

Why Participate in WESS?

The WESS cycle is a valuable experience for cadets and senior members for several reasons.

- First and foremost, the WESS activities are fun. The staff and students keep coming back year after year because they enjoy it and look forward to training CAP members in Search and Rescue. Participants keep coming back because the activities are real-world based, enjoyable and allow interaction with people from all across the southeast.
- Second, students receive excellent training throughout the WESS cycle. The staff is handpicked from among the most highly trained, motivated and professional Ground Team members and leaders in the Wing. Many have participated and taught at the Ground Search and Rescue School of the National Emergency Services Academy, and bring that experience home to Alabama Wing. The lessons and exercises participants go through are designed to be as realistic and useful as possible, meaning that the training you receive is top notch. Many graduates have gone on to participate in SAREX's, actual searches, disaster relief operations such as Hurricane Katrina, and military training. In all instances, the training provided during the WESS cycle can be invaluable.
- Third, the WESS cycle is more challenging than most CAP activities. The WESS program is designed to accurately simulate the physical and mental demands of search and rescue. We believe in the maxim "train hard, work easy" -- it is our goal to provide a training environment that is more challenging than real world operations. Ground Team ratings are not given out; they must be earned; it takes a certain level of dedication to complete the program. The program can be a personal challenge; for example, many participants spend their first night ever out in the woods on a WESS activity, and are asked to complete many tasks that they never thought would be asked of them. This provides a great sense of accomplishment for those who graduate and become Ground Team members or leaders.
- Finally, coming to WESS gives students a chance to network with fellow cadets and senior members. Participants come from all across the Wing (and oftentimes other Wings as well) for training. As team rosters typically stay the same throughout the entire cycle, students have the opportunity to really get to know and work with their team mates through six months worth of Ground Team training. These connections can be very valuable later on as participants move up or become more active in Wing events.

How to Prepare for Your First WESS Activity

Once you've decided to take part in the WESS program, you need to take the following actions to ensure that you are prepared:

- Several weeks prior to the beginning of the cycle, inform your unit chain of command that you wish to attend; they will coordinate with the activity director to make sure you meet the activity requirements.
- Obtain all required gear as listed on the WESS website. Check with your unit on what gear they have available before you buy a full complement yourself. If you require regular medications, have a sufficient supply with you for the duration of the activity and inform the activity director and medical officer of your medical needs.
- Arrange transportation to and from the activity. Many units will organize carpools for their members; however, do not wait till the last minute to see if this is the case. Also, make sure your ride knows when the activity will be over so they can pick you up on

time; the WESS staff have other tasks to attend to once the activity is over, but cannot leave until all participants have left.

- Arrive in uniform, with all gear ready to go. Do not forget your CAP ID card and any other specialty qualifications you have (First Aid, Radio operator, etc.). Also, bring a completed WESS Medical Form and the activity fee to your first WESS.
- Come with a good attitude and ready to learn.

What to Expect at a Typical WESS

Though each WESS weekend in the cycle is different, the basic schedule remains the same.

Friday

A WESS typically begins at 1900 on Friday nights. You should have eaten dinner before you arrive. Upon arrival at the activity site, staff members will direct you to unload your gear and head inside to check in. You will need your CAP ID card, your completed WESS Medical form, and the activity fee, if you have not already paid. Once you have checked in, you will be directed to a gear check outside. The gear check is to ensure that you have all required equipment, do not have contraband, and can safely participate in the WESS. After all participants have been checked in and gone through the gear check, you will be assigned to a team for the duration of the WESS cycle. The staff will then conduct a series of briefings, beginning with an introduction of staff members, safety issues, and an overview of the training that will be done over the weekend. Slide sets on the assigned tasks for the weekend will follow. Lights out is typically 2300.

Saturday

Reveille on Saturday is generally between 0530 and 0600. Participants will usually have about an hour to eat and get ready for the first activity. Students will put theory into practice throughout the morning, as the staff guides them through the application of knowledge covered by the briefings of the night before. After a break for lunch, participants will finish the practical tasks from the morning, or switch to another set of tasks, as determined by the staff. As the student to staff ratio can be as much as 10 to 1, participants will have plenty of time to prepare for and test on their knowledge based tasks throughout the day. Sometime in the late afternoon, all base gear will be gathered and moved to the bivouac site for the night. Students will have an opportunity to set up their shelters and prepare the campsite before dinner. After dinner and a safety briefing, the students will participate in a night exercise designed to put into practice what they learned throughout the day. Depending on the duration of the night exercise, lights out could be anywhere from 2100 to 2300.

Sunday

After another 0530 to 0600 reveille, participants will have about an hour to eat breakfast and take down their shelters. Students will participate in more exercises and scenarios for most of the morning. An After Action Review (AAR) and demobilization are the last activities of the weekend. Students are released sometime after 1230 as the activity closes.