

Mayday from plane with three passengers

December 26, 1977
Near Desert Hot Springs
1977-034

By Kevin Walker

At 5:00 A.M. the day after Christmas, I was awakened by my dad (Walt Walker) after he had received a call from Deputy Carl Sabo of the Riverside County Sheriffs Office in Indio. The deputy informed him that a light aircraft carrying three passengers from Las Vegas to Bermuda Dunes, was down in the foothills about three miles north of Desert Hot Springs.

Fellow team member John Dew drove to our house, and rode with us to the rendezvous point at Interstate 10 and Highway 62. Enroute, my dad told us that at 8:00 P.M. Christmas evening, the pilot had radioed a mayday to the Palm Springs tower. Shortly after that, radio contact was lost, and an Emergency Location Transmitter (ELT) signal was heard by the tower. During the night an Air Force C-130 plotted the ELT signal to be about three miles north of Desert Hot Springs. Using their ELT direction finding equipment, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) found the downed Grauman Tiger in the bottom of a ravine at 6:30 A.M. They reported there were no survivors of the crash.



Jim Fairchild

With two bodies already placed in body bags and the rain falling, RMRU members (L to R) Don Chambers, Kevin Walker and Steve Zappe lifted the fuselage, while Walt Walker worked to remove the last body and John Muratet held the left wing steady.

Upon reaching the rendezvous point, we were informed that base camp would be at the Mission Lakes Country Club just north of Desert Hot Springs. RMRU members were met by the CAP and Captain Ray Canova of the Sheriffs Department. He informed us that the Coroner was enroute, and that local helicopter pilot, Don Landells was also on the way with his supercharged Bell.

While waiting for Don to arrive, the weather worsened, it began to rain harder and the cloud ceiling lowered. Operations leader Walt Walker instructed base camp operator Bernie McIlvoy to turn on RMRU's new strobe to assist Don in his approach. Upon his arrival, Walt advised Don of the situation while a RMRU radio was being installed in the bird.

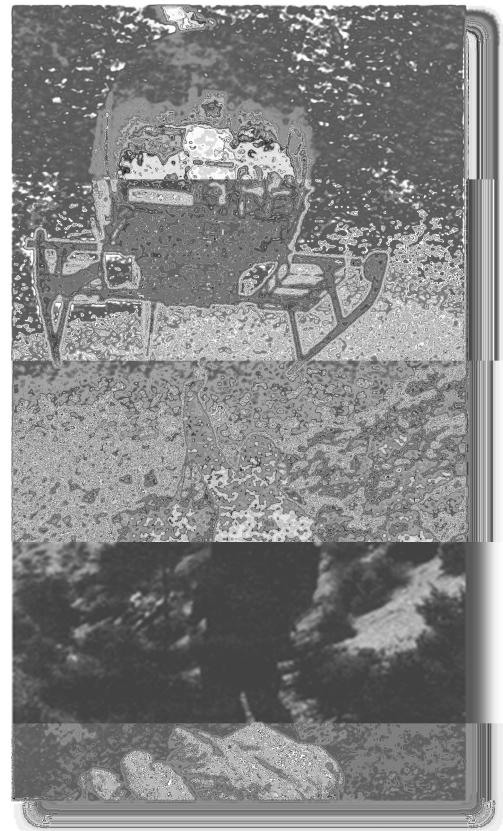
Don and Walt departed base and headed in the general direction of the crash. They were guided to the site by information radioed to them by the CAP ground party. Their trip was hampered by the rain and low clouds. Don was able to land on a ridge where Walt climbed out, and was replaced by two of the three wet and cold CAP men. Jim Fairchild and the Coroner were flown in, and the remaining CAP member was lifted out. Due to the deteriorating weather conditions, the remaining RMRU members, John Muratet, Kevin Walker, Don Chambers, Jim Hanson, Steve Zappe, and John Dew were flown in one at a time, with Don receiving helitac signals on every flight.

As it continued to rain, the Coroner and RMRU began the sad task at hand. One of the victims was thrown clear of the plane, and the remaining two were still in the wreckage.

The victim who was thrown clear, was placed into a body bag. Then began the job of removing the first body from the wreckage; this was accomplished without a great deal of difficulty. However, the remaining body was pinned by the wreckage. With everybody except Walt, we began lifting under the tail section and left wing. With the plane tipped up on its nose Walt was able to get through the debris and cut the seat belt and remove the final victim.

With all three bodies secured, the final chore, was to air lift them back to base camp. It was decided that with the weather conditions being poor, it would be safer to fly them out in RMRU's cargo net beneath the helicopter. With Don waiting on the ridge above, two bodies were placed in the cargo net.

Don was advised by radio that we were ready for the first load. Don flew up the canyon towards us, and I gave him hand signals. This aided him in moving over my dad who was waiting to clip in the line attached to the cargo net. With the line secured, I gave Don the up signal. Don applied more power and the line tightened. Don slowly picked up the load and moved down canyon to base. With the operation being repeated the final



Jim Fairchild

Don Landells maneuvered his super-charged Bell helicopter into position, with the help of hand signals that were given by Kevin Walker (not in the picture), so that Walt Walker could snap the line to the helicopter. The line was linked to the cargo net (foreground) that contained the body bags.

victim and our gear was flown back to base.

With the sad task completed, we climbed to a ridge top and Don started making trips to fly us to base.

My dad and I were the last two to be flown out. As we (both being pilots) waited our turn, we quietly spoke of the tragedy, trying to figure out how and why, and the sorrow that many would go through during this joyous holiday season.

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.