



Two Missing Teen Backpackers

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The previous mission just ended was another bitter disappointment. We picked up after a plane crash that had no survivors. If there must be a next plane crash, we most vigorously pray that all aboard will survive so it turns into a rescue.

We stopped in at the Banning Sheriff's Office on the way home, only it was not on the way home, but up to Idyllwild. Two boys 17 and 15 years old were overdue from a backpacking trip into the San Jacinto Mountains. They hiked in Friday evening, 27 Feb., expecting to be home Sunday evening. Weather conditions gave us great concern, for had they encountered problems like injury or getting wet, they could need a lot of rescuing. We drove up and established base at the Idyllwild Fire Station, in which a small room constitutes the local Sheriff Station.

The pager call and callout procedure resulted in thirteen RMRU members gathering for assignments into the search area, to wit, Tahquitz Valley and environs.

Thus began another saga of snowshoeing up the Devil's Slide Trail from Humber Park at 6400' el. to Saddle Junction, just over 8000' el. Bernie McIlvoy and Gary Anderson drew the scenic tour - get to Caramba Camp, three miles beyond and 1600 below Saddle Junction, and determine whether they'd gone that far. We always cover that area when people are lost or overdue in the Tahquitz Valley region because they often head on down toward the desert in the precipitous canyon. John Dew, Hal Fulkman, Pete Carlson, Rich Quackenbush, Rick Pohlers, Ray Castilonia, Ed Hill, Steve Zappe, Larry Roland were soon ascending on assignments - mainly to check trails and camping areas. John and Hal were to set up a permanent camp at the saddle, which we always do in case the lost parties wander westward. Also, a radio relay is needed there.

John Muratet, a bit new to the search game and winter conditions, assisted me at base, a truly great need when answers and decisions loomed to keep the Ops Leader hopping. Really, the men in the field, while meeting strenuous exercise and weather conditions, are to be envied. But, someone must direct the operation,

albeit a confining job when mountain SAR is your "bag."

Meanwhile, back on the mountain, strong winds and falling snow became the lot of searchers and victims alike. Somewhat lower temperatures during the storm were reported from the field - frozen clothing, icicles on beards, and incipi hypothermia nagged at times. The roaring wind made communication between men difficult, so yelling for the objects of our search, Erick Peterson and Roger Newman, became a joke. All the parties camped as most of the initial assignments were completed.

Early Tuesday evening we opted to call for assistance from other Mountain Rescue Association units. Some would be sent into the Tahquitz Valley area, some others into the Round, Tamarack Valley region, even to San Jacinto Peak. The latter because we found that the boys had applied for a camping permit in Tamarack Valley. Therefore, teams were deployed from the upper station of the tramway early Wednesday morning.

The storm continued in gusts and squalls, it was moving eastward rather fast, at times giving indication of abating, then quickly plunging into heavy snowfall. Fourteen inches of snow stacked onto vehicle roofs in Idyllwild.

Wednesday night the field parties camped at sever, localities on the mountain. We were kept up-to-thehour on weather reports coming into base camp. We looked forward to cleared skies early Thursday morning, hoping for low velocity winds so that Landell's helicopter could fly without undue hazard. I asked Phil Lester of Sierra Madre to direct the ground search from the upper station of the tramway on Thursday, and we opted to move base over to the lower station. Rich Quackenbush would direct operations from Idyllwild for the Tahquitz Valley area.

While I slipped new chains on a new station wagon, Pete took RMRU's van over to the Chevron station in Idyllwild where the chains were put on it in just minutes. Our drive down to Banning and thence to the tram would have been uneventful had the van not become too intimate with a snowbank. A bit of digging and rocking pried it away from the grasp. Down at the road leading to the tram we found a locked gate, so we "camped" that night in the backs of our respective vehicles.

Thursday went superbly well. Clear skies and a calm atmosphere greeted Don Landells, Sgt. George Conroy and myself as we flew a search pattern. Main thing was to check the summit cabin sixty yards east and below the peak of San Jacinto (10,000' el.) A steady thirtyknot breeze from the north made it easy for Don to hover as I stepped off the skid into waist-deep snow, only thirty yards north of the cabin. Following a strenuous struggle I was in the empty cabin, instantly convinced the boys were holed-up somewhere much lower. The ground parties were asked to carefully check trails and campsites in both drainages now populated by MRA teams. Of course, they were already doing just that, but I opted to postpone search of higher areas.

We circled the high country closely, seeing not one green or brown hint of the thick forest - snow and ice deeply covered vegetation and earth. We could track a coyote til we found him sitting disconsolately on a snowy rock, tail curled over his toes. Thus we knew that we could instantly spot human sign from a great distance. We covered the Willow Creek drainage that is between the search areas of Round Valley and Tahquitz Valley, continuing on down Tahquitz Canyon to 2000' el., thence back to base for fuel.

On the next flight Mr. Peterson accompanied us as back seat observer. We covered the west side of the high country, then headed for Tahquitz Valley again. We could tell the search parties were handling their assignments well, if slowly because of the snow conditions. Over Saddle Junction I said hello to Larry Roland who was functioning as relay. Over Little Tahquitz Valley a few seconds later (a half hour's snowshoe) Ed Hill and John Inskeep waved. Don turned northwest over the western extremity of Tahquitz Valley where two people were standing near an orange tarp and a huge figure-eight tramped in the snow. They were waving.

"Hmm, they sure don't look like searchers," I thought.

"There they are" said Don.

As the bird circled once preparatory to landing the father pointed excitedly at them. We plopped into the snow fifty feet from Erick and Roger. I slid out again, this time only knee-deep snow. After a short exhortation to keep heads down and move slowly about the bird, the boys were in and we flew back to base, radioing to field units the boys were aboard and O.K.

As I watched the boys and fathers embrace and everyone else smile I could not but think back to Tuesday morning when we bagged up three once lively, happy humans there at the plane crash. Quite a contrast.

Roger and Erick hiked up to the Saddle Junction on Friday and camped. Saturday they snowshoed down the Tahquitz drainage to near Caramba and camped, then hiked south to the ridge and looked out over mountains and desert. Sunday they retraced their direction westerly and camped somewhere below Reed's Meadow. Monday they tried to hike out but were confused as to direction and becoming wet and cold, realized the incipient signs of hypothermia were appearing. They were in upper Tahquitz Meadow and headed a hundred yards south into a really dense forest of white fir where they spent Monday through Thursday morning. The long, productive storm kept them pinned down. Fuel ran out and food almost did. On Wednesday they thought they heard searchers' yells but their whistle failed to carry sound the two hundred yards or so back to the searchers. Thursday morning they heard the helicopter fly over early, but were still in the tent. Incidentally, the tent was well hidden both from the ground and from the air. One would have had to come within twenty yards to see it - half buried in snow as well. Obviously, they were ready for us the second time over, and their ordeal ended. Their simple

decision to stay camped in the tent in the sheltering grove of firs kept them alive. Had they persisted in fighting the storm to get out of the mountain they would have frozen to death.

Our sincere thanks to fellow Mountain Rescue Association teams, Sierra Madre, China Lake, San Diego, and San Dimas for their manpower and support.

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.