

Three Stranded Climbers

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Tahquitz Rock
1977-026

by Tom Aldrich

What do you do on a Saturday night when you've had a hard day at work and you're just too tired to party? I got the answer to the question when Jerry Muratet called at 8:00 p.m. and told me there were three climbers stuck on Tahquitz Rock presumably caught by darkness on a climb. None, fortunately, were injured.

Bernie McIlvoy dropped by my place shortly thereafter and we headed towards Idyllwild. Little was said about the rescue. No apprehension was felt. It was a simple one, no one injured. The only serious factor would be safety, but this factor was preprogrammed in everything we would do. Our major concern was time. With a nearly full moon, the rescue would go much easier and as we glanced now and then at the orange orb just rising over the San Jacintos, we thought and talked of the areas of the rock that would be lit.

Tahquitz Rock sits just south of Humber Park in the Strawberry Valley. The only side without significant exposure (the amount of air between one's feet and the ground in this case) to interest a climber is the east/east-west side.

If you were to hike from here clockwise around the rock, the height of the rock wall would increase to 300 ft. on the south face to 500 ft. on the northwest fact to around 800 ft. on the north and northeast side. The climbing on all sides is varied, ranging from easy to very in British parlance, moderate (just 5th class) to exceptionally severe. Only on one side is all of the climbing as hard or harder than very severe (5.7), the northeast recess. This area is bordered by the Sahara Terror on the left and the Long Climb on the right. This is generally the darkest area of the rock on a moonlit night, remaining at all times pitch black. The northeast and south and southwest faces, on the other hand, receive abundant moonlight. The last technical on Tahquitz had been on the south face, on the Ski Tracks route.

Bernie and I talked about where the climbers might be. We hoped they would be in a well-lighted area. We decided near the top or bottom of Ski Tracks would be the easiest area. If the three climbers were here, we could lower them to the ground or raise them to the top with one of our 300 ft. ropes and be off the rock in a few hours. After a moment of silence, I asked Bernie, "What do you think the worst place would be?" After a short pause, he answered naming the same climb that was in my mind,

"Halfway up the Long Climb."

We both chuckled. If they were there, we'd be up all night. But, with 100 routes on the rock, the probability of their even being in that area was small. Perhaps on the butress to the right, the White Maiden, which catches the moon well and is a popular climb for beginners (and these three had to be relatively new at climbing to get stuck like this). Certainly no beginner would go up on the Long Climb!

When we arrived at Humber Park, I got out and began pulling gear out of the trunk. Walt Walker came up to Bernie and started talking in hushed tones. I did not take this as a good sign. A few seconds later, Bernie laughed and said, "Hey, Tom, guess where they are?" The answer was obvious from Bernie's laugh and I had to laugh as well.

As someone nearby hollered up to those on the rock, "Turn on your flashlight", we looked up and saw a light a little above halfway up the Long Climb.

After deciding what gear would go up on the rock and who would take it, we began the slow, hard climb up the trail. Larry Roland and Bernie were in front with Rick Pohlers and Walt. John Dew, his son Richard, and I followed. Hal Fulkman and John Muratet followed us. Jim Fairchild stayed in base to coordinate and in his spare time he listened to dumb questions and local climbers telling us how we should pull the rescue off.

Our number was just right, just enough people to carry the gear up and not too many to get in the way on top. On top, we set up anchors for belaying and lowering and lowered Bernie down the face. With 20 ft. left in our 300 ft. rope, Bernie radioed up that he had reached the climbers.

The first climber was light and with his assistance as we raised, we were able to get him to the top without resorting to a mechanical advantage. The other climbers were considerably heavier and we resorted to the mechanical advantage which is on the order of a block and tackle arrangement. This makes raising a heavy person easier, but for every 10 ft. of rope pulled through, the climber on the end is only raised about 3 ft. With two climbers to help this way, each 280 ft. down, you can imagine the job we had!

Quite a few hours and a couple of thousand feet of rope later, the three climbers were on top. Bernie jumared back up and we headed off the rock.

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.