

Dive team uses sophisticated sonar system for searches

August 11, 2013

ELOISE OGDEN (eogden@minotdailynews.com) , Minot Daily News

[Save](#) | [Post a comment](#) |

When a Black River Falls, Wis., dive team came to North Dakota to help with the search for an apparent drowning victim in Lake Sakakawea last week, they used a highly sophisticated sonar system.

Diver Keith Cormican said the side-scan sonar can be set to go down 300 feet and more. The system has a 4-foot-long towfish or torpedo weighing 70 pounds. "You drop that down in the water and we drag that near the bottom so that's why it's so much more efficient," he said.

Topside, a laptop computer is used on the boat to monitor below the water. "It records everything in case we miss something....," he said.

"It's the best of the sonar equipment around," Cormican said.

"Now with this piece of equipment it will eliminate so much time and keep the divers safer," he said. He said divers won't have to spend as much time underwater and will be able to go directly to what they are searching for. "This will make it much safer for everybody involved," he said.

Cormican and his son, Jeremy, recovered the body of Scott Eagle, of New Town, from 50 feet in Lake Sakakawea, west of New Town, the afternoon of August 2. It was near an area from where a 911 call was placed by his family the night of Tuesday, July 30. Eagle was a former New Town-Little Shell representative to the Three Affiliated Tribes' business council.

After the search was completed, V. Judy Brugh, executive secretary and Four Bears representative to the tribal business council, presented a check on behalf of the business council, to Bruce's Legacy, a nonprofit organization that Keith Cormican established this past spring in memory of his brother, a firefighter who lost his life in a diving accident.

"It was totally unexpected," Cormican said of receiving the contribution. Cormican said they had just asked for the cost of gas and motel expenses.

Keith and Jeremy Cormican, and Jon Borreson and Damon Kennedy, who helped the Cormicans on the divers' boat, all received star quilts.

Tex Hall, chairman of the Three Affiliated Tribes, in a news release on Aug. 2, thanked the many people involved in the search and providing support to the searchers.

Jeremy Cormican said this was the first time they had been in North Dakota for a search and recovery.

Keith Cormican said he got involved in the search for Eagle when he was contacted last week by a friend of his, Jon Borreson, of Ettrick, Wis., who is working with the Three Affiliated Tribes' yacht project, west of New Town. Borreson told him a search was going on there but the searchers were not able to find the apparent drowning victim.

Cormican has owned Wazee Sports Center, a dive store in Black River Falls for 17 years, and also trains public safety divers throughout Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota and Iowa. He also organized a nonprofit organization for search and recovery operations, and education.

He said Borreson asked if he would be willing to travel the 12 hours to New Town to help with the search. Cormican said he didn't even hesitate to make the decision to go to North Dakota.

Keith and Jeremy Cormican left Black River Falls Thursday, Aug. 1, about noon and arrived in New Town around midnight. They joined the search, with Borreson and Kennedy, who is the captain of the tribes' yacht, helping on the divers' boat. The yacht was the command center for the search operation led by Marle Baker, tribal Fire Management director. Many others also helped them with the search.

The sonar system located Eagle's body in about 50 feet of water north of the Four Bears Bridge.

Keith Cormican said it's pitch dark in the lake. "Just imagine swimming underwater with your eyes closed," he said, describing the conditions under the water.

Bruce's Legacy, the organization that Keith Cormican organized this past spring, is a volunteer organization providing emergency assistance, education, public safety awareness and search and recovery operations for drowned victims to provide resolution for families.

"My brother was a firefighter here in town and they were trying to recover a missing canoe. They didn't have the proper training and basically the plan went bad and he drowned. That was in August 1995," he said.

Keith and his brother were certified in 1990 with the intentions of doing public safety diving in their county because of a lack of qualified people there. He said for those first few years they did recoveries in the county as private individuals. After the accident involving his brother, he talked to local county officials about the need for better training. "They stepped up to the plate and let us organize a dive team," he said. He's been the unit's dive team instructor since the team started 17 years ago.

When he recently organized Bruce's Legacy, Cormican said, "I took a big gamble with this." But, he said, he "knew in my heart" it was something that must be done. "It took every nickel of my savings," he added.

Cormican had thought about starting the organization for a long time but, he said, what really motivated him was this past spring when a college student fell from a bridge and into the river. "We went up and started helping them with this young man," he said. He said the young man's parents had to go to bed every night thinking about their son who was in the water. "This is heart-wrenching when you are with families like that and families have to go through that," he said.

"Every year I had been pushing this off and pushing this off so that was actually the event that motivated me," he said.

The organization was formed and they've been training and practicing ever since. He said the organization has a board of directors. "We will be training more people as we go along with this," he said.

Three Affiliated Tribes' officials are considering having Keith Cormican return to North Dakota to train a tribal dive team. Jeremy Cormican would assist his dad.

© Copyright 2013 Minot Daily News. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.