

## Man left behind

**March 06, 1980**  
**North Face Mt. San Jacinto**  
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By Dave Ezell

We had just pulled off an extensive all night evacuation of Lloyd Allen in the wilderness near Powder Box Spring. The troops were arriving home when we got another callout. The story was a man missing on the North Face. Having just come off the mountain we knew he was to await his ordeal through the pending storm that had seized the mountain the previous evening. Little did we know that we were about engage ourselves in only Part I of "the Missing Person Syndrome." (See other article - North Face Search).

As the tired troops moved their way back toward the mountain late in the day, Landells Aviation was being dispatched to the summit to take a glance through the storm blanket to locate the missing person Winfred Blevins. A team comprised of RMRU members and Hemet Search and Rescue Team members were deployed to the mountain tramway station to begin their search at first light. Because of heavy cloud cover, strong winds and darkness Don Landells had to call off his search. The remaining available members met at 5:30 A.M. the following morning at the Snow Creek helispot for airlift to the peak. By this time the weather had cleared and I felt it would be the typical helicopter search and recover operation.

The search and recovery was as expected but the circumstances of the search turned out to be atypical. As it turns out our lost person was left by his climbing team to trek the last 1,000 feet to the summit solo. (He was traveling at a slower rate than his companions, Hooman Aprin and Vickie Mayfield.)

There were some forcing circumstances that added up to a near miss tragedy though. Blevins claimed later that during his approach he became very fatigued and extremely sleepy; a storm was approaching; his climbing partners left him behind; and the wind speed was estimated to be well over 40 m.p.h. To add device to misery Blevins sleeping bag was swept away in a strong gust just as he was preparing to bivouac in the wake of the approaching twilight holocaust - this began his first night without a bag.

In the meantime his climbing partners atop the mountain climbed into their bags out of the wind and fell fast asleep. Upon awakening early in the morning and discovering that Blevins wasn't there they concluded that he must have passed them and blitzed to the tramway ahead of them. So, being cold, they decided to be on the first "down car," but

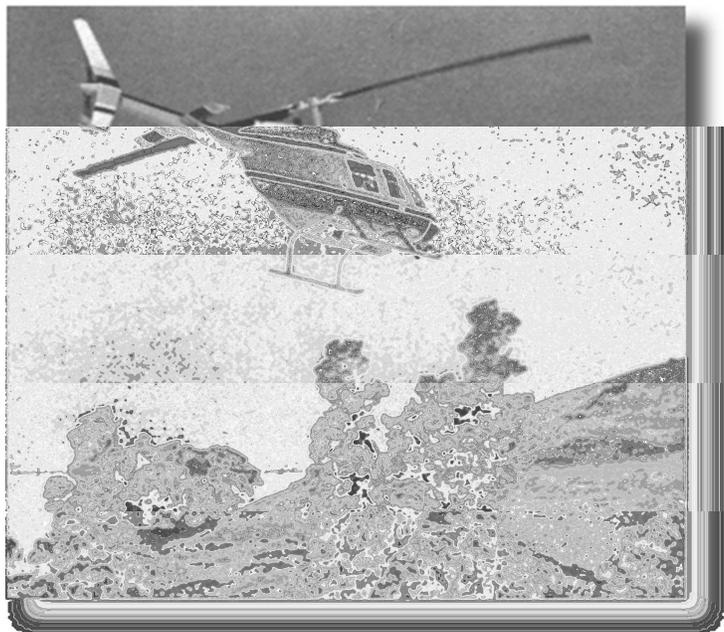
to their "astonishment" Blevins was not to be found at the parking lot. Thus they began a day long wait for his imminent return. As the day lengthened the couple began to wonder if indeed their lone partner was to be imminent prior to dusk. A call to the Long Valley Ranger Station was all that was necessary to activate a rescue call through the Banning Sheriff's Station. What, you left who behind? How many hours ago?

The next morning six RMRU members were air lifted to the peak. Jim Fairchild, Pete Carlson, Walt Walker and Kevin Walker were on top and Brian Hixson and myself were the last team to board. Hal Fulkman rode as observer. As Don Landells moved us slowly up the desert ridges we all hoped that Blevins had indeed reached the summit before the storm had peaked because the fresh flocking showed those portentous signs of that incessant phenomena that snow crystals relinquish to gravity.

Don flew this flight in slower as we scanned the slopes. As we reached the top the bird was getting hit with severe blasts of wind. Snow crystals blown off the peak in large plumes were striking against the cleared blue sky. Because of the strong winds near the peak Don decided to swing out further than before and we banked out over Little Round Valley. As we passed over I caught a glimpse of fresh tracks crossing the meadow and exclaimed, "There's his tracks - down there in the meadow." Hixson and I were dropped off on the peak and Don and Hal flew back for a closer look. Sure enough, Blevins hobbled out of a grove of trees and waved to the ship.

The conditions by this time (approx. 7 A.M.) were extreme in exposed areas. The temperature was exactly 9°F. and the wind was as high as 60 m.p.h. It was time to draw the storm hoods closed and peep through glacier goggles for the remainder of our stay - wind chill being nearly 40 below.

Don landed the ship in eloquent fashion in the squirrely winds on a nearby knoll and Hal motioned Blevins to the bird, got him in, and they flew back to base. Hal began an immediate verbal survey and detected a lot of ambiguity in Blevins responses. Blevins felt extremely confident about his condition, his abilities as a mountaineer, and expressed disconcert about the need for rescue. He claimed that he knew right where he was and that he was headed for the Tramway. He was confident that he was nearing Long Valley because of the increased number of footprints he was crossing. Fulkman quickly pointed out that the prints he



was crossing were indeed his own and that he had been walking in circles and in addition he was walking away from the Tram (180° west). Blevins admitted later that he firmly believed in following his own sense of direction without the aid of map or compass.

Hal began having doubts about the true condition that Blevins was in even though Blevins kept assuring him that he was fine. Hal began probing deeper and when he asked Blevins about his fingers and toes the response came back "I can wiggle my toes fine." After arriving at base camp Hal insisted that Blevins toes be examined. Blevins consented with, "OK, if it'll ease your mind." After a lengthy struggle to remove a boot with the help of Captain Canova's biceps it was a Medivac to the hospital Code 3. Blevins had solidly frozen feet as well as frozen finger tips.

This was another excellent example of intuitive examining demonstrated by a conscientious member. If Hal had only listened to Blevins' constant assurance, definitive treatment and prevention of true tissue loss would not have been realized. More importantly from all of this was a great lesson for me as an observer. As the saying goes, "Believe the signs and the symptoms, not the person," cannot be overemphasized. How often do we read of accounts of mountaineering tragedies where the apologetic person becomes the victim because of masquerading symptoms. In the words of Jim Fairchild, "Blevins is a classic example of the victim who claims he's OK and then dies an hour after you've turned your back!" It was speculated by some of the veteran members that Blevins indeed was a lucky man and that he probably did not have much life left in him at the time of his rescue even though he appeared to be alert. Blevins was admitted to the Desert Hospital in Palm Springs for treatment of frostbite by 9:00 A.M. that morning and released nearly two weeks later. According to Hal Fulkman the miraculous saving of tissue in Blevins recovery was due to a fast and effective rescue and immediate transportation to the hospital without delay or subsequent trauma to the frozen feet.



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.