



Missing Child Near The Tram

March 23rd, 1970
Palm Springs Tram
1970-003

by Unknown

Monday was clear and balmy, a fine time for an outing at the tram. Mr. Seth Fessenden and his grandchildren, Christin Harley, age 7, and Jeffrey, age 5, arrived at the Mountain Station. They live in Placentia, California. Mr. Fessenden did not feel like hiking down the 200 yard path to Long Valley, so the children went alone, to play in the snow. After a while Christin returned without her brother. Mr. Fessenden notified tram people who notified the state park rangers. They looked around without success. The Sheriff's Dept. was notified and they in turn called RMRU. Jeffrey was last seen at about 4:20 pm.

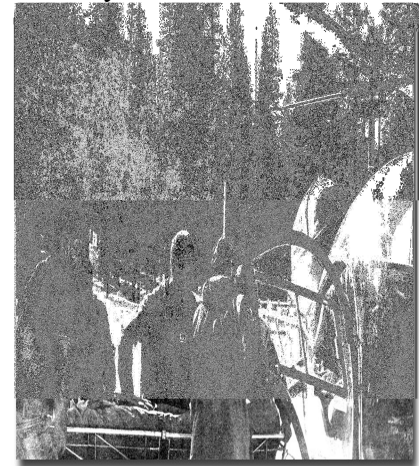
Eight of us arrived at the Mountain Station just after 9:00 pm, and went out in teams to search. Lt. Ed Brown manned base. Mike Daugherty and Dick Webster were assigned to go northerly from the valley and search the edges of the mountain where it drops off toward the desert, Jake Johnson, Jack Schnurr and I went westerly toward the water tank and ranger cabin, Walt Walker, Al Andrews and Leon Barris went into the valley. The night was clear, the moon was bright, we were reasonably sure Jeffrey had wandered over the edge in the Long Canyon area. We had to check all probabilities. About 10:00, "Base, 456." "Base, go ahead." "We have tracks." They were on the ridge overlooking Long Canyon about a quarter mile north of the stream. We started to converge. Soon Mike & Dick (radio #456) found Jeffrey's shoes.

We all searched the ridge, following the wandering tracks, then lost them in a bouldery area above a cliffy face. Walt, Al, & Leon went to the tram station for Sugar. Bill Speck & Ed Hill had arrived then. Mike & Dick went over to search along the plunging stream. Jake and I stayed where we lost the tracks. We decided that to use Sugar would result in injury to dog and handler, and advised Walt. Then we looked for the umpteenth time down in the oaks and pines and snow -- there was a disturbance in the edge of the snow -- looks like a track. Jake came over, we descended fifty feet to the track and verified. By radio we advised Mike, Dick and Jack, who contoured around below. They came to the tracks 300' down. We followed the tracks making many detours and falling -- good old oak branches to hold on to: Joined the others, lost the tracks. Decided that Dick, Jake and Jack would descend left side of stream while Mike and I made a looping contour northerly. Used flares to keep oriented with each other. Getting hoarse from calling the boy's name. Mike and I circled back to ridge. The party below decided Jeffrey was not below them and contoured north, ascending about two gullies over from our path, and 600' below.

Mike and I built a fire for a one hour bivouac, the party below planned to do the same soon, waiting for dawn. "Base, 456." "Base, go ahead." "We have voice contact with Jeffrey, he's about 200 yards below us." Pow: Answer to prayer. This is why we're here, this is full payment for our efforts. It was 3:05am. Mike & I descend to help. Dick's jubilant voice comes in again when they reach Jeffrey to say he's in fine condition. They feel they can carry Jeffrey up, Mike & I find terrain rather more dangerous to descend than anticipated, so we stop. So does the party below. We decide a helicopter pickup would be better. Jake and Jack look for a helispot while Dick carries Jeffrey on his back up the steep face through thick shrubbery and over class three pitches. Two hours later they find a "good" spot. It turned out to be a really scary place when dawn came. Earlier in the night a helicopter had been requested from Western Helicopters, Inc., in Rialto. We were told that Darrel Ellenberg would be piloting the Bell supercharged machine, a three-place helicopter that can hover and fly like a hummingbird. Elly has flown us on several previous missions and we work together well.

The tram station is at an elevation of 8500', the ridge Jeffrey went over about the same. He was found at about 7000'. The terrain is steep, cliffy, has lots of pine and oak trees and faces Palm Springs. When asked what he was doing descending the mountain Jeffrey answered, "I'm going down to a service station to get a map." The lights on the desert look deceptively close to adults, to children they must appear even more so.

Well, Jeffrey first jabbered a streak while being fed water and candy bars, and dressed warmly. On Dick's back he nearly went to sleep, at the helispot he snored. When dawn came Mike and I went up to Long Valley. Then Elly arrived at the Valley Station, Walt installed the radio and they flew up to make the evacuation. It was "hairy" to say the least. Over the radio we could hear terse, crucial messages. Then the machine came into sight, we popped a smoke flare, and quickly Walt was carrying Jeffrey up the path to the tram. Elly returned to make three more pickups and we all went up to the tram for rolls, orange juice, and coffee. We could not go down for a few hours because of maintenance work on the cables and other mechanism. Jeffrey was not breathing too well, an oxygen mask was put on and seven liters flow did not help much. The boy was too exhausted to breathe properly. We called Elly back as he was flying home, and he took Walt & Jeffrey to the Desert Hospital in Palm Springs. Even landed on the front lawn because the usual open lot was full of equipment. Of course, the lower altitude (455') was what Jeffrey needed.



Young five year old Jeffrey was loaded into the helicopter by members of RMRU San Diego MRT

Critique. In retrospect there isn't much we would change, except for more men. San Diego MRT had been called, they arrived at dawn and came up for refreshments and a tremendous talk fest. If Jeffrey had not been found they sure would have been needed. What got us to the boy in a reasonably short time was past experience, hunches, coordination by radio, and

probably, the fact that bright moonlight permitted us to negotiate the terrain at all. Three years earlier we had an April training session up there when we descended Long, Hidden Lake, and Tahquitz Canyons. We said we would not send teams down that terrain at night. But, when a little child needs us, what else can we do but try? Our sincere thanks to all who helped: Lt. Brown; tram manager O.L. McKenney; Western Helicopters and Darrel Ellenberg.

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.