



Search for 3, found 10 plus zoo

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Black Mountain Road
1978-049

By Jim Fairchild

A few hours into resting up from the physical and mental exhaustion of the preceding day's missions the phone rang again; another search call.

The Banning Station of the Sheriff's Office requested assistance in locating three overdue hunters, reportedly in the Black Mountain area.

When I was near Banning driving the van toward the Black Mountain Road turnoff, the Sheriff's dispatcher called to say a convoy would form at the bottom of the grade, then Capt. Canova confirmed this and soon a motley parade began to wend its way up the mountain; a dump truck ahead to drop sand on icy stretches of the road, a semi-trailer with caterpillar tracks with snow pushing blade, other State pick-ups, Capt. Canova's 4WD vehicle, RMRU van, and assorted others. This was the most leisurely (Slow) drive I ever made up the grade. At the roadhead there was a flurry of packing and getting into other 4WD vehicles (add the Pine Cove Rescue panel truck driven by Bob Muir), then it was off up the road, following the snorting and bucking tractor that cleared the way enough for the wheeled vehicles to follow. Brian Hixson remained with the van as Base Camp Operator, while Hal Fulkman, Bernie McIlvoy, Steve Zappe, Kevin Walker and I jolted along for ten miles to Camp Lackey.

Before reaching the camp we encountered a number of vehicles left abandoned on the road. They were unceremoniously moved by the tractor. On a hunch we checked the Fuller Ridge Trail roadhead. Kevin and I had exited Canova's vehicle to get some welcome exercise loping along behind the tractor. As we neared a van at the roadhead a frantic honking began. Visions of near-dead hypothermia victims were conjured. Upon stumping up to the door through deep snow we saw four warm but anxious men safely ensconced. We tried to calm their anxiousness to be evacuated, saying they would be returned for later. It was on to the camp where dawn found us being greeted by two Doberman Pinchers, five chickens, two cockatoos, and a cat. Not to mention a woman (owner of the zoo) and three young men. They too were eager to be evacuated, especially the woman who told of a strong wish to drive east to be married in three days. Of course, she thought her "Murphy", a VW bus, could drive out on the "cleared" ten miles of steep, narrow, snow-covered road.

Are you wondering what happened to the three overdue hunters whose worried wives initiated this whole drill? Well, the woman at Camp Lackey had heard shots the previous evening and radioed out on CB to that effect. That's how we all got into the act. She told us further that she heard shots about the time we would have been a mile or so away from reaching the camp. The noise of the tractor had prevented the sound from reaching our ears. All this early morning we had been awaiting the large helicopter on contract to the Calif. Division of Forestry. Capt. Canova had



requested it to come to transport RMRU searchers and evacuate whoever we found. As time passed without results, Canova requested Don Landells, who soon arrived. With Steve Zappe aboard and searching where I figured the shots came from, a whole three minutes elapsed before the two vehicles and three hunters were spotted. Don ferried them back to Camp Lackey, and departed for a trip to Bishop. Meanwhile, Bill Barrett of Western Helicopters flew the 205 overhead and said he wasn't planning to land on the tiny field in the middle of Camp Lackey. We suggested a huge helispot on a ridge a mile or so NW and that was fine. Also meanwhile, because we anticipated this eventuality, the tractor had cleared the road over to the ridge and thence up to the van with four men at the Fuller Ridge Trail. Canova made trips, Bob Muir made trips, and when all were on the ridge Bill made his final flight from there to the Banning Airport. It was planned to drop the chickens over the airport on a fly-by just for effect, but their wings had been clipped. Anyway, Bill lifted the big bird off the ridge about a minute before the dense, white cloud brought almost zero visibility and later another snowstorm.

We landlubbers spent another two hours jolting back to the rescue van, putting in a total of seven. I'm still puzzled as I ask, "This is mountain rescue?"

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.