Chapter 5: Phases of a Ground Search Mission/Assignment

Phase 1 – Planning and Preparation

Planning Concepts for GSTLs

One of the most critical skills for a GSTL is not performed in the field, but takes place before the team even leaves base. Once a team leader has been briefed by SAR Management, the ability to competently plan and organize the team mission/assignment, and deliver an effective team briefing, lays the fundamental groundwork for a well-executed search. In this section, planning and preparation activities carried out by the GSTL will be discussed, as well as the recommended pre-deployment preparations that should take place prior to receiving a team mission.

Some of the skills a team leader will utilize during the planning stage include the ability to:

- Distil the SAR Management Briefing into its essential elements
- Conduct an effective assessment of all planning factors
- Develop an effective plan for execution of the mission/assignment based on current situation
- Visualize how each Phase of the team mission will be performed
- Pay close attention to detail
- Anticipate individual and team logistics/administration needs
- Write a comprehensive, yet concise, Team Briefing
- Effectively brief team members on the overall mission, how it will be performed and what their individual roles will be in each Phase of the mission

The benefits of a comprehensive and organized plan cannot be underestimated; however, the urgent nature of SAR operations often threatens to eclipse the importance of effective planning. At times, team leaders may feel pressured by SAR Command/Management, or even by their own team members, to speed up the process. In such situations, it is important to resist the inclination to take shortcuts, and recognize the risk associated with inadequate planning, as captured in the “6 P Rule” — Poor Performance is Prevented by Proper Planning and Preparation.

Some of the consequences of poor planning and inadequate briefing include:

- Delays in commencing the search or effecting a rescue due to lack of proper equipment
- Failure to complete a mission due to problems that should have been anticipated and mitigated prior to deployment
- Confusion amongst team members due to unclear or unstated expectations
- Safety of team members and/or subject compromised due to lack of preparation or information

While the new GSTL may be concerned about the time required for planning the mission/assignment, understanding the key planning concepts and process discussed below, in combination with practice and experience, will reinforce the necessary skills
and eventually allow the process to flow naturally. The time required for planning and carrying out the mission/assignment can be reduced by:

- Passing on mission information to the team members at the earliest possible moment
- Anticipating future tasks and contingencies
- Using effective planning and briefing practices
- Maximizing concurrent activity

**Concurrent Activity**

A key concept that can accelerate the planning process, and make the most of the time available for team preparation prior to deployment is *concurrent activity*. This is achieved through delegation of certain GSTL duties to an Assistant Team Leader, allowing the GSTL to take the time necessary to plan for the mission/assignment, while the ATL carries out other preparatory activities with the team.

Employing the concept of concurrent activity has the side benefit of keeping team members active and engaged during the planning phase, rather than waiting for something to happen.

**Forward Planning**

Forward Planning is the ongoing process of anticipating, identifying and planning for future events or contingencies that could require an alteration of the original plan for the mission/assignment. Anticipating potential challenges for the team, and planning for them before they occur, is the mark of a good leader—one who is concerned about the safety and welfare of his/her team members.

It is impossible to anticipate and plan for all potential circumstances, but it is essential to take into account those contingencies that have the greatest likelihood of occurring, based on the nature of the operation and past experience. In a typical SAR operation, potential situations could include being stranded overnight, experiencing a sudden change in weather, or dealing with an injured team member.

While forward planning is an activity that is specifically mentioned in the planning phases, it is also closely linked to situational awareness, and should be considered an ongoing process throughout the mission.

**Maintaining Documentation**

Another concept that is critical to the planning function is effective and thorough documentation. This is particularly important for GSTLs, as they are the primary conduits for information passing upwards to SAR Management, as well as downwards to their team members. Both groups have a reasonable expectation that the GSTL will provide complete information—relying on memory rather than keeping thorough notes can have a detrimental effect on forward planning and the overall performance of the mission/assignment.
It is equally important to provide information, particularly briefings and debriefings, in a written format. Sharing information verbally can be very unpredictable—the person receiving the information may not interpret it correctly, or may not pass it on to others who need the information. By documenting all actions, decisions and observations, the GSTL can be assured that there is an accurate record of events, and that SAR Management is provided with all pertinent information for future planning activities.

**Planning and Preparation Process**

While SAR Management is responsible for planning the overall SAR response, GSTLs must establish their own plans to effectively prepare for and execute their mission/assignment. GSTLs must pay close attention to detail to ensure the safety and well being of their team members, as well as that of the subject(s).

Two checklists (see Forms section) have been developed to help GSTLs organize their planning and briefing information:

- GSTL Mission/Assignment Checklist—provides a general reminder of the basic actions required of the GSTL during each phase of the mission.
- Checklist - Team Leader Briefing to Team—a comprehensive SMEAC-based checklist to ensure that all detailed information required for planning and briefing of the mission is obtained prior to deployment.

As noted in the previous section, the planning process for SAR missions has been broken down into five phases—this section describes Phase 1, Planning and Preparation activities. Phase 1 is broken down further into five distinct steps:

**Step 1: Pre-Assignment –SAR Management Briefing**

**Step 2: Initial Planning**

**Step 3: Detailed Planning**

**Step 4: Team Briefing**

**Step 5: Prepare to Move**

These steps are described below, along with some tips to prepare the GSTL for his/her role prior to deployment.

**Preparing for GSTL Role**

The team leader’s individual preparation and readiness to participate in a SAR mission prior to arriving at the Incident Command Post is an essential pre-requisite to performing well as a Ground Search Team Leader.

Once the GSTL has reported to SAR Management and has been briefed on the mission/assignment, all the GSTL’s energy becomes focused on planning, organizing the team and deploying them to the field as rapidly as possible. There will be little or no time to attend to personal preparedness at this point, so try to take a moment on
arrive at the ICP to reassess and make any last minute changes to your clothing and/or equipment before reporting in.

If at all possible, try to arrive at least five minutes early for your briefing. Without intruding upon the work of the SAR Management Team, use this opportunity to observe and augment the information that will be provided in the briefing by:

- Assessing the tempo of activity in the Incident Command Post to gain a sense of the level of urgency for the SAR operation
- Reviewing and copying the Status Map to get an initial orientation in terms of the ground and the overall scope of the SAR operation

**Step 1 – Pre-Assignment - SAR Management Briefing**

The team leader’s role in a SAR operation begins with a briefing from SAR Management on the team’s mission. In a small SAR operation, the SAR Manager or Operations Chief may conduct the team leader briefing. In larger operations, where several SAR Management positions are activated, the Planning Chief may give the briefing.

Regardless of who gives the briefing, the information provided will generally be in a standard format and address the same core information required for all searches.

SMEAC is the preferred briefing format used in SAR Management and GSTL training. SMEAC is an acronym for Situation/Mission/Execution/Administration/Command, and will be described in more detail later in this section.

Using a SMEAC briefing checklist to ensure a thorough briefing, the information provided will generally include, but is not limited to:

- Incident information – what is known, what is assumed, and what is not known
- Subject details
- Review of hazards and precautions, no-go criteria
- Mission objective(s) and tactics
- Team skills and equipment required, and coordinating details; access to supplies
- Whether or not family/friends of the subject, or other convergent volunteers, will be on the team
- Communications Plan, e.g., confirmation of frequencies, call-signs, and radio checks
- Team number and mission/assignment number

**Convergent Volunteers**

On occasion, untrained convergent volunteers may show up at the search site offering their assistance. SAR Management will try to put their skills to use in the most advantageous way, which may be assisting around the base camp, or being assigned to a search team. The GSTL may be asked to do some training on site as to what is expected of the convergent volunteer.
The GSTL should introduce him/herself to any convergent volunteers assigned to the team. Remember that, although the general public will sometimes offer assistance, convergent volunteers are usually friends and family members of the subject. These volunteers should be taken under the GSTL’s wing and guided through the search process. Try to determine their relationship to the subject—they may be able to offer some personal insight that can assist in finding the subject.

Extra attention is required to ensure the safety of convergent volunteers. While SAR Management will normally screen to ensure they are properly equipped before assigning them to a team, it is the GSTL’s responsibility to ensure that all team members have the necessary gear and supplies to perform the required tasks.

Note: It is important to record the position of everyone on the search line, particularly when unknown convergent volunteers are involved. There have been cases when the perpetrator of a crime involving the subject has joined the search, either to steer the search away from evidence or to use search information to relocate the body of the subject.

**SMEAC Checklist**

It is good practice to refer to the Checklist for Team Leader Briefing to Team (see Appendix B) during the briefing from SAR Management. As the checklist is laid out in SMEAC format, it can be used as a guide to ensure all necessary information is received.

SAR Management may also be working from its own checklist, which is slightly different in detail from that used by team leaders. For instance, certain planning details that are generally considered the responsibility of the GSTL, such as assigning individual tasks to specific team members in each phase, are only found on the team leader’s checklist. In some situations, however, SAR Management may choose to provide more explicit direction, particularly if they are more familiar with the team members and their skill sets.

**Taking Notes**

The GSTL must take detailed notes of the briefing from SAR Management—they will be essential when trying to recall the details that the GSTL will need to plan and organize the specific details of the team mission. Accurate, readable, and complete notes are critical. If the SAR Manager or briefer is speaking too quickly, it is reasonable to ask him/her to slow down or to repeat certain sections—accuracy is more important than speed at this point.

Take nothing for granted, and do not make assumptions. The team leader should take note of any information that is unclear, incomplete, ambiguous, or missing, along with any questions that arise during the briefing. It is the GSTL’s duty to ask appropriate questions; however, clarification should be requested at the end of the briefing, rather than slowing down or sidetracking the process with interruptions. In addition to clarifying information, asking questions may also serve to remind the briefer of missing information that SAR Management needs to track down. SAR Management
may not have all the answers, particularly in the early stages of an operation, so make note of any outstanding questions for future follow-up.

Providing Input

Team leaders are generally recognized by SAR Management for their firm grounding in the practical aspects of conducting a SAR mission. GSTLs should not hesitate to offer the benefit of their practical field experience when the opportunity arises. At the same time, it is important to recognize the authority of the SAR Management Team and respect their decisions, whether or not the team leader’s suggestions are utilized.

Collecting Mission/Assignment Documentation

Once the briefing is concluded, the GSTL should ensure all necessary documentation is in hand before beginning initial planning. This will normally include:

- Team Assignment Sheet (ICS 204)
- Map with pertinent data (grid line numbers, etc.)
- Copies of other relevant handouts, e.g., Subject Profile or Lost Person Questionnaire

Step 2 – Initial Planning

With all necessary mission briefing information in hand, the next step is to find a quiet spot, without distractions, to formulate the initial plan.

Select an Assistant Team Leader

SAR Management will often assign the Assistant Team Leader (ATL). If this does not occur, then the GSTL will be responsible for selecting the most appropriate team member to perform the role of ATL. As this person will be second-in-command, it is important to choose someone who is able to do the job. If someone on the team is being groomed as a potential GSTL, this may an opportunity to provide some mentoring or coaching. Some additional factors you should consider in making the selection are:

- Experience
- Personal organization
- Ability to work well with others
- Ability to make rapid, reasonable decisions
- Demonstrated leadership potential

Initial Map Review

Conduct a preliminary review of the map at this stage to gain a better understanding of the terrain the team will be encountering, and how it may affect the remainder of the assignment/mission planning. A more detailed review will be carried out a little later in this process. At this point, the focus is mainly on issues affecting safety, and time and space.
Safety

Safety is a primary concern at every stage of planning. At this point, the objective is to identify and begin planning for any potential safety issues apparent on the map, such as steep embankments/cliffs, fast flowing streams, or potential avalanche/rock fall areas. A significant safety risk can override all other factors, but most can be adequately managed by taking appropriate precautions. The team leader should make note of any special equipment the team or individual members may need to safely perform the team mission.

Any serious hazards that threaten the mission or the safety of team members should be immediately brought to the attention of SAR Management for reassessment of the mission.

Time and Space

Although the SAR Manager may have given you a time estimate to complete the mission/assignment, the second objective is to review the map to determine the distance to be traveled and the size of the area to be searched. Review of the terrain to be traveled includes not only the search area, but also the routes to and from the search area, even if traveled by vehicle. In addition to determining distance, the GSTL considers how the nature of the terrain (e.g. steepness, thickness of vegetation, road/trail conditions, natural or artificial obstacles) may affect the team’s rate of movement and time to perform the mission.

Given the spacing indicated by SAR Management, the GSTL now estimates how many sweeps of the search area are required in order to achieve the mission, and makes note of how these and other terrain factors affect the time required.

Keep in mind that maps are only a snapshot—not only are they likely out of date, but they could also be inaccurate.

Initial Time Assessment

The main purpose at this point is to get a general idea of how much time it will take to perform the entire SAR mission, including all preparation time as well as the time necessary to travel to and from the search area. Only a rough estimate is required at this stage—a more complete time assessment will be performed in Detailed Planning. With experience, time estimates may become almost intuitive, but until then, it is important to take the time necessary to ensure all factors have been considered.

This task can be simplified by breaking the estimate down by phase. The cumulative total of the times for all Phases will provide the Initial Time Assessment for completion of the mission.

Phase 1 – Planning and Preparation

The key time frames to capture in this phase are:

- Initial Planning – ends with delivery of the ATL Briefing
- Detailed Planning – ends with written draft of the Team Briefing
Team Briefing – the time it will take to deliver the briefing and answer any questions

Prepare to Move – departure time is determined by estimating the time required to complete all logistics and ensure team members are ready to move

Phase 2 – Move to Mission/Assignment Area

This time estimate should have been determined during the Initial Map Review.

Phase 3 – Complete the Mission/Assignment

Again, Phase 3 should have been at least partially timed during the Initial Map Review. The time assessment of this phase has several elements to consider.

- How fast the team can move safely over the terrain
- The number of sweeps required, as determined in the Initial Map Review
- The time it will take to move from the end of one sweep area to the start line for the next sweep
- Estimated time for rest breaks and meals
- Build in extra time for any unexpected time requirements

Phase 4 – Return to Base

As for Phase 2, this estimate should already be available as a result of the Initial Map Review.

Phase 5 – Post Mission/Assignment Procedures

Remember that the mission does not end with the team’s return to base. A Time Assessment for the activities completed by the SAR team in Phase 5 must also be included.

Initial Plan

The Initial Plan is simply a rough outline of the mission/assignment from start to finish. With the information already gathered in the first part of the process, the major elements of the Initial Plan should be coming together.

Through the Initial Map Review and Time Assessment, the team leader has already determined the departure point, routes to and from the search area, search methods to be used, and the time estimated to complete each phase of the search, including the post-mission/assignment tasks.

By this point, the GSTL will have realized the need for at least two possible versions of the plan—what happens if the subject is not found, and what happens if the subject is found. Now is the time to begin considering other contingencies, as well. For instance:

- What happens if the weather turns bad?
- What happens if the team gets stranded overnight?
- What happens if one of the team members becomes injured or lost?
For now, the GSTL should limit contingency planning to only the most likely possibilities, and identify what the ATL should do in order to prepare the team for those situations. There will be an opportunity to expand the list of possible scenarios in the Detailed Planning step.

This is also a good time to review the Administration section of the SMEAC format to identify other administrative, logistical or resource needs, including making arrangements for the comfort needs of the team on return from the field.

If the team has just returned from a mission/assignment, and is now preparing for another similar deployment during the same operation, the Initial Planning step may take significantly less time as personnel, equipment, and nature of the mission are largely unchanged. However, it’s important to ensure that no relevant element is inadvertently overlooked.

Prepare and Deliver ATL Briefing

Select Briefing Area: Select an appropriate area for briefing the ATL. This area may be separate and apart from the area chosen by the team leader for the planning activities, but will have many of the same characteristics; it should be protected from the weather, if possible, and free from noise and distractions, to ensure the ATL can give full attention to the ATL briefing. The area chosen for the ATL briefing is also frequently used for the Team Briefing.

Draft ATL Briefing: The ATL Briefing follows a standard format that is designed to focus the SAR team’s preparation and help identify the administration and logistics that need to be addressed in preparation for the team’s deployment, while the GSTL completes the Detailed Planning. As always it is important that the ATL Briefing be recorded in writing.

The ATL Briefing is done in a standard format as follows:

1. General Situation
2. Mission/Assignment
3. Personnel
4. Team Briefing - location/time
5. Equipment Needed
6. Special Instructions

General Situation –

This is usually a 2-3 sentence summary of the Situation as outlined in the briefing from SAR Management. Focus at this point is to provide a brief orientation to the ATL (which will be shared with the team) containing enough information about the Situation to allow the team to prepare for deployment. The Situation information provided will generally consist of the subject’s name, age, plus a very brief description of the subject type and activity and any other critical facts about the situation. The designated name for the team is also identified at this point (e.g. Team 1).
Mission/Assignment –

This information is provided in a short, sharp, single sentence that concisely states the team’s mission/assignment. It will usually address WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW, and is always said twice to ensure that there is no confusion or misunderstanding. For example:

“Team 2 [WHO] will conduct a low visibility grid sweep [WHAT and HOW], of Area C [WHERE] no later than 1900 hours [WHEN].”

SAY AGAIN...

“Team 2 will conduct a low visibility grid sweep of Area C no later than 1900 hrs.”

Personnel –

This is where the team leader advises the ATL which personnel have been assigned to the team by SAR Management. The team leader may pass on the Team Assignment Sheet containing the personnel information at this point, or may keep it for reference while completing the planning activities. If personnel information (e.g. special qualifications) is not complete, the ATL can be asked to obtain this information to complete the Team Assignment Sheet.

Team Briefing Location/Time –

The GSTL indicates when and where the team will be briefed. It is the ATL’s job to make sure the team members arrive at the briefing on time and ready to go.

Equipment Needed –

The GSTL outlines what supplies and equipment (individual and team) the ATL is to arrange for while the GSTL continues with the Detailed Planning.

Special Instructions –

The GSTL details what other arrangements or procedures the ATL is to complete prior to the Team Briefing.

Brief Assistant Team Leader: Once the ATL briefing is drafted, the GSTL and ATL should make their introductions then proceed to the selected briefing area and begin the briefing.

The ATL should always take written notes of the ATL briefing. Despite time pressures, the team leader should take care to speak slowly and clearly to allow for accurate note-taking and check periodically to ensure this is occurring. It is crucial that the ATL receives and understands all elements of the briefing; this can be accomplished by offering the opportunity to ask questions, or by requesting verbal feedback to verify critical points.

When the briefing is complete, the GSTL begins preparation of the Detailed Plan, while the ATL proceeds to carry out the briefing instructions; this is the most commonly seen occurrence of concurrent activity in the planning process.
Step 3 – Detailed Planning

It is now time for the GSTL to again find a quiet area to formulate the final detailed plan before briefing the team.

Detailed Map Review

A more thorough map review is now required; rather than making rough estimates of distances and area sizes, a more accurate calculation should be performed. In addition to the assigned area and the routes to and from it, also include the surrounding area and look for any factors that influence the Initial Plan. For example:

- Is there is anything in the search area or surrounding terrain that could prove useful if an unplanned contingency arises?
- Is there a hazard in another area that could affect your team’s search area? [e.g., the search area is in a possible “run-out zone” for an avalanche slope that is in another team’s area, which would require an Organized Avalanche Response (OAR) Team and OAR Team Leader to search]
- What type and thickness of vegetation is represented on the topographical map?
- How steep are the slopes?

Amend the plan as necessary.

Detailed Time Assessment

The main purpose at this point is to get an accurate idea of how much time it will take to perform the entire SAR mission/assignment, including all preparation time as well as the time necessary to travel to and from the search area. Applying the same principles used for the initial time estimate, this assessment is based on the more precise information obtained from the Detailed Map Review, and provides more complete and accurate results. Any changes that have occurred since the Initial Time Assessment should also be taken into account.

Detailed Plan

As in the Initial Plan, detailed planning should also be approached phase by phase.

By this point, Phase 1 is almost complete, and Phase 5 is usually fairly routine, so the primary focus should be on Phases 2, 3 and 4. It is necessary to plan, in detail, what the team and will do in each phase, how they will do it, and exactly how and where they must move to complete the mission effectively.

Particular attention should be paid to the “Coordinating Details” and “Administration/Logistics” sections of the SMEAC briefing checklist, which list the most common items that require planning in the majority of SAR operations. While the checklist is fairly comprehensive, it is only intended as a planning aid. Depending on the nature and type of the SAR mission, there may be other matters to consider that are not listed. It is the responsibility if the GSTL to anticipate, identify, and plan for all relevant matters at the team level.
Forward Planning

Also referred to as contingency planning, Forward Planning is the process of anticipating, identifying and planning for possible situations or events that could make it necessary to revise the plan while in the field. Contingency planning began during development of the Initial Plan, and continues now in more detail.

Any number of circumstances may arise that can alter the plan after the team has left base. For instance, the team may discover that some of the information provided was inaccurate or out of date; or perhaps unexpected weather has washed out a road or grounded the helicopter that was to pick up the team. The GSTL may need to make some quick decisions in order to ensure team safety and/or keep the team’s mission on-track. Having a tentative plan that addresses the most likely contingencies may allow the team to continue without losing significant time or momentum.

The Detailed Plan should be modified to take into account those contingencies that the GSTL believes should be addressed.

Assign Individual Tasks in Each Phase

The final task before drafting the Team Briefing is to assign individual tasks to the team members. Along with the basic roles of Radio Operator, Compass Person, Pacer, or First Aider that may be assigned for the entire mission, assigning specific roles for each Phase of the mission/assignment should also be considered. For instance, individual tasks for Phase 3 might be Right Flanker, Searcher 1, Searcher 2, or Left Flanker; specific roles for Phase 2 might include driver, navigator, or co-driver.

With this degree of planning, team members will be able to prepare in advance for the specific roles expected of them.

Draft Team Briefing

By now the GSTL should have a fairly clear picture of how the mission/assignment should roll out, and will have detailed notes to work with while developing the Team Briefing. The objective now is to distill those notes and the Detailed Plan down into the essential elements required for an effective Team Briefing.

It is absolutely vital that the Team Briefing be in writing, as it is an essential part of the due diligence documentation that is maintained by the SAR group. While some team leaders have been known to try and brief the team by flipping through their notebooks and pulling out what seems to be the key information from SAR Management, this method has significant flaws and appears unprofessional. Not only is there no definitive record of the information provided to the team, there is also a very real risk of inadvertently omitting important, or even critical, details that may be required as evidence in the future.

The SMEAC format is an invaluable tool for organizing and presenting briefing information in a standard format, ensuring that briefings are conducted in the same organized and predictable way every time. The “Checklist – Team Leader Briefing to Team” form (see Forms section) has been developed to assist team leaders in using the SMEAC format as they formulate their Team Briefings.
SMEAC Format

**Situation** - This will be based almost entirely upon the information received in the team leader’s briefing from SAR Management. It provides the team members with the “big picture” as well as necessary details regarding the subject of the search.

**Mission/Assignment** - As previously mentioned, it is important to state the team Mission twice. This is possibly the most important part of the briefing—each team member must have a clear understanding of what the team is expected to accomplish.

**Execution** - This part of the briefing covers details on how the mission/assignment will be executed.

  *General Overview* – Provides a general overview of how the mission/assignment will be carried out, broken down by Phase. Avoid specific details—these will be presented under “Coordinating Details”. Diagrams should be used rather than verbal descriptions, wherever possible.

  *Specific Individual Tasks* – Describes the general tasks each team member will perform throughout the mission/assignment, as well as their specific individual tasks in each Phase of the mission.

  *Coordinating Instructions* – Explains exactly how the team will perform the mission/assignment, including details regarding timings, movement, safety, tactics and techniques.

**Administration/Logistics** – In this portion of the briefing, logistical support for the team is described, along with administrative details such as policies on media interviews and interactions with family/friends of the subject. Any changes to the usual individual and team equipment needed for the mission should be confirmed.

**Command/Communications** – This section outlines the chain of command—including the ATL, GSTL, SAR Management and SAR Commander—and the location of the Incident Command Post (ICP). The team is also given all essential information relating to radio communications, and watches are synchronized. Finally, the GSTL invites questions from the team members (although this material cannot be included in the draft, it is important not to omit this step during the briefing).

**General Tips for Preparing the Briefing**

- Items on the Checklist that do not apply to the current mission can be omitted.
- For second or subsequent missions in the same SAR operation, enter “N/C” for “No Change” if the item remains exactly the same from the previous team mission. Note: This does not apply if there are any new members on the team, as they will not have the benefit of being able to refer to the original briefing.
- Do not write detailed narrative paragraphs when drafting the Team Briefing.
- Write legibly and use point form so that each written point triggers a more comprehensive verbal explanation. However, there must be sufficient detail for someone else to understand the contents of the briefing.
- The use of diagrams can prove extremely effective, when trying to describe how a team may move through an area, or change locations within an area.
**Step 4 – Team Briefing**

With the Team Briefing draft completed, the GSTL is now ready to take the team aside and conduct the briefing before departing for the search area. Briefings should be clear, concise and complete. Although time is of the essence, it is important to ensure that critical details are not omitted for the sake of brevity.

There are two types of briefing that can take place:

*Detailed Briefing*

Ideally, the team leader will have enough time to deliver a thorough, detailed team briefing prior to departure. Every attempt should be made to meet this goal; however, there will be exceptions when this may not be possible.

*Critical Briefing*

In certain urgent circumstances, such as a rescue where the subject is threatened with imminent death or injury, it may not be possible to follow the full planning and organizing process in all its detail. In such cases the team leader may give a Critical Briefing, where not only the planning process but also portions of the SMEAC Checklist will be substantially condensed or even eliminated in order to deploy the team more rapidly.

There is no definitive combination of elements that constitutes a Critical Briefing. Experience, training and instinct will be the team leader’s primary guides in determining which information is immediately essential, and which information can be passed on as time and circumstances permit, i.e. “need to know” vs “nice to know”.

For instance, there is no question that the team must clearly understand their assignment/mission, and be made aware of all safety measures identified for the mission. However, it may be appropriate to reserve certain details, such as individual tasks for Phase 3, until a later time, possibly en route or on arrival at the search area. Other information that does not affect the progress or safety of the mission may be omitted entirely.

Critical Briefing must not be confused with the unprofessional practice of “winging it”. A Critical Briefing must still be planned, albeit in a more abbreviated manner than the full Detailed Briefing. Where a Critical Briefing is used in place of the complete process, then a much greater degree of diligence is placed upon the team leader to anticipate and plan for upcoming events during the execution of the mission/assignment, and to communicate his/her intentions and requirements more frequently to the team.

*Briefing the Team*

As stated earlier, every member of the team must understand exactly what the team mission is, what support they can expect, and when and how their own specific individual tasks within that mission are to be executed. The Team Briefing is the method by which the team leader passes on this information.
The briefing pointers discussed in regards to the ATL Briefing also apply to the Team Briefing, with a few additional tips included:

- Choose a quiet site for the briefing.
- Place the team in such a way that there are no distractions in their line of sight.
- If possible, seat the team members in the same order they will be placed when searching the assigned area, and maintain this order when moving to the search area. This provides a physical cue that visually confirms their order even before leaving base.
- Introduce yourself and confirm ATL as second in command.
- Have team members introduce themselves and briefly state their specialties/experience.
- Request that all questions be held until end of briefing.
- Ensure that team members take notes of the briefing to avoid unnecessary questions later.
- Speak slowly and clearly to allow for accurate note-taking.
- Refer to the map and point out key locations as they are mentioned in the briefing.
- Ask for questions at the end of the briefing. This step should not be considered optional—it provides the team with an opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings or ask any questions they may have about the mission/assignment.
- The team leader may also ask questions to confirm that team members know and understand the key elements of the plan, and their individual tasks.

**Step 5 – Prepare to Move**

Now that the Team Briefing has been completed, it’s almost time to leave base. However, there are a few final details to address.

*Final Preparation*

It is at this point where the team leader completes his/her own individual preparation and, with the assistance of the ATL, confirms that each team member is also ready. This is the time for the final call to the latrine, or other “facilities”.

*Complete Administration/Logistics*

The team leader will confirm with the ATL that the arrangements from the Initial Plan that were requested in the ATL Briefing have been completed. Any final changes in Administration and Logistics from that Initial Plan will now need to be arranged.
Radio Checks

The team leader will supervise a final radio check of all radios to ensure they are working and that the ICP has been made aware that the team is about to leave.

Equipment Check

The team leader will usually have delegated responsibility to the ATL for an equipment check of the team members’ gear. However, the team leader should personally check to confirm that all critical team gear is present and make note of who is carrying it.

The team is now ready to leave base and move to the mission/assignment area – Phase 2 of the mission.