

First time climber fell hundreds of feet

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Tahquitz Rock
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By Ron Barry

My wife and I had just returned from a five day trip in the Sierra Nevada, and I was opening the windows to air out our house, when the phone rang. It was Al Andrews, and he had some bad news. I realized there would be no fireworks for me tonight, as he told me of a climbing accident on Tahquitz Rock with a badly injured climber to be evacuated. After talking to Al, I called Bernie McIlvoy to arrange driving up with him.

On the drive up to Idyllwild, Bernie and I ate fruit pies and milk - that was to be our dinner. Humber Park was enveloped in darkness when we rolled up to the tight knot of vehicles at base. At the RMRU van, we were informed that our operation status had changed from "rescue" to "recovery". The story was that a young man, on his first ever rock climb, had plunged several hundred feet to his death, his body coming to an abrupt stop on a ledge in a vertical chute 270 feet above the base of the rock. Walt and Kevin Walker were presently climbing up to the accident, as a large group of us below were pulling out several 300 and 150 foot ropes, assorted hardware, and the litter out of the van. After we had divided up the gear, we started the long, steep haul up to the base of Tahquitz Rock to the vicinity of the White Maiden Route.

Eons later, our "merry" crew arrived at the foot of the vertical granite monolith. Hundreds of pounds of gear was sorted out and set up at a point directly below where Walt and Kevin were above us. Walt and Kevin had gotten to a ledge fifty feet below the victim and had set up a fixed rope to the ground, Bernie McIlvoy Jumared up quickly to their position and the lead the final section up to the victim. After a fixed rope was set up, Walt and then Kevin followed up.

Meanwhile, down below, Don Chambers, Rick Pohlars, and myself slipped into harnesses, and proceeded to Jumar up to the intermediate ledge directly fifty feet below Bernie, Walt, and Kevin, I went up last, trailing along one end of a 300 foot line that would be attached to the litter eventually. I continued on up past Rick and Don, into the darkness above and soon was with Bernie and the Walkers. Bernie installed anchors and pulleys quickly, as the Walkers and I hauled up the litter (which sent off several rocks down onto our guys below),

and eventually placed the deceased into a body bag.

This unfortunate fellow had fallen for quite a ways after stumbling off a ledge in the blackness far above us. The most obvious injury was a radical femur fracture, though the cause of death appeared to be a broken neck. With our cargo lashed away Kevin and Bernie lowered me and the litter over the ledge and down. Rick Pohlers helped me get by the intermediate ledge, and in no time I was down onto horizontal again, at the base of a rock.

But now, the really hard work began. Attaching the wheel back to the litter, we proceeded to thrash our way through the thick stands of pines, shrubs, and other assorted obstacles, back down to Humber Park. It was just like going to war, with several casualties: Kevin tangled several times with thorns of buck brush; Walt had a large rock dislodged onto his shin; Don took a flying branch in the eyes - and then another one; John Dew received a puncture wound from some unknown assailant, and all of us were bathed in sweat, and a thick layer of dust from that cursed trail (if you want to call that a trail!)

It was a quiet group that ate breakfast in Hemet at dawn, and by 7:00 Bernie and I were heading home as I dozed off.

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.