

Man caught in swift water

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Strawberry Creek
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By Jim Fairchild

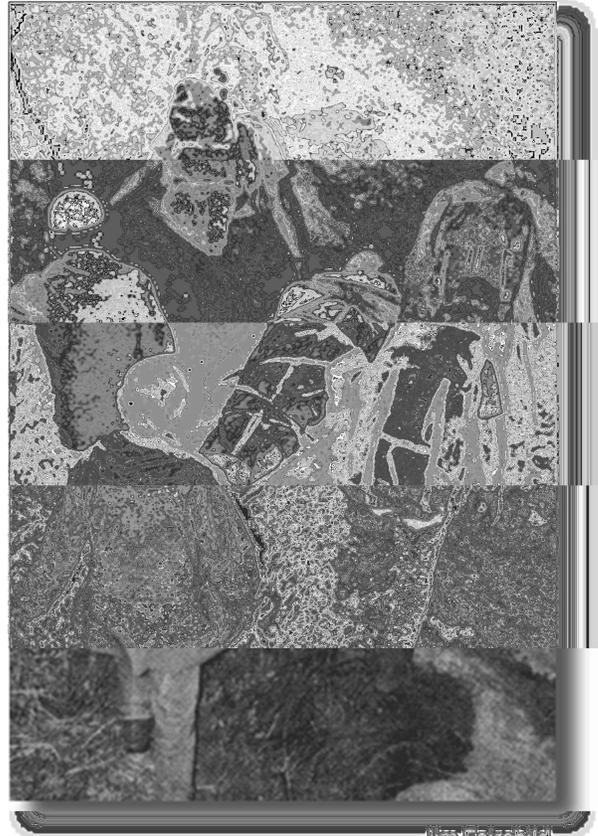
"Beware of stepping into swift flowing streams, the force of the water can suddenly spin you into the torrent." So I addressed my class in wilderness safety at UCR, at about 15:30 that Saturday. At about that same time Howard Bechefsky, 39, a San Diego Superior Court judge, along with his fiancé, was enjoying sun-bathing and scenery in the vicinity of Grieg's Grotto where Strawberry Creek flows down narrow, cliffy, steep terrain. There was a really considerable volume of swift flowing water present.

My wife, daughter and I were debriefing the class just ended when the pager told me to call Walt Walker. His information was that we were to meet at the Idyllwild Grammar School to search for a man. Daughter Carol and I were soon on our way, arriving at the base camp on the Isomata Campus, just a few minutes hike from the grotto. Mary Bowman was at the van as Base Camp Operator. Walt, Kevin, Brian, John and Steve Vaughn from Hemet Search & Rescue Team (HSAR) were ten minutes into the field already, Jim Garvey pulled up, so we decided to go together, having loaded requested gear. Just then the eye-witness to the accident showed up. I loaned him a flashlight, and we hiked. Soon we saw lights below and by radio learned Walt's party was checking pools. The eye-witness had described the whole scene to us, and we checked very closely downstream from where he had last seen the judge. Jim Garvey went on belay to check a huge boulder that split the stream, no luck. We went around the projecting ridge and onto an overhanging rock 150' from a likely pool. My headlamp revealed a skin-toned shape undulating below the surface, often obscured by foam. That had to be the judge. To be sure Kevin was lowered half-way to the pool to verify our find, and the search was over. Jim, Kevin, and I stayed on the scene while the rest went up to obtain appropriate additional gear, along with Craig Beasley and Joe Erickson who had just arrived.

The eye-witness said he was watching as the judge approached the stream, placed a leg in it, was pivoted off the rock and into the torrent. He tried to stop himself by hooking a rock with his foot, but just as the eye-witness came along to help, he was swept down and over a waterfall, striking head first, then he went over a second falls and out of sight. We found him down a third long cascading falls, around a bend and in the pool.

Our teammates returned, along with several more HSAR men, and a couple of Idyllwild residents. We set up anchors and rigging, and Jim, Kevin and I rappelled down to the pool. Kevin and Jim climbed onto a huge boulder that helped block the judge's body from washing on down, then Jim dropped onto a flatish boulder near the body. He tied a rope onto the judge, then I pulled him free and over to the close side of the pool. After placing him into a body bag and securing that into the Stokes litter, I jumared the rope back to the ledges to take further pictures. Kevin and Jim attended the litter as it was lifted, and soon the tedious, back-breaking task of climbing back to the van was in progress.

What started out to be a nice day in the sun by the stream became a tragedy, what was expected to be a quick, easy mission became a search and technical evacuation.



Jim Fahrenia

SAD TASK - Members from RMRU and HSAR carry the litter containing the body of Howard Bochafsky up the steep canyon side of Strawberry Creek.

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.