

THE PHILIP COMPOSITE SQUADRON HORSE-MOUNTED GROUND SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM 1992-2012

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In 1992, after substantial discussion and planning the South Dakota Wing Commander at the time, Colonel Alden House, authorized the commander of the Philip Composite Squadron (NCR-SD-053) in Philip, SD to form a horse-mounted ground search and rescue team, hereafter referred to as the Mounted SAR Team.*

There were multiple rationales for the formation of a Mounted SAR Team:

The town of Philip, a small agriculture and ranching community, is surrounded by acres of cropland and pasture land. The watershed area to the Bad River around Philip adds to the dimension of rough terrain as well as land that breaks into the Cheyenne River to the North in Haakon County. A little south is Bureau of Land Management land that is hilly and covered by pasture. Nearby are the unforgiving Badlands of South Dakota, an extensive area of rugged eroded buttes, rock spires and pinnacles. Because of the diversity of the land many members of the Philip Composite Squadron owned and rode horses to handle their daily chores, much as their Western forefathers did.

The Philip Composite Squadron, was a small unit, and sought for a way to integrate itself into the South Dakota Wing's emergency services missions without duplicating existing capabilities. It was the then squadron commander, Lt Marsha Sumpter, who pursued the idea of a mounted search and rescue team which would take advantage of the local expertise in horsemanship in the rugged terrain around and near Philip. She reasoned that horses could pretty well get around and through most terrain obstacles encountered on SAR missions, not often having to divert too far off a search line. Their squadron had enough horses and riders to support such a team.

A horse-mounted search and rescue team has the ability to cover a vast area quickly and quietly. That speed of travel made the Mounted SAR Team superior to a regular ground search and rescue team. Further, horses can carry more supplies to stay out longer, offer a higher viewing platform for searching, and provide a more rested rescue worker when a subject is found. In addition, medical or emergency services personnel can be transported to a rescue site in a timely manner. As the horse component of an overall ground search and rescue team effort, they can be used to set up mobile radio relay points in rugged terrain, and trails can be quickly checked and blocked if needed.

Packhorses can be used to transport medical equipment, block and tackle, litters, and radio gear. Six 40-pound backpacks can be carried on a large packhorse, leaving foot searchers more mobile and not as prone to exhaustion.

For the rescue itself, many types of injuries do not prevent rescue on horseback. Not only does this speed up extraction time, it reduces the number of rescuers needed, since the subject does not have to be carried out of the field on a litter.

While not comparable to dogs for their air-scent capability, horses are aware of their surroundings and will alert at anything out of the ordinary, thus warning their rider who may be looking in another direction.

* The team has also been identified in the local Philip Pioneer Review and Rapid City Journal newspapers as the Philip Mounted Patrol, the 53rd Mounted Patrol, the 53rd Mounted Ground Team, Philip Composite Squadron Mounted Patrol, and the Philip Composite Squadron Civil Air Patrol Mounted Ground Team.

Additionally, horses are a relatively quiet mode of transportation, unlike ATV's and snowmobiles which can likewise cover a lot of area but are noisy and may muffle cries for help.

Colonel Alden House, who commanded the South Dakota Wing of the Civil Air Patrol from 1990 to 1994, took some convincing. It took over a year of discussion and planning before Lt Sumpter submitted a formal proposal for authorization to form the Philip Mounted SAR Team. In an undated letter, most likely in the spring of 1992 Col. House approved Lt Sumpter's request, albeit with five stipulations: The Civil Air Patrol will not be liable for injury/loss/damage to personal property (including horses); All Mounted SAR Team personnel must meet the same qualifications as any other ground team to serve as a qualified team member; All members must be members of the Civil Air Patrol and have completed Level 1 to include CPPT; All members must retain a CAPF 101 marked as "Ground Team – Mounted"; [and] All members not fully qualified must have completed the CAP 116 test and have the basic knowledge in horsemanship to be able to handle their horses.

The pickup trucks, trailers, horses, horse tack and specialized rescue equipment were all privately owned by the members of the Mounted SAR Team. There was some question at the time the team was formed as to whether the Wing would pay for fuel for the Mounted SAR Team's vehicles if called out on a real-world mission. It was decided that the team was responsible for all costs associated with their trucks and trailers, horses and animal tack as well as the costs for feed and the fuel. Certain standard items of Civil Air Patrol search and rescue gear such as a field litter and the had-held radio-direction-finding emergency beacon locator were provided by either the Wing or the squadron.

The members of the Philip Composite Squadron's Mounted SAR Team wore a unique CAP uniform authorized by the Wing Commander. They did not wear the camouflage battle dress (BDU) uniform. Their duty uniform consisted of black cowboy boots, gray Wrangler brand jeans, a white aviator shirt with epaulets, an Air Force blue necktie for males, and a black "Stetson"-style western cowboy hat with a South Dakota Wing patch on the front. Essentially the same uniform was worn in the field as the Wranglers were durable and easy to ride in; cowboy boots were authorized because military boots were too bulky for horseback and the low heel tended to slip through the stirrup. The white aviator shirts showed up well in the field and were easier to spot from an aircraft. In February 1993, a request was made and approved for a large blue silk bandana to replace the blue necktie. The justification for the bandana was that the necktie was basically useless in the field whereas the bandana was multipurpose; it could serve as a head and/or face cover in inclement weather or as a smoke mask. It could also serve as a splint sling or tourniquet.

The Philip Composite Squadron was a small unit averaging about 21 members. Of those some 12-15 senior members and cadets were directly involved in one capacity or another with the Mounted SAR Team. There were on average 5 qualified riders utilizing 4-5 horses, the rest of the personnel provided mission base support services such as driving the pickup hauling the horse trailer, caring for reserve horses and/or the pack horse, maintaining a communications base station, equipment logistics, etc. They were essential in moving the mission base to a new location as the perimeter of the search area expanded. The squadron was one of the few, if any in Civil Air Patrol to focus their monthly unit safety briefings on equine safety.

The members of the Mounted SAR Team were eager to perfect their skills and exhibit their expertise to validate the team's value to the South Dakota Wing's search and rescue capability. From the time they were formed they were very active in participating in search and rescue training missions (SAREXs). So much so that within the first few years they logged about 580 hours of training mission assignments participating in SAREXs in the Black Hills, at Onida and Pierre, Custer, Mitchell, Philip and in Aberdeen and the surrounding area. While most of the SAREXs in which they participated were routine, two SAREXs stand out for their drama and humor. The first official search and rescue training exercise for the Mounted SAR Team took place on the weekend of 16-17 May 1992. The South Dakota Wing held a major Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX) in Philip. Senior members and cadets, vehicles and aircraft from across the state gathered at the Philip Municipal Airport. The Mounted SAR Team was dispatched in conjunction with a ground search team and supported by two CAP aircraft to seek two cadets who played the role of hikers lost in the Sage Creek Wilderness Area of the Badlands

National Park. Initially the two cadets deliberately did not make themselves visible to the aircraft. However, later that day the temperature plunged from 70 to 50 in about 30 minutes, with the wind gusting up to 60 mph. When the cold, blustery weather moved in the “lost hikers” definitely wanted to be rescued as they were wearing shorts and t-shirts. Because the Sage Creek Wilderness Area is walking or riding only, the Mounted SAR Team brought them out of the area to the comfort of a CAP van parked on a nearby roadway.

This SAREX was not without drama at the Mission Base at the Philips Municipal Airport. Wind gusts of up to 60 mph necessitated the dispatch of wing-walkers to meet the CAP aircraft returning from their missions. In addition, CAP vans were used as a mobile wind break to help get the aircraft to their tie-down locations.

The SAREX also had a humorous episode. The strong winds allowed the South Dakota Wing to try out a new experimental aircraft – the “flying outhouse” – which took off and cleared the airport’s three-strand barbed wire fence. When the porta-potty crash landed, a team of emergency services personnel were dispatched on a real-world search and rescue mission to the site to determine if there were any physical damages or personal injuries. As it turned out, the flying outhouse was unpiloted.

The next significant SAREX for the Mounted Sar Team came in mid-June 1993 when the South Dakota Wing underwent an Air Force Evaluated Search and Rescue Exercise. The Mission Base was at Rapid City’s Regional Airport. As part of the SAREX the Philip Composite Squadron’s Mounted SAR Team was deployed to Hermosa, SD in the rugged Black Hills area to search for a missing small aircraft with a pilot and a passenger aboard. The Mounted SAR Team was accompanied by a USAF evaluator. In the usual “hurry-up and wait” pattern of SAREXs after the team got to Hermosa they had some down time before commencing the search. While waiting the USAF officer had the opportunity to mount up on the pack horse Howdy and take a short trail ride for instructional purposes, a “Zoomie” on horseback was a sight to see.

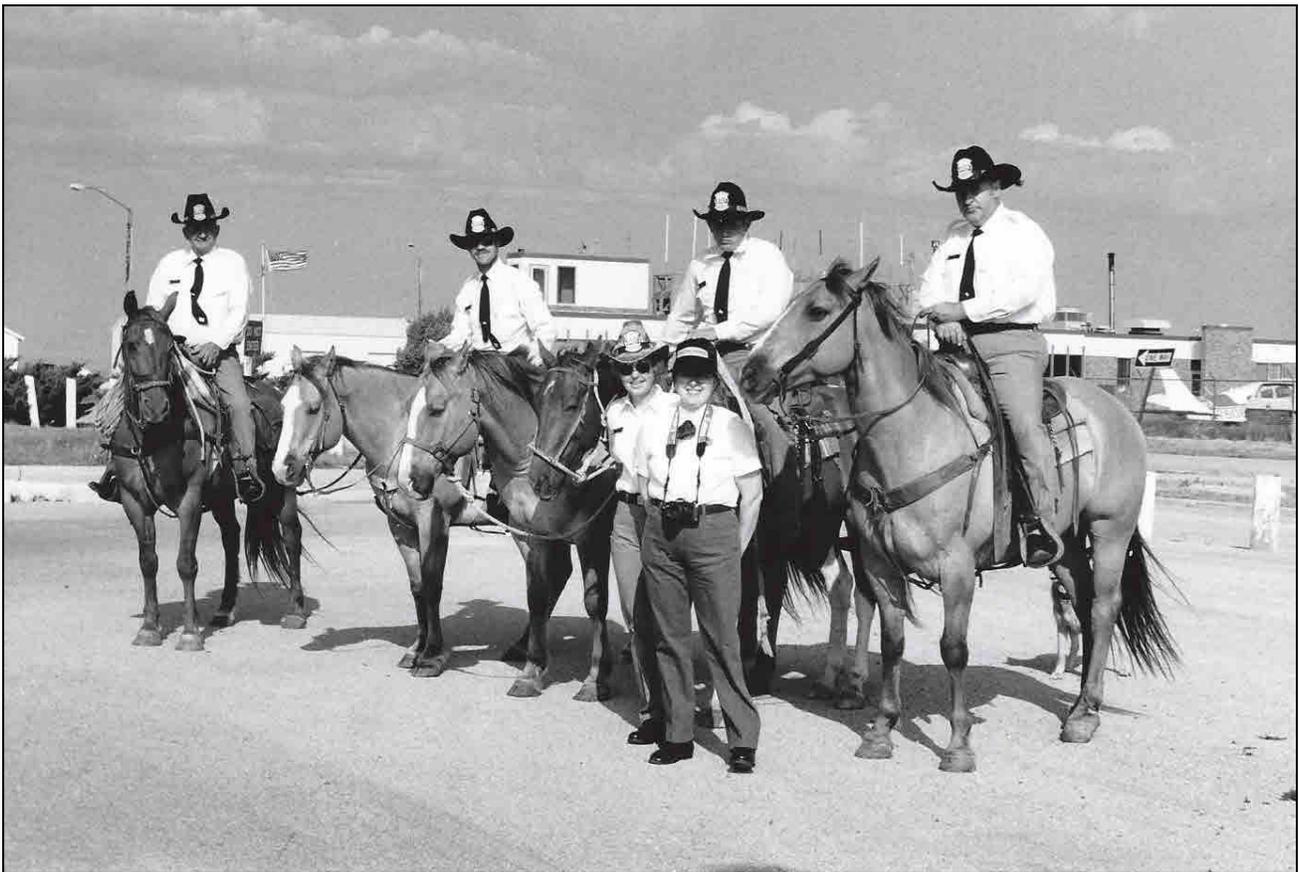
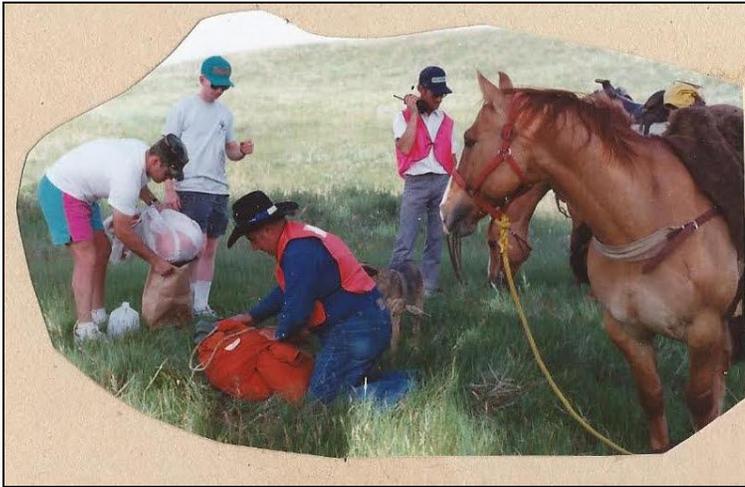


Photo Designator: 53rd Mounted SAR Team.jpg

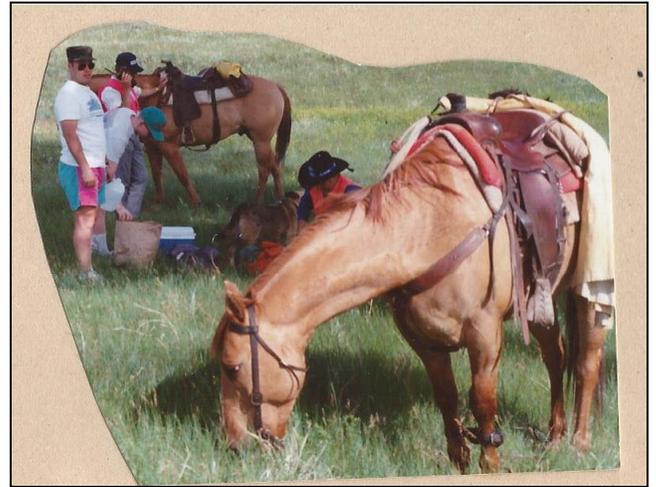
This photo, taken by then Maj Don Barbalace, Wing PAO at the time, shows some of the members of the Philip Composite Squadron Mounted SAR Team at the evaluated search and rescue exercise held June 13th 1993 at the

Rapid City Regional Airport. Members of the team mounted are (l to r) Senior Member Merle Johnson on Red, 2nd Lt Steve Millage on Blue Pine; the unit pack horse Howdy; Cadet Stanley Reimann on Chief; and Senior Member Rick Reimann on Poko. Standing (l to r) are 1st Lt Marsha Sumpter, the Philip Squadron Commander wearing a hat unique to her position, and 1st Lt Roberta Vaughan, then squadron PAO. On her cap is a reflective “Civil Air Patrol” patch.

Members of the Mounted SAR Team were sent out on a search and rescue training mission in the Black Hills. The scenario was a search for a private aircraft that had gone down and rescue of the pilot and passenger (two CAP members from another squadron wearing shorts). In the left photo kneeling in the black Stetson is SM Rick Reimann. 2nd Lt Steve Millage is on the radio. Both were members of the Mounted SAR Team. The same individuals are in the photo on the right which shows a close up of the tack and equipment worn by the horses. The horses in both photos belonged to SM Reimann. The photos were taken by then 1st Lt Marsha Sumpter, commander of the Philip Composite Squadron and member of the Mounted SAR team.



(Training Photo-4.jpg)



(Training Photo-5.jpg)

This SAREX was also not without its drama. 1st Lt Rick Reimann suffered an injury to his ankle and foot when his horse acted up and got him in a tight situation. We were just ending the search so Capt Sumpter rode to a nearby farmhouse to get some ice. With his foot packed in ice the team switched from a SAREX to a REDCAP to evacuate Reimann to Ellsworth Air Force Base for medical care. While waiting for him to be treated a storm came up making travel hazardous so the Mounted SAR Team set up camp that night near the airbase. For some reason, Rick’s dog Rex who usually rode on top of the pack horse vanished into the storm. The team launched a search and rescue mission for Rex. Radio stations were alerted and word was sent out in various other ways about the lost dog. He had a collar tag with his name and number and before camp was broken the next day, with Rick on crutches, Rex was found in New Underwood about 15 miles away.

Another memorable moment came when the Mounted SAR Team and other members of the squadron were invited to Custer to carry the flags for their big parade. The team took their horses to Custer and set up camp the night before the parade. The day of the parade the Mounted SAR Team looked sharp. The riders decided to take the horses out to Custer State Park and ride a little to give the horses some exercise before returning home, about a 140 mile journey. Rick and Stanley Reimann had ridden in Custer State Park many times rounding up the buffalo, which is a yearly event. The riders unloaded their horses and took off. Howdy the pack horse was unloaded to let him graze and move around next to the trailer. Maj Vaughan and Lt Sumpter had stayed with the vehicle and trailer to tend to Howdy. All of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere a herd of buffalo came right toward them! Maj. Vaughan jumped out of the van, grabbed Howdy and got him in the horse trailer just in time as the buffalo surrounded them. The two were stuck in the trailer for some time until the buffalo continued on their way. Lt Sumpter could have driven away, but chose to quietly stay put to see how the event was going to play out. As it turned out, all ended well. The riders returned in fine shape having seen the buffalo and other

wildlife on their ride. Not unsurprisingly, the size of the herd, as did the size of each individual buffalo, got bigger and bigger with every retelling of the story.

The Philip Composite Squadron's Mounted SAR Team's peak period of activity was in the early 1990s when they trained extensively, participated in numerous SAREXs and took part in many parades in their own and nearby communities. Unfortunately, the Mounted SAR Team was never called upon to demonstrate their expertise during a REDCAP. According to Lt later Capt Marsha Sumpter, the Philip Composite Squadron commander, "By 2002, we had basically fallen by the wayside when we lost members with horse trailers and enough equipment to support [a SAR mission]." Later she added, "... by 2000 we had not been used by CAP in SARs to the potential that we could have been and it was about then that members' interest faded as well. We never officially disbanded or stood down."

The Philip Composite Squadron Mounted SAR Team had one last hurrah when the Wing organized a parade in Philip to honor the team's 10th Anniversary. The parade, also open to community participants, was held on Saturday, June 8, 2002. The theme was "A Ride like No Other". In addition to the Mounted SAR Team there were about 30 local entries and the American Legion's 7th Cavalry Drum and Bugle Corps from Rapid City. From the staging area the parade route was eight blocks down Main Street to the park downtown for speeches, food, fun and music.

By 2002, the Mounted SAR Team had not been riding for some time so in order to stage the event the squadron had to scramble to find horses and qualified riders. Maj. Vaughan and Capt. Sumpter rode horses he had at his place over the parade route two times ahead of the parade to get the horses accustomed to being ridden and aware of the surroundings in the town. Six Mounted SAR Team riders took part in the parade. They made two trips down the parade route. It was a well-attended event with some 250 people in attendance. The Mounted SAR Team looked sharp.

The parade, however, was not without incident. It was very windy that day. Team member Lt Marsha Sumpter was on the horse Christian. As the parade proceeded along the route an American flag in front of the mortuary made a loud snapping sound in the high wind. Christian got spooked at the sound and fell down. Fortunately, Marsha was able to step off and held on to the reins to keep the horse from bolting. When the horse stood up she needed help remounting as Christian was still skittish and wouldn't hold still. Once back on the horse she got back in formation and finished the parade.

In addition to the parade, the then Mayor of Philip, the Honorable John F. Hart, issued a proclamation declaring June 8, 2002 "Civil Air Patrol Day". In the mayoral proclamation the Mounted SAR Team was mentioned twice. Mayor Hart also presented a plaque marking the day to the Philip Composite Squadron.

As has happened in many small towns in South Dakota, a slowly declining membership in the Philip Composite Squadron and waning interest in the deployment of the Mounted SAR Team spelled the team's demise. Later the South Dakota Wing "demoted" the Composite Squadron to a Composite Flight because of the low number of members. Eventually the flight was disbanded and the remaining members reassigned to Pierre Composite Squadron, thus closing the chapter of the Philip Composite Squadron. Maybe someday it will resurface and shine in the past glory.