



Missing Backpacker in Storm

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Willow Creek
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Re - Search for Kenneth Self November 1975 - May 1976 Thanksgiving morning, Ken Self signed out from the Lone Valley ranger station for Deer Springs. He planned a two day trip if the weather was poor or a four day trip if the weather stayed fair. He had made the trip several times that summer and fall.

Thursday afternoon, a fast moving storm hit the mountain. First, a freezing rain and then snow fell and continued to fall. By Sunday there were three or more feet of powder snow and scores were trapped and needed help to get off the mountain.

Sunday night after returning from a Thanksgiving holiday at Morro Bay, I was called out and told that Ken Self was missing since before the storm. Since we knew his listed destination, we decided to call all the teams in the California region, and have them snowshoe his route. On Monday we had teams from Sierra Madre, San Dimas and San Diego covering the route. The deep soft snow either stopped or otherwise frustrated the teams. We kept searching from the air, and located several other groups in need of help. We did not locate Ken Self.

On Tuesday, we continued to fly and check out all reports. By Wednesday, we were no closer to locating Ken than we had been when we started. We were reasonably sure that he was not up and traveling on the mountain. The search was postponed until the next weekend. On Saturday, we returned and continued searching. By now, the snow had consolidated enough to allow us to snowshoe fairly easily. The day was raw and cold with a storm forecast for that evening. We checked out more gullies and drainages on the Marion - Jean divide.

Two weeks later, on our regular training date, we searched again. The team was split into two groups. One group hiked in from the west and covered Deer Springs and Little Round Valley. The other continued working the Marion - Jean divide. At this point the search was postponed indefinitely until we knew where Ken had gone.

On the last weekend in April, a party of Girl Scouts traveling cross country located Self's last camp, at 8000' el. in Willow Creek area. By now the snow had melted. The leader brought out Ken's wallet, stove and pack frame.

Following the leader's description, RMRU went directly to his camp. Ken had crossed Wellman's divide traveling south following an old phone wire that leads nowhere. From there his destination, Deer Springs, is to the west, over the Marion - Jean ridge.

We found a ripped open sleeping bag, books, cooking gear, and shredded clothing. We also found the sleeping places of several coyotes and other large predators. We fanned out, searching downhill. Two hours of careful searching netted us some more fragments of clothing and a couple of well chewed bones. In one of the clothing fragments we found a permit made out to Ken Self. We gathered up all that we had found and gave it to the Coroner.

We will never know exactly what happened to Ken Self but can only guess. My guess is that he became soaked in the freezing rain and lost his way in the snow. The storm would have made it very hard to see more than fifty feet. Staggering along, he found the wire and followed it until he could go no farther. One of his last acts as to get out his sleeping bag, take off his boots, crawl into the bag and go to sleep ... The snows buried him and all his gear. Toward Spring which is always a lean time in the mountains, the melting snows uncovered him, and the coyotes found him. Finally the Girl Scouts took the same route and located the devastated camp. Five months after the first effort, RMRU was able to bring the search to a close.

What can all of us learn from this? Ken made a number of serious mistakes. His gear was adequate for summer but not for winter in the San Jacintos. The area, so hospitable during Spring, Summer and Fall, is arctic during the winter.

Ken did not heed the weather. He had some warning of the fast moving storm, but decided to push on anyway. These two factors combined to kill him. The mountains belong to the wise as well as the willing.

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.