

Man slid 2000 feet

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North Face Mt. San Jacinto
1979-014

By Jim Fairchild

This Sunday morning Guenther Zaeschmas, 57, of San Diego, planned to finish a big event climbing the North Face of San Jacinto Peak via the East Fork of Snowcreek. He and his party of 13 had camped Saturday night high on the face. They started up early, but Guenther soon found himself far behind staying with a straggler. He also found a crampon was loose, stopped to adjust it, slipped, and slid down the snow gully. His friends ahead, already on the peak, saw the slide and assumed his demise. They proceeded down eastward to the Long Valley Ranger Station and reported the accident. Meanwhile, Guenther had finally managed to dig in his heels and stop, having descended 2000'. No major injury, just badly lacerated and abraded face, hands, and calves, perhaps a broken finger, he surmised. Fortunately, both his crampons came off the boots during the slide, thus no doubt preventing leg fractures. Guenther tried descending and soon was met by three men ascending who convinced him he was in no condition to continue. He slipped at about the 8500' elevation, slid down to about 6500' el., and got down to 5000' el. where the angle was much less steep and a handy, large, flat boulder protruded from the snow.

The author was up in Mill Creek shooting a class assignment and testing filters and other paraphernalia when (0830) the pager went "beeeep." Breakfast was cooking as well, so it was quite a scramble to bag up the camera gear and stove, unleash the dogs, and head



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ASSIST - Walt Walker and a unidentified climber assisted Guenther Zaeschmas to the waiting helicopter. They were all bending down because of the steepness of the slope and the nearness of the helicopter's main rotor blades.

for the Snowcreek roadhead. The Sheriff's Office at Banning had received the call at 0800, just minutes after the informants did their informing, then our coordinator was called, then the pagers were activated.

Upon arrival at the roadhead only a Sheriff's Deputy was there, Sgt. Weakly and Don Landells were flying the face. Soon Walt, Kevin, and Brian arrived, then we heard that the victim had been spotted. By 0945 Walt, Don, and the author were heading up. It was an easy spot to hover at and we stepped out on the snow, walked over to the smiling Guenther, took pictures, bundled him into the bird, and flew back. Everything was so much easier than preliminary information indicated. After some de-briefing at the roadhead Guenther was convinced he should be checked at the San Gorgonio Pass Memorial Hospital. RMRU then rolled up to Sambo's for a meal.

As we think back on past and recent North Face missions, we are truly amazed that the victims have not been much more injured, that conditions for the rescue have been so easy, and that the accidents have been reported so quickly. The weather has always been good, a helicopter available at the outset, access quick and easy, and no trouble finding the site of the problem. Nevertheless, this environment remains high, steep, puzzling as to route for first timers, and holds a terrific potential for disaster. Our next mission could be as easy as in the past, or it could manifest all the factors for a difficult 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.