

Four inexperienced hikers in winter conditions

January 16, 1978
San Jacinto Mtns
1978-003

By Walt Walker

It was late Monday afternoon when the pagers went off; it had been raining most of the weekend. "Who could be out in all that weather?" We had just spent the weekend on training and knew that it had been wet, windy and very cold. When I called our coordinator, the question was quickly answered; four young men from San Diego county.

When my son Kevin and I arrived at the Idyllwild substation, about 1720, it was raining very hard. John Dew had arrived shortly before us and had gathered what information was available at that time. It wasn't much, four young men had left Escondido late Friday evening, stating they planned to climb the peak, and be home Sunday evening.

Tom and Susan Cherry of the Riverside County Amateur Radio Association (the group that provides RMRU with communications back to Riverside) walked in to the substation with Jim Fairchild almost right behind them (he had brought the rescue van.)

The next to arrive were Steve Jensen and Don Chambers, then Steve Zappe and Tom Aldrich, followed by Bernie McIlvoy, John Muratet and Darrel Hand. With the rain still coming down in sheets, Jim Garvey walked in solo, and 30 minutes later the part of our southwest group arrived, Carl Miller and Randy Beaty.

The information we had was not enough to know where to start searching. So as unit members began packing for a night out in bad weather, I began to try and obtain the necessary information. First, I called the mother of one of the missing boys girlfriend, she was able to provide good information on clothing and equipment. However, she only knew they had planned to go to the summit shelter. (We had to use snowshoes during training and since they had none, we knew they could not have reached the summit.) The next call was to Mt. San Jacinto State Park Ranger Larry Ferry to find out if the missing group had obtained a wilderness permit. He said that he had not been in the office and gave me the number of his clerk. Calling Sandy McCormick I found out that there had been no State Park permits issued from Idyllwild for the high country.

To cover all the bases, I phoned Danny Britt, chief ranger at Idyllwild, of the U. S. Forest Service. He said he would check with his employees and have one of them call me. Shortly Kathi Buchwitz called and said she would go to the office and pick up all the permits that were issued for the weekend. While talking to Kathi I found out that two hikers who had come out on Sunday had reported seeing three or four hikers near Caramba Camp, who seemed confused as to directions and that one of them did not look well.

When Kathi arrived we were able to quickly narrow the field to two permits, both having been issued for the Laws Camp area. Discussing it further we eliminated one permit and began trying to contact the two listed on the final one. There were no telephone numbers listed by the telephone company for the two men listed on the permit.

We then asked the sheriff's department to contact the Pasadena Police Department and ask them to send a patrol car to the address. Everyone did what they were asked, for shortly thereafter I received a telephone call from Jim Posaconey. He described what had happened on Sunday morning.

Just out of Laws Camp, he and his partner A. J. Hill, ran into three and possibly four hikers heading towards Laws Camp. His description of clothing and equipment was the same that we had received earlier. He also said that one of the young men did not look well and was not dressed warmly enough for the weather conditions. One other piece of information really concerned me. He said that he had talked to one of the young men about where they were going and that he seemed to be confused about the correct way to Saddle Junction. The young man insisted that his compass was right and Jim tried to show him the correct way on a topo map. He said that when he last saw the group they were headed toward Caramba Camp. (Once again, it seemed like Tahquitz Canyon was beckoning.)

Before finalizing a plan, I called the Ontario FAA for a weather briefing for Tuesday. It wasn't good, they were predicting more of what we were having, with clearing expected about noon. Since it appeared as if the missing four were in serious trouble (and we had some idea where to start searching) we decided to send a four man team right away, with a relay team right behind them.

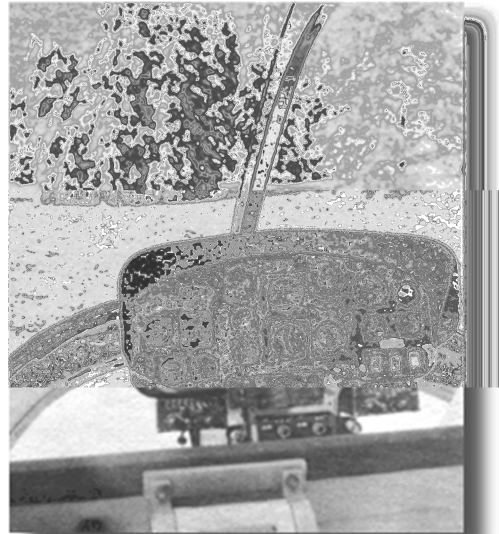
After a short discussion, it was decided that the first group would consist of Fairchild, McIlvoy, Muratet and Jensen. The relay group would be Aldrich and Zappe. While they completed packing I briefed the entire group on the plan. The four man team would hike to Saddle Junction and head towards Caramba via Laws Camp going as far as possible. The two man team would hike to the Saddle, set up a tent, and relay radio communications between base and the four man team. The rest of the members would be a standby team. When the four man group was ready, Kevin drove them to Humber Park, in the four wheel drive Wagoneer. After dropping them off, he returned, picked up the relay group and drove them to Humber.

At 2228 hours (10:28 P.M.) the four man team reported they were at Jolly Spring, there was six inches of snow and that there was no wind. Shortly after midnight we received a radio message from the Saddle. Fairchild was not feeling well, so he and Aldrich would be trading teams. It also stated that Zappe and Fairchild were setting up a tent and that the new four man team was on their way to Tahquitz Valley. The next radio message was, "wet snow, wind and poor visibility." At 0145 hours the four man group decided to camp for the night due to extremely poor visibility. The deputy made arrangements for everyone at base to sleep at Camp Maranatha. At two o'clock we climbed into bed, only to get up again at five.

During the night Don Landells had been put on standby. At first light he took off from Desert Hot Springs and headed towards the mountain. Relay reported light snow, wind at 25 m.p.h. just after seven we heard the sound of a chopper. Much to our surprise, Don's bird came into view and then landed on the baseball field. We quickly installed an RMRU radio in the bird and Garvey and I climbed aboard as observers.

As we climbed up towards the Saddle, the hole in the clouds that Don came through, closed. We circled around and Don found another opening and we flew over the Saddle and searched the Tahquitz drainage. Near Laws Camp we spotted tracks and tried to follow them as they went downhill towards Caramba. Losing them in the dense trees, we flew towards Caramba and located more tracks right at Caramba Camp. Don circled and circled, nothing moving below. I radioed out that base should be moved to Palm Springs. So we started searching Tahquitz Canyon. Back and forth, across the canyon, each time a little lower. As we reached the bottom, Jim Garvey began to feel the effects of riding in the back seat and all the circling, so we set down at Ann Dolley's house. Don radioed to his wife to have the fuel truck sent over. With Jim feeling better, it was up again very slowly, but with no luck.

Don landed at the Caramba helispot and Jim and I got out. The four man team had been advised to be ready to be picked up and moved to Caramba. After they had all been air-lifted to the helispot, Garvey joined up with them, and they started towards Caramba Camp to check out the tracks. I climbed back in and Don and I searched the canyon as we descended back towards Mrs. Dolley's. When we arrived back, the rescue van was there along with all our members who comprised the standby team. Members of the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team, who had been called during the night for assistance, began arriving.



Jim Fairchild

This photo, shot from the rear seat of Don Landells Jet Ranger helicopter, gives some idea of the snow that was covering the high country. RMRU members were being picked up at Tahquitz meadow and being moved to Caramba for further searching.

As the group was coming around to Palm Springs, word was received that two of the missing young men had walked out and had been picked up by Capt. Ray Canova. He brought them to the new base where I questioned them about the other two. The last they had seen the other two, was Sunday evening, just at dark in the upper part of Tahquitz Canyon. Don's brother Bill had just finished refueling the Jet Ranger as I told Don of the new information. Don fired up the bird as I climbed in. As soon as the check list was completed we lifted off and headed back up the canyon. The sun was shining into the bottom of the canyon as we cleared the third falls.

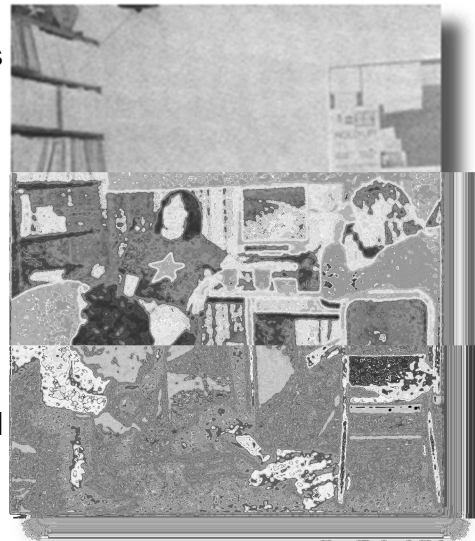
Looking ahead, I could see two people sitting on a large rock. I told Don and we headed right towards them. Don circled over them, they were wet and the clothing descriptions were close. Don and I decided that I would get out and check them out. However, we now had an interesting situation. The right rear door was off for easy entry and exiting, but the front doors and the left rear door were on, and I was in the left front.

Don maneuvered the bird into position and set the right runner on a large boulder. As he held the bird in position, I slowly opened the front door, got out onto the cargo step, un-latched the rear door, closed the front door, moved towards the back, opened the rear door and slid inside. Whew, the hard part was over, I slid across, Don nodded and I stepped out onto the boulder. Don lifted up and flew away. I climbed over to them and indeed it was the two remaining missing young men. I helped them over to the boulder and I radioed Don for the pickup. He brought the bird back to the boulder, put the runner down and gave the nod. I yelled to the first man and helped him in, he slid over, another nod and I helped the second man in. I gave Don the thumbs up and he took off back towards base. When the bird went around the corner and I couldn't hear it any longer, there was a pleasant silence, save the rushing water just below.

In that wilderness quiet I briefly thought to myself, these four young men are truly, "Lucky to be alive." The quietness was broken as Don returned for another one runner, I loaded my pack, one of the subjects, grabbed the second pack, climbed in with it in hand and we headed for base.

Editor's Note: Later that morning, after the four had been treated at Desert Hospital and transported to the Banning Station of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department, they were questioned by RMRU Operations Leader Walt Walker. The following are highlights of the information gathered from them:

No topographic map of the area



Jim Fairchild

Four tired young men were questioned by Operations Leader Walt Walker (not shown) about their ordeal, while they were waiting to be picked up by relatives.

Improper clothing for conditions

Lack of experience and/or training for winter conditions

Poor judgement when problems began and continued (related to above)

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.