

Missing hunter triggers search, and rescue

By **ROBERT MILLER**
Staff Writer

WORTHINGTON — It was approaching daylight on Tuesday when those searching for Robert T. Bartlett got really worried.

More than 50 people, including state and environmental police, search dogs, Worthington police and fire officials, Berkshire Search and Rescue personnel and local volunteers had tramped dirt roads and thick woods throughout the night looking for the 83-year-old who had left home at 2 p.m. the afternoon before to go deer hunting and did not return at dark.

The searchers were tired, the 5-square-mile area of rugged terrain thoroughly explored and still no sign of the missing man. "It surprised everybody. Nobody came up with zip. It got us a little afraid come daybreak," said Worthington Police Chief Larry Mason.

The search for Bartlett had a happy ending: he was found, disoriented and dehydrated but seemingly in good health otherwise, by a fresh team of searchers at 8:15 a.m. Tuesday. But the story behind the search is one of impressive organization and cooperation, and remarkable commitment by people, most of them volunteers, from throughout the hilltowns and beyond.

The search for Bartlett began with a phone call from family members to Worthington's police chief at 7:15 p.m. on Monday. The hunter, who knew the woods around his West Street home as well as anyone in town, had not come home. Initially, they had not been worried, Mason said, because Bartlett often came out of the woods at dark and made his way home slowly along the road. By now, however, they were concerned.

Mason mobilized the six-person Worthington police department to search the roads in the neighborhood, but by 8:15, with still no sign of the missing man, he realized "we had a problem," and called in the state police.

Supported by troopers from the Northampton and Russell barracks, Lt. Lee Manning, from State Police headquarters, set up a command center and staging area in the Worthington fire station. By 10:30 a.m., Manning had called in other units, including four dogs from the K-9 division, the Environmental Police with all-terrain vehicles, and Berkshire Search and Rescue, a volunteer group known in the region for their



CAROL LOLLIS

State Police Officer Jack Godfrey checks a map of the search area during the hunt Tuesday for a Worthington man who became lost in the woods. In the background are State Police Lt. Lee Manning, at left, and Lt. Roland Lacasse, also of the state police. The hunter, Robert T. Bartlett, was found unharmed.

expertise in tracking and finding lost hikers and hunters.

By this time, Worthington Fire Chief Richard Granger and Assistant Chief Robert Reinke had mobilized their volunteers, several other town residents showed up to help, and briefings of the searchers, by Berkshire Search and Rescue, were under way. Coordinated by Granger and Reinke, 11 teams of five to seven people were signed in, assigned sections of ground to cover and provided topographical maps.

Call for reinforcements

Throughout the night they combed the woods and steep hillsides, returning to the firehouse to sign back in, mark down the exact area they covered, eat some food provided by the Women's Auxiliary of Worthington's fire department, who

also worked through the night, and rest.

By 4 a.m. search organizers realized that reinforcements were necessary. "We really needed some fresh bodies," Mason said. A page went out to all nearby towns asking for volunteers. By daylight, more than 40 additional searchers had arrived, from police and fire departments in Chesterfield, Cummington, Windsor, Peru and Huntington. "They really got great, great coverage," Mason said.

By 7 a.m. the Worthington firehouse was a sea of bright orange hats, jackets and vests as search teams came and went. Four fresh dogs joined the hunt and a state police helicopter from Barnes Airport in Westfield circled the area, making larger and larger concentric circles over the search terrain.

Then it was over. A team of men searching in the vicinity of Sam Hill

Road and West Street found a hat, and then they found Bartlett, walking along the road. And, as quickly as they had come, the volunteers from throughout the hilltowns, vanished again, to jobs and families and, for the lucky ones, to bed.

Just what really happened and why almost 100 searchers could not find him for more than 12 hours will have to wait until today when Bartlett returns from The Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton, where he was held for observation overnight.

Meantime, Police Chief Mason has nothing but praise for everyone involved in the search. "One of the things that really impressed me is how so many different agencies and everybody worked so closely. There were no problems whatsoever, everything flowed," he said.