

Emergency signal from an aircraft

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Santiago Peak, near Elsinore
1977-035

By Rick Pohlers

A long standing tradition for RMRU is to be called out on either New Year's eve or day. We were not disappointed this year. Most old timers have their gear already packed and ready to go, knowing that the call is going to come. It came.

But Elsinore - that dreaded territory that evokes a groan from every member when he hears it. Elsinore! Ah, the scene of so many epic foul-ups and "weirdo" missions, like rescuing motorcycle frames from mine pits, drunk drivers' from off the road, or lost nudists. This mission would prove to be no different.

The "story" was that there was a downed plane in the incredibly brush-covered mountains northwest of the city. It had been located by a FAA inspector tracking the emergency locator transmitter (ELT) that starts transmitting when a plane crashes. He had a visual sighting at about the 4,500 foot level near Santiago Peak.

We had just had a plane crash mission the weekend before, so we all boogied out hoping to get to the crash quickly and maybe find somebody alive for a change.

However, you can't be in a hurry in Elsinore as things generally seem to move pretty slow there. On recent missions we have yet to get out of the Sheriff's substation in less than an hour. As usual, that's where we met, and as usual, we sat around there for over an hour. It seems that we couldn't pin down exactly where the wreck was. It's not the kind of country you can stroll through what with nearly vertical canyon walls and brush so dense that you can walk on top of it.

Anyway, "Mr. Bad" (Walt Walker) called around to several agencies attempting to get air support. No way, guy. They were not going to risk flying in the dark. So he called our buddies from Sierra Madre who had ELT finding equipment.



We were all chomping at the bit by then (it was now 11:00 p.m.). So we decided to at least get out in the field since we wouldn't get much air help until light. It couldn't hurt ... much.

So we all trucked down the highway to a fire road that snaked its way up Santiago Peak. As many of us as could, piled into Walt's Jeep Wagoneer and the Sheriff's four wheel-drive rig and we were off. Almost - for after careening along over the rutted, rock-strewn, washed-out fire road, our progress was halted by a locked Forest Service gate. This steel monument was built to stop an M-60 tank, and four locks securing an anchor chain from the Queen Mary wrapped around the post and gate at least twenty times. Every key we had, from roller skate keys to safety deposit box ones, was tried to no avail.

Suggestions were made and some even tried like: breaking it down (didn't work), pulling it down with the Jeep (might break the Jeep), or shooting the lock off (the deputy said that only works in the movies). Now what?

The enterprising deputy, Sgt. Eastman, called up for some bolt cutters. An hour later, we had them. But would they work on an anchor chain? We thought a cutting torch would have been better. But sheriffs' are strong guys, so when he put the bolt cutter to it, the chain parted and we were off ... again.

By the time we got to the general area where the plane was supposed to be, Sierra Madre was about twenty minutes behind us and we were in a new year. (Somebody forgot the champagne though).

When Sierra Madre got there, they showed us how their black boxes worked and drove around to get some fixes on the signal. However, their boxes seemed to be defective since the fixes, when plotted, indicated the wreck to be miles and miles to the north. That precluded any thoughts of bush-wandering in the cold wet sticks. So we all settled around a fire while RMRU got more fixes and waited for morning.

With the faintest glimmer of light, we heard the distinctive pop-pop-pop of Don Landells jet Ranger. He came directly to our base camp off the highway with the aid of our new, super-intensity strobe light. This saved him searching around for us and was much appreciated by him. Soon a big, twin-turbined Rescue Huey from El Toro also came in and started looking.

Freezing, up in "mayhem" canyon, we all thought the wreck would be spotted in minutes. Such was not the case. All morning both birds searched the whole mountains, finding only old marked wrecks or rock formations that looked like planes. The signal was still there, but not the plane.

About this time, both choppers retired to refuel. Don, with Jim Fairchild, and one SMSR team member with the black box ELT locator, went to Riverside for gas and coffee. On the way, the signal got stronger. So after gassing up at Riverside

"International" they flew over to Flabob airport at the foot of Mt. Rubidoux. And there it was - the phantom wreck! A red Cessna parked there had its ELT merrily bleeping away, bouncing off Mt. Rubidoux out to Santiago Peak where it was reflected up. Once shutting it off, the ELT frequency was silent. So ended our mission ... almost.

The FAA pilot who had spotted the wreck through the fog was still convinced that we had not found it. It was white, not red. He then volunteered to fly over the area as he had done the day before at 7,500 feet and find it for us. So while he was rounding his "kite", we rounded up some grub at a delightful little cafe in Elsinore run by a merry little English lady. J.R. "the animal" Muratet ordered his usual mountain of food after starving all morning, while the rest of us admired the cute waitress who took our orders. It sure beats Sambo's.

Meanwhile, back at the base camp, the FAA pilot was circling around high up in the sky like a soaring eagle. Like an eagle, he kept soaring and soaring. That's how we left him, searching for the phantom wreck. The Sheriff figured we had found our man at Flabob and would call us if anything came up (it didn't).

Some way to spend New Years, in Elsinore - the pits. However, we would rather be called than not, especially if there is a possibility of someone being hurt.

So with the FAA people flying off into the sunset, another exciting Elsinore adventure come to an end (about time).

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.