

## William Syrotuck Foreword

**Rick LaValla**

Washington State SAR Coordinator (Former)

NASAR President (Former)

SAR Historian

**Email:** [info@eri-intl.com](mailto:info@eri-intl.com)

The aim of the Syrotuck Symposium is to foster SAR best practice dialogue and debate. The symposium founder, Chris Long, back in the day was in quest of a name for this event and I suggested it be named for William “Bill” G. Syrotuck who, in the 1960s and 1970s, was a SAR innovator particularly in matters dealing with search management, the training and application of air scent dogs (he also experimented and considered the use of falcons), and use of search theory.

It was late 1971 and I was hired by the State of Washington Civil Defense to work as assistant to Hal Foss the State’s SAR Coordinator and founder of the National Association for SAR. Principles of land search planning and SAR management as we know it today were lacking. Law enforcement would often wait 24 hours to determine if someone was indeed missing. “Experienced” individuals (most often older SAR volunteers) would rise to the occasion to serve as the ‘search master, mission coordinator, or ring master’ (pick a title!). Development of a search plan was inexact and lining searchers “shoulder to shoulder” to move through a search segment was a frequently used tactic.

Bill was promoting the idea that principles of land search planning and management could be taught in a training course environment (much like the US Coast Guard and Air Force mission coordinator schools). He was publishing papers on use of probability theory to establish a search plan and determine probability of detection. He analyzed SAR mission reports and published profiles of lost person behavior with the suggestion that these would be useful in search planning. He stated that the early application of air scent dogs and hasty search resources could be beneficial.

I was told by many of the old “experienced” volunteers that Bill was “nuts” and to stay away from him, and that you only earned the right to be a SAR leader/manager after many years of experience (ignore the fact that you might be doing it wrong).

Meanwhile there were other people emerging who had the same observations as Bill: that land search planning and management needed to come out of the dark ages. People such as Jon Wartes and Explorer Search and Rescue were promoting hasty searching and quantifying

probability of detection for search methods. Dennis Kelley published his book *Mountain Search for the Lost Victim* that included use of probability theory. Many other 'thinkers' were emerging as well.

During 1971-1972 Washington State was looking at the National SAR School and the Civil Air Patrol's mission coordinator schools as a framework for inland SAR management training. The National Park Service (NPS) also recognized the need for search management training and were working with Bill to build a training course. NPS conducted a prototype course built around Bill's ideas and publications.

I attended this first NPS course and subsequently began working in collaboration with Bill, the NPS, and other search innovators to continue the development of a best practice search planning course. In 1975 the NPS convened the first search planning think tank in Grand Tetons. Bill and all the innovators of the day were in attendance to debate and further develop inland search planning concepts. In retrospect this was the first "Syrotuck Symposium". NASAR meetings and conferences also provided forums to bring people together to further the development of search management and planning. Until his passing in late 1976, Bill was the center of the "managing the search function" course development, and was the lead instructor (usually 16 hours) for the POA x POD = POS lectures.

Bill was a Canadian living in the USA and married to his lovely wife Jean, an American and a nurse who was involved with hypothermia research. Bill and Jean and their air scenting dogs were deployed to hundreds of lost person missions throughout the country via the US Air Force giving them a national view during the 60's and 70's of how search management was done (or not). Not much is known about his background before coming to the USA. After his passing it was whispered that he had involvement with Canada's "Camp X" and participated in Canada and USA cold war activities. Was his last name really "Syrotuck"?

I was in Bill's company often during these years; rooming with him and debating course content and principles far into the night. I would mention often that he was indeed "nuts" as the old heads in the early days stated; that anyone who would devote their life solely to finding and aiding person in distress must be "certifiable" and should not be allowed to run free. We would have a laugh and then dive back into the "craziness" of course development.

Bill was a mentor and a friend. He would be pleased that the quest for best practices in SAR, and the associated dialogue and debate, continues in his memory.