



Missing Fisherman

May 23-26, 1970
Quincy, California
1970-010

by Phil Moedt

On Friday the 22nd a call for assistance came from Sheriff W. C. Abernathy of Quincy, Calif. (located about 100 miles northeast of Sacramento). James Henthorn, age 22 of Castro Valley, Calif. had been missing for four days after becoming separated from his father while fishing near Bucks Lake (located 15 miles west of Quincy).

At 2:00 AM Saturday morning word was received that a flight had been set up with the 303rd Air Rescue Squadron from March Air Force Base, near Riverside, for transportation north: A total of 19 members from three different rescue teams participated in the mission.

The scheduled departure time of 6:00 AM Saturday morning was delayed until 7:40 AM due to heavy ground fog. After a two hour flight on a comfortable C-97 we arrived at Beale Air Force Base located about 40 miles north of Sacramento. An Air Force bus, driven by A1C Doug Bartley, had been authorized to take our group to Quincy which was still about 70 miles away. After a tedious five hour ride along the beautiful Feather River Canyon we were stopped by a CHP officer about 10 miles out of Quincy. He informed us that the victim had been found alive and that our assistance was not needed. We proceeded into Quincy to check in with the Sheriff.

The deputy on duty was in radio contact with the Sheriff when we arrived at the office. He informed us that the victim had been found at the bottom of a cliff near Bear Creek and that, in fact, was deceased. The victim's father (who along with other relatives evidently contributed much to the effort of finding him) was with the victim. Evacuation by use of ropes, etc. was indicated. Our services were offered to assist in the evacuation but the Sheriff said the situation was under control and that we would not be needed.

Since return air transportation to Riverside had not been firmly scheduled and because none of us looked forward to the long bus trip back to Beale we decided to camp that night on the fairgrounds located just out of town. After dinner, Ron purchased a softball and bat for an enjoyable baseball game. At dusk the group proceeded to a local establishment for shuffleboard and refreshments. About 9:30 PM a Sheriff's deputy and a worried looking gentleman in civilian clothes (Sheriff Abernathy) entered the room. The Sheriff stated that the victim had not in fact been precisely located and requested our assistance. He informed us that no topographical maps of the area were available for our use and that no helicopter could be obtained to give us assistance. It was agreed that we would meet the Sheriff at 3:30 AM Sunday

morning.

After an early breakfast in town we proceeded west towards Bucks Lake. After a half hour ride on a good road we turned off onto an old logging road. It was quite a ride in that Air Force Bus jammed with 19 Rescue members and equipment packed from floor to ceiling in the last three rows of seats. When the bus could go no further, the deputy we had been following led us on foot to the creek we were to follow. Dawn was just breaking. Since it had been indicated that the way to the site of the victim was to be easy going, the bus driver decided to accompany us. The small creek we were at was supposed to be the shortest way into the apparent location of the victim. We had been told that the site would be about 12 miles down the creek from this starting point. As it turned out the creek was not the best way into the area. Use of an existing trail only a short distance away would have saved us about four miles and four hours of indescribable effort. The creek soon began to follow a steep canyon covered with dense undergrowth and hazardous dropoffs. Moving men and the empty stokes litter through this became extremely difficult. It was soon evident that the bus driver was committed to remain with us for the duration of the mission. His subsequent herculean contribution to the mission was appreciated by all rescue team members.

At the point where the small creek we had been following emptied into Bear Creek the terrain became somewhat easier. Bear Creek (which could be considered a river in most other parts of the state) has many large cascades and waterfalls bordered by high cliffs. As a result our group became dispersed into essentially three separate units. The first unit reached the site of the deceased about 1130. Because the radio that the first unit carried had been inadvertently dunked in the creek, no radio contact between the first unit and the other two units was possible at this time. With the victim was a close relative (the father had evidently left the site the night before) who had a topographical map of the area. Evaluation of the map indicated that the closest road available for evacuation purposes was up the 45 degree angled West slope approximately 3000 feet above Bear Creek. After a brief discussion it was decided that the relative and two Sierra Madre members from the first unit would take the map and proceed up the west slope to determine if that way would in fact be an acceptable route to haul the loaded litter up. Unfortunately they took no radio with them. They were to return back down the west slope if they found the way to be too difficult for evacuation.

Meanwhile, because of lost radio communications the second unit (including Ron, Tom and Ed) had difficulty in the locating of the first unit. This situation arose because the negotiation of the 300 foot cliff area, from which the victim had evidently fallen, placed them downstream of the first unit. They arrived at the victim's location at approximately noon. Every one felt that evacuating the victim upstream, back the way we had come, would be extremely difficult and hazardous and was therefore out of the question. While the group was having some lunch a cousin of the victim and a friend showed up at the site. The cousin, who apparently was somewhat familiar with the area, indicated that the brush conditions up the west slope would make it extremely difficult and that the east slope, although somewhat steeper, would be more feasible. They then left the area. Since the advance party had not returned from the west slope it was felt that it would be possible to proceed in that direction as planned. This approach, it was felt, would enable the group to intersect the closest road shown on the map.

By the time I arrived at the site with the third unit the litter had already been moved up about a hundred feet up the west slope of the canyon. The task was a difficult one because of the almost impassable brush and lack of discernible trail. Ropes and pulleys were used many times to help haul the litter straight up the slope. This work continued all afternoon until about 6:30 PM; we had reached an elevation approximately 2,000 feet above Bear Creek by this time. From this point a newly developed road located on the East- side of the canyon could be seen at- a slightly lower elevation than ours. The two Sierra Madre members, who had gone on ahead to determine the difficulty of the terrain and to locate a possible trail and road had not returned. Since they had no radio with them, no word as to their success was known. The situation ahead of us seemed worse than what we already came through. It was disheartening to think that the new road we could see on the East side might be our only way out. It was decided that if the road on the west side of the canyon could not be exactly located within the next few hours the plan would be to take the litter back down to Bear Creek and up the East side of the canyon to the new road. Taking a radio with them, Ron, Tom and 2 Sierra Madre members continued up the west slope looking for a road while those remaining with the litter pooled all remaining food for a sparse supper. It was hoped that their finding the road quickly would alleviate the grim thought of taking the litter to the road on the east side. After dark Ron reported that no sign of the road had been seen and that the terrain he had encountered in the previous 2 hours was impossible for evacuation due to immense unbelievable growths of Manzanita. With this bad news we bedded down with dulling thoughts of the task to be executed the next day. This task would be doubly difficult due to the fact that our food supply had been exhausted.

At dawn we began moving the litter back down the slope we had climbed with so much difficulty the day before. After a couple hours word came from Ron that they had finally arrived at a road. Ron indicated he would get some needed food and water and come down the east side of the canyon from the new road and meet us as we moved up the east slope. After hiking several more hours along the road they were finally picked up by the father of the victim who had been driving the road looking for our group to show up.

In going down the west slope we tried to traverse as much as possible so that we would arrive back at Bear Creek at a position slightly downstream of the site where the victim was found. This was necessary since it was the only feasible point at which to start the assault up the east slope. While traversing we took a slightly different path back down to Bear Creek. In doing so we missed two Sierra Madre members (the same two who had originally gone up the west slope to check it out) coming up the west slope from Bear Creek. They had made it out the day before and returned (via the trail we should have taken at the start of the mission) to the site where the victim had been found; they had spent the night at that location. They had hoped to make contact with us only a short way up the west slope and tell us that it would be too difficult for us to continue in that direction. They also had brought with them additional food for us. Since they could not locate us they continued up the west slope and out again as they had done the day before.

At a distance about a quarter of a mile away from Bear Creek, and still several hundred feet above it, we came to a small creek with impassable vegetation on both sides. We proceeded to take the litter down the center of this creek; poor footing on the slippery rocks and knee deep water made it very difficult. We finally got the litter to Bear Creek where we had to wade

through waist deep water to get it across to the East side. By the time we all made it across it was close to noon. We dried out while resting for about a half hour on the gravel bank located on the East side. Just as we started to proceed with the task of moving the litter up the East slope we received word over the radio that a helicopter had been obtained to assist us (efforts of the victim's father had made this possible). Since there was in our opinion, no acceptable spot for a helicopter to land in the immediate vicinity, the plan was to have the helicopter verify our position and to let us know what exact direction to head while moving up the East slope. This plan would enable us to link up with Ron and additional help in a most expeditious manner.

The pilot, who flies for Pacific Gas and Electric Company, and a member of the Sierra Madre team showed up overhead in a Bell helicopter about a half an hour later. After they had been gone for about 20 minutes we again heard the copter approaching. Word came over the radio that the pilot had decided to go in by himself and take a second, closer look at our location and land if he thought it possible. He made one low pass and then came towards us from the downstream direction about forty feet above Bear Creek and centered in the steep walled canyon. We waved him off (indicating to him not to land), but he continued on towards us where he finally made a nice landing on some boulders located on the east bank. The pilot said he was already committed to land when he realized that he shouldn't have attempted it. The landing site was extremely tight, from the standpoint of main rotor blade and tail rotor clearance. A fifty foot cliff rose from the edge of the East bank while trees hung out over the creek from the West side. At the most, a five foot clearance was all that he had. While in a semi-hovering condition the deceased was placed into the seats next to the pilot and tied in. The pilot then lifted the helicopter off the ground in a vertical direction, to about 30 feet and then rotated the craft 180 degrees so that he could fly back downstream and leave the way he had come in. With delicate touch the pilot did this without appreciably moving the helicopter in any lateral direction. He began to move slowly downstream for about fifty feet and then suddenly rotated the helicopter 180 degrees once more and came back upstream to make another landing. The group scattered for protective covering once again. The wind conditions in the canyon and extra weight in the helicopter made it too difficult for him to keep the craft under control. Fuel had to be drained from the tanks to make the craft lighter. While the pilot kept the helicopter in a semi-hovering condition John Holcomb of the Sierra Madre team drained fuel from its tanks. While moving from one side of the copter to the other, John almost stepped on a rattlesnake that had come out from the rocks directly beneath the craft. The snake was probably more startled by the events occurring over its head than what John was of the snake. With both tanks only a quarter full the pilot again lifted off. This time however he flew upstream past our position. Overhanging trees leaning from both sides of the narrow canyon made this avenue of escape extremely dangerous. Everyone held their breath as we saw him bank first one way and then the other as he tried to avoid the tree limbs. He still hadn't cleared the trees when he disappeared around a turn in the canyon. All ears were strained for the sounds of what everyone thought would be the inevitable. After what seemed to be an unbelievable period of time we finally heard him approaching us from upstream and then saw him well above the trees. We were all relieved to know he had successfully flown himself out of such a tight spot. He then flew to Bucks Lake where Tom helped unload the deceased from the helicopter. While Tom was inspecting the craft he noticed that several green-colored areas were visible on the main rotor blades; evidently these had come from the tree limbs he had clipped while leaving the canyon. The pilot's skill and coolness in the face of an obviously dangerous situation certainly

prevented his own demise.

The assistance of the helicopter in removing the victim from the canyon certainly made our task in climbing the east slope much easier. After about three hours of climbing we arrived at the new road. Within five minutes two vehicles sent to pick us up came into view. The food and cold drinks they had brought with them were quickly devoured. We proceeded to Buck's Lake to pick up the other rescue team members and then into town for dinner. After dinner we boarded the bus for the long ride back to Beale AFB, arriving there about 11:30 PM Monday night. We were then given rooms for the night in the transient airman's quarters. The return flight to Riverside left Beale about 3:00 PM Tuesday afternoon. Our arrival back at March AFB at 5:30 PM ended the long four day mission.

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.