

Hiker fell through ice covered water

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San Jacinto Mountains
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By Kevin Walker

It seems that every time there is a weekday mission, the call comes just before lunch. Today was no different. At 11:45 the pagers went off with news of a search in the San Jacinto Mountains. After checking with the team coordinator I was told that we were to meet at Camp Maranatha, and that a helicopter had been ordered. Even though it was a warm day down in the low lands, it was quite cold up on the mountain. While enroute to Idyllwild we came across two auto accidents apparently related to icy road conditions, since the highway patrol and the ambulance were on the scene we were able to continue on.

Upon reaching Camp Maranatha, Walt and I were met by Don Landells and his Jet Ranger, CPA. Canova and Sgt. Weakly from the Banning Station of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department. CPA. Canova informed us that a second call for a missing hiker had just been phoned in. It was decided that Wait and I would fly with Don and see what we could see while the rest of the team was enroute.

After loading our packs and snow shoes into the bird, we lifted off for the big mountain (the high country in the San Jacintos'.) Both hikers (hiking separately) told their wives that they were going to snow shoe cross-country to Mt. San Jacinto via Marion Mountain. Sure enough, there were two sets of tracks heading towards Mt. San Jacinto. Only one set made it to the peak though. Don let Walt and I off on the peak with our snow shoes. We then snow-shoe-skied in knee deep powder snow down to the summit shelter. After checking the shelter register Walt found that one of the hikers spent the night at the cabin and had stated that he was fine and having a fantastic time. Just after that Don flew by and radioed to us that the one hiker who had spent the night in the cabin had just hiked out to Humber Park.

One down and one to go. After making our way back to the summit, Don picked us up and we were off to Marion Mountain where the tracks seemed to split. After checking closer we found that the tracks were heading down the Wellman Ridge. As we moved further down the ridge the tracks started drifting towards the Tahquitz drainage. Making an educated guess Walt and Don decided to fly over Caramba and just see if the hiker had made it that far. Just as we flew over the narrows at Caramba, I Spotted a lone set of tracks going through the ice covered rocks. With that we flew back towards Saddle Junction so that we could notify base that we were going to search our way down

Tahquitz Canyon, and that we would be out of radio contact. Once back at Caramba, we started to fly slowly down the canyon. We were approximately 1000 feet below Caramba when Walt spotted the hiker waving at us from the canyon bottom. It now seemed that finding him was the easy part, the hard part would be to find somewhere to let us out. After looking for a few minutes Don found a spot where he said he was willing to try. That wasn't encouraging, but it did seem to be the best. Don carefully maneuvered the bird into position over a very small clearing on the side of the canyon. Once in position, I dropped the packs out into the snow. Now came the exciting part. Since I was on the pilots side in the back I was to make the first jump. Speaking of first jumps, this would be my first jump on an actual mission, instead of Don's soft grass at his heliport where the team practices. Oh well, with Don's nod it was out on the runner, and one more nod jump ... luckily instead of rock underneath the snow it was only a scrub oak. After Walt joined me on the ground, Don left for Palm Springs and jet fuel. We slowly made our way down to the canyon floor. Soon we were in voice contact, and soon after that we had visual contact. Our missing hiker was quite wet and very cold. I took his pack and Walt assisted him back up the side of the canyon with the use of a call out rope. It was slow going working our way back up through the snow covered brush. Normally there would be no problem about time, but darkness was beginning to set in, needless to say we moved just as fast as possible. Once back at the helispot the hiker told us how he could see Palm Springs, and how close it seemed to be. He thought that it would be a quick way off the mountain when he became lost. After asking how he got wet, he explained that he was trying to make it past an ice covered water fall when he slipped and fell into a pool of water covered by ice. With his pack still on and under the ice, he poked a hole in the ice and was able to get his head out to breath. He had just climbed out when we flew over. Lucky man!

After a short wait, Don returned. Since daylight was a factor, there was no time to have Don go back for brush cutting tools. So ... Don rested his right runner in the crotch of an old scrub oak tree. I climbed up onto the runner, and then Walt handed me all the gear, and then I climbed into the bird and Don flew me down to the old Doggy helispot. While I waited there, Don flew back up the canyon and picked up the hiker and Walt. It took a little time to help the hiker into the chopper, but Walt finally got him in and then a quick flight back to get me, and then back over the mountain to Idyllwild.

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.