

Climbers Stranded

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Tahquitz Rock
1970-006

by Walt Walker

Saturday was one of those typical late spring days, it had begun cool, but by afternoon it had warmed to the point where you just want to lay around. Upon returning from the Scout Fair in Sunnymeade I found a note, placed there by my dad, that there had been a rescue call. I had missed it only by a few minutes. Upon calling the Hemet substation I learned that two climbers were stranded. As quickly as possible the whole family helped to load my gear into the station wagon and was on my way. Arriving at Humber Park, I talked to two young climbers and they said they had heard about the problem and that the stranded climbers were on the route called the 'Error'. After transferring my gear, first aid belt and radio into my rucksack I started out for the base of the rock, a 30 minute hike up a trailless slope.

On the way I met a young couple who said they had heard that one of the stranded climbers had a nosebleed. This didn't sound too good and I started hiking faster, arriving at the bottom of the Error in 22 minutes. There was a group of very young climbers gathered and none of them felt that they could climb the 5.6 route. Looking up I could see a pair of feet sticking over a small ledge and another fellow standing. Discussing the situation with the group assembled I learned that a two man climbing team had fallen and that both needed help. The rescue truck arrived and I advised Al Andrews of the situation and what equipment would be needed. Shortly after sunset Bill Briggs arrived and we decided that we would start climbing immediately. Bill began leading the first pitch as darkness settled upon us. He belayed me up to a very large ledge and he started on the next pitch, which is the crux of the climb, the overhang. It was now dark and Bill was having trouble with his headlight. With my lamp lighting the way and a very heavy rucksack upon his back he led masterfully up and over the overhang. During this time one of the victims began to complain of being cold and thirsty. Bill belayed me up to him and I scrambled over to where I could look down on the victims. The sight was bone chilling, a climbing rope looped and laying around, tremendous splotches of blood and two climbers grossly injured sitting on the edge of a down sloping ledge. The most direct route to them was too dangerous for them as loose rock lay everywhere. So I had to climb down to them, off to one side. While climbing I bumped a small piece of dead wood and it bounced down. Immediately I yelled "rock". That small piece of wood dislodged a rock and it hurtled downward and struck Dick Webster's hardhat. He and Mike Daugherty were climbing up with the litter and the rescue sleeping bag. Needless to say they were not too thrilled with the rockfall.

As I reached the victims, Ron White began to move about and said he wanted to get up and

leave. The tremendous laceration on his forehead, which bared the bone of the skull, was almost unsettling. I convinced him to stay put and yelled to Bill to tie me off and come over and help. The second victim, John Guthe, was sitting slumped over. Upon checking him, I found that he had died, probably shortly after the accident. Bill then secured the victims rope to a small tree and lowered another rope down to Mike who tied on the rescue sleeping bag. While I examined John, Bill hauled on the rope. The necessary first aid was given and the sleeping bag was placed around John. Once again the rope was lowered, this time the litter was tied on and Bill began to haul. However, it hung up on the overhand and he could not get over. I pendulumed out onto the face and with Bill pulling I worked it free. Bill then belayed Mike up the overhang while Dick worked on setting up an anchor for the second lower that would be needed later. Mike quickly climbed down to Ron and I and we placed the injured young man into the litter. This was not as easy as it sounds and it was with considerable effort. Bill, Mike and I then hauled, pushed and strained to move the litter with victim up 20 feet to the ledge where we would start the first lower.

While Bill and Mike set up anchors I prepared to descend with the litter. We quickly got the litter moved over to the edge and then started the 400 foot descent. Everything was moving smoothly until the litter and I started over the overhang. It was extremely hard to move past the overhang and for days I could feel the sore muscles. (Bill was already sore since he had only been out of the hospital a few days for treatment on his back.) Dick began to give me directions so that the litter would stop near the second anchor. After he and I placed the litter securely on the ledge he transferred the ropes into the second set of brake bars and once again we were on our way down the steep cliffs complete with more overhangs. Dick shouted down that he was out of rope. The litter was not down to the base of the rock but on a tongue of snow. The team members who had all carried great loads to the base of the rock then climbed up the snow and took the litter. During the evacuation plans and routes were made for the carry back down to Humber Park. Part of the team started down carrying the victim with help of climbers who had been in the area. While this was in progress Mike, Bill and Dick started the operation to lower the young man who had died. The team members who had stayed behind and climbers carried the deceased out to the roadhead, arriving at first light.

When we reached the roadhead with Ron White, he was placed into the Idyllwild Volunteer Fire Department ambulance and Ron Harris and I rode with him to the Hemet Hospital. He was examined by the doctor and x-rayed. It was determined that he had two skull fractures and a compound fracture of the knee cap. When his head was shaved the lacerations upon his head looked like a roadmap. He was then transferred to the Kaiser Hospital. Ron Harris and I sat around the emergency room until our fellow team members drove down from Idyllwild and picked us up. As I showered and dressed for my wife's capping ceremony I couldn't help but think this was not going to be a happy Mother's Day for everyone.

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.

