR service is well designed to play an important role in the total defence concept.

After the Second World War, the total defence concept was designed to give the Armed Forces assistance from the civilian society, so to say. The main point was to use all available assets to support the defence in case of war. During the two last decades, the focus

has turned to a matter of military assistance to the civil society during peacetime. Even if the military always has been a solid and accountable partner in the SAR service, the updated total defence concept has brought more value to the cooperation because we are used to participate in more situations than before. That kind of participation makes our society stronger and subsequently more prepared to save lives. †



**About the author**

Hans Vik graduated from the Norwegian Police Academy, and he also holds a Master of Laws degree from the University of Bergen. His military background is from the Royal Norwegian Army (MP), where he reached the rank of Captain.