

A Brief History of Tracking In British Columbia – By Mike Neeland, Sign Cutter

Prior to the 1980's, there were very few SAR groups in BC that employed trackers in the field. Those that did received training at the local level by the use of hunters and trappers who saw the similarity between animal and human sign.

I was lucky to be in one of these groups. My mentor was a long-time hunter named Dick Beatle. We were tasked with locating a lost hunter west of Quesnel. After a successful search with Dick, I was hooked for life!

In 1982 Universal Tracking Systems, later to become Universal Tracking Service (UTS), made its first trip into the interior and held a Track Aware class at Mount Lolo – a radar station east of Kamloops, and the following year at Baldy Hughes, a radar station south west of Prince George.

The UTS instructors were Joel Hardin, Al Eastman, Al Pratt, Jerry Darkis, Stan Robson and Marvin Martin. They were all either US Border Patrol, Special Deputies or Sheriffs.

Moving back in time and place to El Cajon, California, Joel Hardin, Ab Taylor and Frank Heile were Border Patrolmen along the US/Mexican border. Their job was to cut for sign of illegal entry into the US from Mexico, follow the sign, locate the Illegals, and transport them to a muster point, from which they were returned south across the border. Often, this process was repeated many times - the trackers were soon able to identify the subjects by name from the sign they left when they tried to enter the US again.

One day, the Border Patrol members were coming off shift and noticed a group of Search and Rescue volunteers on a task at a local park. They asked the SAR Manager if they could be of any help. The SAR Manager briefed the Patrol Members and they cut for sign of the subject. A line of sign and direction of travel was determined, and the subject was successfully located.

The SAR Group was impressed and they approached the Head of the Border Patrol and arranged for some of his members to conduct tracker training. So, the seed was planted for tracking to become a SAR specialty.

The use of the stick to find sign was developed by SAR, and is now a recognized tracking tool and basic tracking technique. In those days it was not used for tracking – just for moving brush and stuff out of the way.

Moving forward to the early 1980's, the classes at Mt Lolo and Baldy Hughes were long on field work and short on classroom time, because the visual and audio components of the classroom presentations were only in the development stage.

Lines of sign were laid on whatever the local area had to offer. Sometimes it was a gravel parking lot, as in Port Alberni, or an active gravel pit south of Sumas on the Nooksack River.

By the late 1980's and early 90's, several of the more senior trackers in the BC interior and northern communities decided to start their own training programs and the "In House" tracking class was born.

The single sheets of tracking information that had been developed by UTS over the years, were copied and stapled together 10 copies at a time at the Stores Office of Cariboo Pulp and Paper. For me, it was a labour of love – it had to be.

Classes were fairly simple back then because there were plenty of Track Aware novices and only a few senior trackers – so a single class for the both were the norm.

But, soon there were more UTS classes to be had and this generated more advanced trackers who also wanted to be involved in the In House classes.

The senior In House presenters lobbied UTS for permission to host a split Novice and Advanced class. UTS reluctantly agreed, with the proviso that "the needs of the Track Aware Novices would be fully met before the advanced students were split off to do tracking scenarios."

In the mid-90's, a group of BC trackers and UTS, met with Jon Heske from the Justice Institute of BC (JIBC) to discuss the possibility of a formal Train The Trainer (TTT) class so that everyone would "be on the same page" when it came to Tracker training in BC. This was addressed again at a UTS class in the hills west of Kamloops.

Thirty-two of the senior trackers in BC met with UTS and Stewart MacDonald from the JIBC to finalize an agreement to conduct JIBC/UTS TTT courses. The first course was held at the Youth Correctional Centre on the Vedder River south of the Army Base in Chilliwack.

It was agreed that funds permitting, JIBC would sponsor two UTS TTT classes per year so that more Trackers would have an opportunity to attend in different areas of the province.

Unfortunately, the UTS TTT concept was abused by some students who used it as an opportunity to attend a JIBC sponsored course and get a free UTS class. The TTT instructional content was lost to practicing tracking scenarios, instead of learning how to instruct and present a tracking class. Neither UTS nor JIBC ever issued TTT certification to those who attended the classes.

The last JIBC/UTS TTT course was held in Prince George in the fall of 2008. Only 11 of the 18 registered Trackers showed up and there was much dissatisfaction with the course content. Also, the course could not be used for Advanced Tracker re-certification.

In 2009, a meeting of the SAR Stakeholders Training Committee, consisting of EMBC, BC SARA, RCMP and JIBC, decided to end support for contractor provided Tracker training. Reasons given were that JIBC had no control over course content and there were limited funds for SAR specialty training. This was formally announced by JIBC and funding for Tracking courses ceased in April 2010.

The BC Trackers Association had been in existence for some time. It was an informal group of trackers dedicated to furthering Tracker Training in BC. However, in order to apply for funding and grants, they needed to be formally established as a Registered Society.

This was done in 2009, and called the British Columbia Tracking Association Society. Applications were made for Community Gaming Grants and the National SAR Secretariat New Initiatives Fund (NIF). In 2010, the Association was formally recognized by Emergency Management BC as a Volunteer Search and Rescue Tracker Training Group and was provided a Training Task Number.

Also in 2009, the Association and UTS signed an agreement, which basically continued the previous agreement with JIBC for TTT classes and In House training.

In April 2011, the Association received a SAR NIF Contribution Agreement (NIF CA), which would provide funding for Tracker Training for one year. In addition, the CA required the Association to develop GSAR Tracker Training Standards and supporting training materials.

The first BCTA sponsored UTS Train The Trainer and Tracker 1 courses were held in Duncan in April 2011 and 13 BCTA Instructors were certified. This was the first Tracking course and TTT since the fall of 2008 in Prince George. It returned to the original intent of teaching how to conduct Tracker training. In House courses and UTS Advanced courses were held, but due to lack of courses during the previous two years, and the late confirmation and announcement of funding, only about half of the NIF CA proposed courses were conducted.

The draft BCTA Training Standards and instructional materials were gradually introduced during the 2011 courses.

The NIF funding was due to expire at the end of March 2012. Because there were fewer courses than planned and budgeted for, a request was made to use some of the NIF CA funds to produce a professionally-made BCTA Training Video. This was approved and the project was taped and completed between November and March 2012.

Also, a request was made and approved to extend the NIF CA for a second year – thereby providing funding to subsidize courses in 2012.

The first formal BCTA GSAR Tracking Instructor course was held in Vernon in April 2012 and nine instructors were certified by the BCTA. An Instructor Manual, including the Training Video, Power Point presentations and documentation, was developed and copied on DVD, and provided to all 23 current BCTA Instructors. Eleven In House Track Aware and Advanced courses and one BCTA sponsored UTS course, were conducted through 2012. More of the draft training Standards and instructional materials were introduced and trialed at these courses.

Since 2010, the Association has provided 29 courses for over 566 students at the Novice/Track Aware and Advanced levels of GSAR tracker training.

The Training Standards and Instructional Materials will be delivered to EMBC and NSS at the end of the NIF CA on 30 March 2013. Undoubtedly, there will be much more history to follow....