



CAP Sleuth Tracks Down Rogue Distress Signals

Hawaii 'Find-O'

By Kimberly L. Wright

Using technical expertise and his love of a good mystery, the Hawaii Wing's Lt. Col. Randy Leval has found seemingly lost emergency locator transmitters, some in unlikely places.

Leval said he relies upon more than 25 years of experience as a police officer with the Maui County Police Department and a lifetime of communications experience dating back to his CAP cadet days to locate elusive ELTs.

Leval was called into action recently by Lt. Col. Tony Schena, the Hawaii Wing's director of emergency services, to locate a distress signal detected near the coast of Maui that had stumped the U.S. Coast Guard. He drove to the coordinates the Coast Guard provided, near Kahului, and scouted the scene with the aid of a handheld 121.5 radio receiver. But it was not until he moved away from the coordinates to the harbor that he hit pay dirt.

"You have to be a little bit of a detective and look at the probabilities," explained Leval. "For instance, I thought it was a good probability to go to the harbor because of the boats, since seagoing vessels also have special transmitters similar to ELTs that sound in distress situations."

Leval discovered the signal was coming from a large

shipping container on a trailer holding an aircraft — a white Hughes 500. The find had a Hawaiian flair, as Hughes 500 helicopters are commonly used by sightseeing companies in Hawaii, and one was featured prominently in the hit TV series "Magnum P.I."

He located and silenced the wayward ELT in less than three hours.

Try to Detect It

Leval's ELT discoveries have included some oddities. Once when searching in a residential area for an ELT, he discovered the signal was emanating from inside a home. "I'm pounding on the door and looking inside, and I can see a small puppy playing with an ELT," he said.

Another ELT search almost got Leval and his squadron down in the dumps.

After Kahului Airport personnel failed to track down a phantom ELT signal at the airport, the Maui Composite Squadron was put on the case. Leval found the ELT in a dumpster. The well-sealed container made detection on the ground difficult, but the satellite was readily picking up the signal through the top of the dumpster.

“Somebody had a box of stuff they threw away with this old ELT, and when they slammed it to the bottom of the dumpster, that set it off,” he said.

“We were talking about it after the find thinking, ‘Boy, if this thing had gone to the landfill the next day, it would have been difficult to locate and disable.’”

In another ELT find, Leval investigated a distress signal coming from the edge of a residential area in Lahaina. “I literally had to go digging through weeds after figuring out where it was,” he said. “Somebody tossed an EPIRB (emergency position-indicating radio beacon, the maritime equivalent of an ELT) into a pile of leaves thinking it was junk, but the battery was good enough to be heard.”

OJT via CAP

Leval, who joined CAP as a cadet in 1975, discovered through the organization a love for amateur radio and technology. He became a qualified radio operator and a qualified mission observer, both extraordinary feats for a cadet. “Back then, I used to run the net control one night

a week,” he said.

“I’ve been around not only the techie part of communications and electronics but also the operational aspect,” said Leval, who was in charge of the Maui County Police Department’s 911 communications center for five years. The center handles police dispatch for fire and medical emergencies.

Leval obtained a private pilot’s license, an interest linked to his CAP experience, and he is now a mission check pilot. As to what it takes to become a multifaceted volunteer, he noted, “The progression throughout the years is OJT (on-the-job training) and a lot of tinkering and determination. My experience with just radio in general helped out a lot, knowing how radio waves propagate in different situations and understanding reflections.”

Hawaii Wing Commander Col. Earl G. Greenia applauds Leval’s volunteerism: “Hawaii Wing is fortunate to have members like Lt. Col. Leval who have the skill and ability to respond to unusual situations. He is a tremendous asset to our wing, as well as the community.” ▲



Photo by Capt. Jack Dixon, Hawaii Wing

Lt. Col. Randy Leval of the Hawaii Wing’s Maui Composite Squadron, shown here in an old photo at an exercise at Wheeler Air Base in Oahu, Hawaii, is an expert at finding elusive emergency locator transmitters.