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Drone assists emergency responders at crash sites



Flying

Ian Stewart, News Services

REACT volunteers Trevor Feth, left, and Ryan Bender fly the group's drone on at the Waterloo Region Emergency Services Training and Research Complex.

Waterloo Region Record

By [Liz Monteiro](#) 

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The newest piece of equipment Waterloo Regional REACT is using is a drone. It was purchased last winter and was first used last month to capture aerial images of a crash site in Wellesley Township where a 23-year-old Milverton man died after the SUV he was driving collided head-on with a truck on Nafziger Road.

The helicopterlike drone with four propellers and a camera attached to it can fly as high as 60 metres and record the scene down below.

Pilots on the ground use a remote control to operate the drone and the images are viewed on a tablet.

"It captures the angle of entry and departure of the vehicles. It assists us with a collision investigation," said Staff Sgt. Jim Strand, head of the Waterloo Regional Police's traffic branch.

The drone belongs to the region's REACT team, part of a worldwide group of volunteers who assist emergency responders at crash sites, parades and large community events.

REACT, which stands for Radio Equipped Associated Communication Teams, began as a CB radio emergency channel monitoring organization in the 1960s in the United States and Canada.

The local chapter started in 1972 with six members. It now has 40 members who volunteer their time with local emergency responders.

They often get called out in the middle of the night to crashes to assist with lighting and first aid. They also are present at large community events such as the Oktoberfest Parade, the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival and Canada Day events.

The volunteers, some who work as truckers, mechanics and paramedics, put in 4,000 hours in 2014, said local president Rick Weisler of Cambridge.

In addition to the drone, Waterloo Regional REACT also uses high-power lighting systems and an all-terrain rescue eight-wheel Argo with a specialized stretcher that helps paramedics transport patients who are hurt in rugged areas.

Weisler said the Argo recently was used to assist a cyclist who was hurt in a local Hydro cut mountain trail.

The organization also has a Gator utility vehicle and a trailer it uses as a command post. On occasion, the trailer is used by police during ride checks.

The group conducts training for all its members and receives funding from the Region of Waterloo, and the cities of Kitchener and Cambridge. It also relies on fundraising dollars raised through the selling of Nevada tickets.

Its annual budget is \$75,000. The group purchased the drone and other material associated with it for \$4,500.

Four volunteers are certified drone pilots through the Ministry of Transportation. The group had to apply for a special flight operating certificate to use the drone in local skies.

Weisler, who works as a manager at a Mississauga trucking company, said he joined the group after he delivered food and water to police at the Parkhill Dam when a 12-year-old Cambridge boy became trapped and drowned. Police diver Const. Dave Nicholson died trying to retrieve the boy.

"I enjoy doing it. I give back to the community," Weisler said.

Volunteers Ryan Bender and Trevor Feth are certified drone pilots.

"I joined because I wanted to help people," said Bender, 26, who works for the City of Kitchener in road maintenance.

Both men don't mind waking up in the early morning hours to assist firefighters and police or the long hours at events such as the Canada Day fireworks.

"I can still remember the first crash like it was last night," said Bender, who went to school for firefighting.

For police and other first responders, the assistance of the REACT volunteers allows police and others to focus on their work knowing the group is on hand to help.

"We have an invaluable relationship," said Staff Sgt. Jim Strand. "They are our extra hands and eyes."

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