

YORK REGIONAL POLICE PRACTISE THE ART OF FOREST SEARCHES IN WHITCHURCH-STOUFFVILLE

They won't get lost when you do

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

York Regional Police officers were milling about a Vivian Sideroad forest Friday, determined not to get lost.

And the 37 men and women who participated in the force's second search and rescue training program this year succeeded, most arriving at or fairly close to a predetermined end point.

"We train so officers can familiarize themselves with the woods," explained Det. Norn Miles, head of the Markham station's COR (Community Oriented Response) unit.

"They learn to see broken branches or trodden-down leaves, to read moss on trees or moss disturbances to see if someone has been through the area."

Each officer was given a compass, a topographical map and a tally cord, on which they tied a knot every 100 metres walked.

They were instructed to follow compass bearings — for example, walk 340 metres at 358 degrees — to get from point A to B, where the fictional missing person was, then escort them to a place of safety at point C.

"Most paths follow the contour line on the topographical maps because that's what most people do, they follow the path of least resistance," Miles said.

"It's practice in locating different areas and again, having officers become familiar in the forest."

If officers were forced off their path by an obstacle, such as a body of water, they learned how to get back on track, moving away at a 90-degree angle and counting

the number of paces, so once around they simply counted paces back to their original line.

During the second exercise of the day, child-sized CPR dummies were placed throughout the 30-acre training ground and officers instructed to find them.

"There is evidence, like a shoe or a jacket for officers to find, clues for them to follow," said Miles.

"They will follow the contour lines in most cases, because again, that's how people walk."

"Most don't realize how easy it is to get lost in the woods. People often walk in circles without realizing it, the trees can all look the same."

Potential victims include hikers and hunters, but a greater concern are the elderly, Alzheimer's patients and children.

"This training is important because when it's my little one or your little one lost out there, we can't pull the stops out fast enough," said Const. Tom Korte, who found the experience worthwhile. "When someone doesn't want to be found, that's one thing."

"But when someone very young or an Alzheimer's patient is out there through no fault of their own, that's when you have to move in fast."

In a real case, the actual search would take place after officers filled out the lost person questionnaire.

This determines the urgency of the situation and offers tips in locating particular groups, like young children.

"A child between one and three is likely still around their own home, but if not it can be dangerous — they may be unaware of being lost and they have no navigational skills," Miles explained.

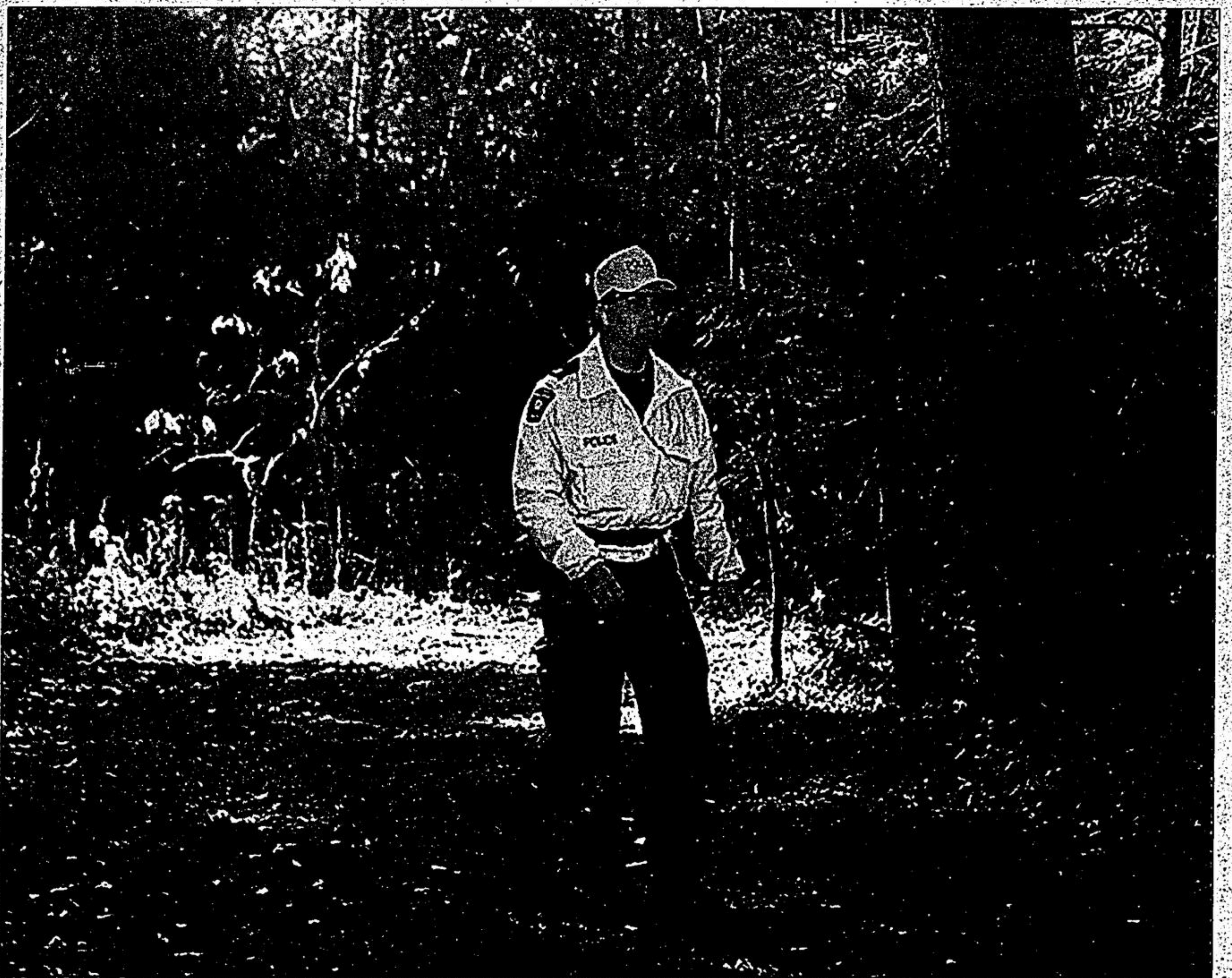
An Alzheimer's patient or someone having an especially bad day may not want to be found, he added.

"They may not call out even if we're very close. We need to have a way to scientifically search an area instead of just driving around or walking around looking with no training."

And as Miles points out, York Region is home to large areas of forests and wooded areas, even though most are fairly isolated.

"No one's ever prepared to get lost in the woods. More people die of hypothermia in the spring and fall than the winter for the same reason — they're not prepared."

"It might be a nice day, you discard clothing as you go, then freeze at night. No one thinks to bring matches either because no one expects it will happen to them."



Const. Steve Thompson treks through the undergrowth. The exercise helps police find people who are lost.

TOP: Sgt. Norn Miles goes over a contoured map of an area near Vivian Sideroad and Highway 48 in Whitchurch-Stouffville, where York Regional Police held a training exercise. BOTTOM: Not all of the exercise was in the deep woods here, Const. Steve Thompson hikes along a forest trail. Armed with a compass, topographical map and a tally rope (which they tied a knot in every 1,000 metres), a total of 37 men and women took part and most arrived at or close to a predetermined end point.

STAFF PHOTOS/SJOERD WITTEVEEN