

Hiker injured and stranded in heavy storm

**December 17, 1978
Tahquitz Drainage
1978-054**

By Ed Hill

Toni and Jim Garvey had been shopping in the Los Angeles area and had stopped by my place for dinner. We had just finished the main course, and were heating a cherry pie for dessert, when Al Andrews called. He reported that two hikers had left Desert Center on Friday and were planning to climb Red Tahquitz Peak and descend Andreas Canyon to Palm Springs. They had hoped to be out Saturday afternoon. They were carrying sleeping bags and a little food and were unequipped for the stormy weather that had moved in. All I could think of is that we have the Thanksgiving dead Boy Scout all over again.

The pie was shoved into the refrigerator, and we drove out to the Banning Sheriff's substation. We met the rest of the team and learned that the missing hikers had been hitch-hiking and could be anywhere. We decided to secure the operation for the night and restart in the morning after seeing if they had obtained a wilderness permit.

At 7:30 the phone went off. It was Jerry Muratet, one of our coordinators. The missing hikers had gotten a wilderness permit for Red Tahquitz Peak. I got my gear together and drove out to Banning again. It was raining lightly as I arrived. The girl at the Sheriff's station told me that the rest of the team was eating breakfast at Sambo's and deciding what to do.

We decided to put a team of four people high on the mountain in case they were still up there and deploy the rest in the desert canyons. Bernie McIlvoy, Brian Hixson, Darryl Hand and I were to hike into Little Tahquitz Valley and look around. John Dew was to act as our control in Idyllwild.

We drove on up into the storm. We encountered first rain and then snow as we drove up to Idyllwild. We reorganized our packs and talked the Fire Department into driving us up to Humber Park in a four wheel drive carry-all.

The weather worsened as we hiked up to Saddle Junction. Snow flurries and fog limited our visibility to about 50 feet. At the Saddle, we snowshoed over to Tahquitz Valley by compass and instinct. We saw no one. Even the squirrels had gone into hiding. We crossed the valley, found Tahquitz Creek and climbed up into Little

Tahquitz Valley. It was getting late, and we were getting cold, so we set up camp in a big clump of trees at the lower end of the valley.

About dark, the wind started to come up and blew all night. I estimated a steady wind of thirty miles per hour with gusts up to sixty. The tent flapped and dumped just enough frost on us to keep us from really sleeping.

Seven thirty the next morning, we dug ourselves out, reset up our radio antenna that had fallen apart during the night and learned that Don Landells was able to fly in the lower canyons. He told us that we were in the middle of a cloud cap. Jim Fairchild asked us to try and hike over to Red Tahquitz Peak and check out that portion of the PCT trail. We figured that we could do it on a compass course if we were careful. Bernie and I would hike, while Darryl and Brian would straighten out camp and dry out the wet bags.

Bernie and I had just left camp when we got the word that the victims had been located; one had walked out to Palm Springs; the other was in lower Tahquitz Canyon. We were told to hike back out to Humber. We broke camp and started back still in thick fog and snow. It had snowed about a foot and a half while we were there. After wandering around a bit, we found the Saddle and dropped down to Humber Park.

The Sheriff fed us a good lunch at the Alpine Pantry, and we were off to the lowlands to dry out all of our gear and get ready for the next one.

Mission No. 1978-054 (continued) From the bottom UP!

By Kevin Walker

After returning to the Banning substation Monday morning, and then catching a quick breakfast, the mountain team headed by Ed Hill (see Mission No. 7854M, Tahquitz Drainage), started for Idyllwild. The remaining team members then started for Palm Springs. Upon reaching the Fiesta grounds of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, we set up base camp for the canyon part of the search. Don Landells had been previously notified about the search mission, so all we had to do was call Don over the radio. It was still raining quite heavily, but Don said he would give it a try.

While waiting for the chopper to arrive, Walt went over the search plan with Jim Fairchild. While the mountain team would try to catch up to the two missing men on the Red Tahquitz Ridge, and Tahquitz Drainage area, our team, using the helicopter, would try to cover the desert canyons, weather permitting of course.

With the arrival of Don, with his Bell Jet Ranger, Jim Garvey, Don Chambers and myself climbed in and off we went, well needless to say, the cloud level lowered and we were unable to get near the mouth of Andreas, so we flew back around to Palm

Springs. The cloud level was somewhat higher at the mouth of Tahquitz Canyon, but there was quite a bit of convection fog forming, so we did not try Tahquitz Canyon either. As we were approaching base, Don pointed out that the clouds seemed to be a little bit higher at the moment. We decided to give it a try. It was a very eerie feeling as we flew very, very slowly up the canyon. We were forced to stay quite close to the canyon floor because of the heavy storm clouds. All the while it was raining, we still forced our way up canyon. At about the 3,000 foot level we had to turn back because the cloud formation was beginning to drop into the canyon. Don carefully turned the bird around and started back to base. Just as we landed it started raining big drops. As soon as Don had the ship shut down, we retreated to the not so warm, but very dry rescue van. The radio group was very gracious and brought us lunch, consisting of hamburgers, French fries, and nice hot coffee. For two hours we sat in the van hoping for a break in the weather. While waiting, Don told us of his flying adventures, and how he got into the helicopter business. I could have listened to that for hours but with a break in the rain, it was back into the bird and flying. It seemed as if we might get lucky this time. As the cloud lifted, Don flew up the ridge where there was quite a bit of upward moving air. It was extremely rough as we got closer to the top. When we reached the 5,000 foot level it started snowing. Icing on the windshield started to become a problem so we started searching back down the canyon. Avery Powers replaced Jim Garvey in the back seat. Avery was recovering from a bout with the flu, and the rough air took its toll on his Stomach, so we quickly returned to base. Jim replaced Avery, and Walt took my place up front with Don. They were gone only 30 minutes. After landing, Walt told me that the air was just becoming too turbulent to fly in. It was now 4:30 in the afternoon. Darkness would soon set in, so we decided to stop for the night.

Don Chambers had to be back for work on Tuesday morning and Jim Fairchild was going to take the rescue van around to Idyllwild where the search was to be intensified. That left Avery, Jim G., Walt and myself on the desert side. Don offered a place for us to stay at his home in Desert Hot Springs. After considering the offer for about, two seconds, we accepted. Upon arriving at Don's home we were happily surprised to find that Don had already prepared his Air Stream trailer for the four of us to stay in, and very pleasantly surprised to have Mrs. Landells invite us in for a hot drink and a warm fire.

After having the best nights sleep I have ever had on a mission, we were awakened by Don with a 'come and get it' cry for breakfast, (by the way, Don is also a great fry cook). Since Avery was still a little bit under the weather, he stayed at the hanger (to operate a base radio and relay via the telephone to the Idyllwild base). With Walt up front, Jim G. and I climbed in the back, and at 6:00 a.m. we were off towards the, still, cloud covered mountain.

Today we were going to concentrate on Tahquitz Canyon. As we entered the canyon it started to rain, and as we reached the 3,000 foot level, it started to snow. The clouds would not let us go past about 6,000 feet, so we flew around the middle portion of the canyon hoping for a break in the clouds. The waiting paid off, the

clouds lifted and we could see Caramba. As we neared the ridge line above Caramba, we experienced very heavy turbulence, so Don lipped over into the Andreas drainage to get out of the rough air. We decided to go ahead and check out the upper portion of Andreas. All we saw as we worked our way down, were a few deer and a whole lot of snow.

It was time for fuel, we landed in front of Ann Dolley's home in Palm Springs. After Bill Landells finished filling up the Ranger, we lifted off again on what was to be a very long flight. Again, we worked our way towards Caramba. All was going well as we approached Caramba, there was not even much turbulence as we lipped over. Walt and Don decided that we would work our way towards Laws Camp while we had the chance. We were probably about half a mile from the camp when the softly falling snow changed to a very heavy storm. Quickly Don turned the ship around and started back for Caramba. To our dismay, as we lipped over, the clouds closed in around us, and on top of that the windshield was now, totally, covered with snow. Carefully, very carefully, Don flew sideways at times keeping the side of the ridge in sight, all the time hoping that we would not fly into a stag tree or formation of rocks. With a little of luck and a whole lot of great flying, Don got us down and out of the clouds. We decided that no more could be accomplished, so we headed back to Don's heliport.

We had been at the heliport for about 20 minutes when I heard the mountain team say something to the effect, "OK, we're heading back to base, since they have been found." The question was, who found them? Well, shortly after that the phone rang with news that one of the subjects had made his way out to Palm Springs with the help of a day hiker who heard him calling for help. The other missing subject was somewhere above the third falls with an injured knee and possibly fractured ribs. Quickly we took the rear doors off of the bird, and put on the side racks that assist in getting in and out during one runner landings. Also, we prepared a pack with first aid gear and climbing equipment. As soon as that was done, Don, Walt, Jim G. and I lifted off for Tahquitz Canyon.

As we neared the third falls, Don slowed the chopper down to a crawl, so that we could hopefully find the injured man quickly. Since the doors were off, and at the moment, it was not raining, Jim and I were able to lean our heads out of the bird and look straight down. It was a lucky thing that Don was flying so slow, because we had just passed the third falls when I saw the subject's pack laying on top of some grape vines. I yelled up to the front that I had spotted a pack, so Don started circling over the little clearing. We had circled over the clearing about four times when something moved under the edge of a large boulder. Sure enough, it was the injured man, he finally crawled out and started waving. So with that Don found a one runner helispot just across, the now swollen, stream from the young man. The three of us climbed out and worked our way over, while Don flew back to Ann Dolley's to wait. Upon examination, Walt found that the young man might have some fractured ribs, and that his knee was only bruised. Walt then wrapped an Ace bandage around his chest, and then we roped him up with a call-out rope and

helped him back to the helispot. With Don's return, I climbed in first, followed by the subject. Don then flew us out and then returned for Jim and Walt.

With all out and safe, and no major injuries to anyone, Mission No. 7854 was termed: Successful. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Don for some of the most fantastic flying I have ever seen. Don Landells, in my book you are the best.

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.