

## **Man separated from group, then got lost**

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**San Jacinto Mtns**  
**1980-021**

By Jack Schnurr

What a relief! It was a gorgeous Monday morning, about 10:30 AM, and I had just forced myself to sit down in front of a desk of mid-term essay exams that needed to be read and graded. The phone rang; Al Andrews asked if it was possible to roll on a man missing in the San Jacinto high country. I'm sure that my "YES" was the most emphatic and enthusiastic answer he received all morning!

It was a beautiful day to be driving. Passing through Banning, I didn't even bother to stop at the Sheriff's station and ask if the mission was still on; if it was cancelled, I didn't want to know about it. Winding up the mountain road towards Idyllwild, I admired San Jac, still iced with a generous coating of snow; yet, at the altitude where I was driving, the country-side was spring green and speckled with wild flowers; I gloated at my good fortune in having an excuse to go hiking on a "work day."

Soon I arrived at the base camp which was set up at Camp Maranatha in the ball park; Don Landells' helicopter was on order and the team was getting briefed to go into the field. The search centered on a 22-year-old male, Joe Coupe, missing from his group since Sunday afternoon. The group had climbed a hill above their camp in Skunk Cabbage Meadows; Joe decided to return to camp alone. When the group returned to the campsite, they found that Joe had not made it back to camp. The group searched the area and found tracks descending towards Law's Camp and Caramba Camp. They decided they needed help, returned to camp, packed up ALL of the gear, including Joe's and hiked out to Idyllwild. Joe, in shorts and a tee-shirt, was now definitely a victim on the mountain! Joe was described as a beginning backpacker, who was a smoker and not in the best of condition.

Walt Walker decided the first field team should check the bottleneck at Caramba for tracks and that the second team should go to the Tower helispot in Tahquitz Canyon, below Caramba Camp, in case Joe had made it past Caramba. Craig Beasley was dropped off on the Palisades to be the radio relay between the field teams and base. Additional field teams were dispersed in the area around Skunk Cabbage to check and see if Joe might still be in that area.

Pete Carlson and I drew the assignment to the Tower helispot in Tahquitz Canyon. We sorted gear for a possible overnight stay as the helicopter lifted Walt and Kevin Walker

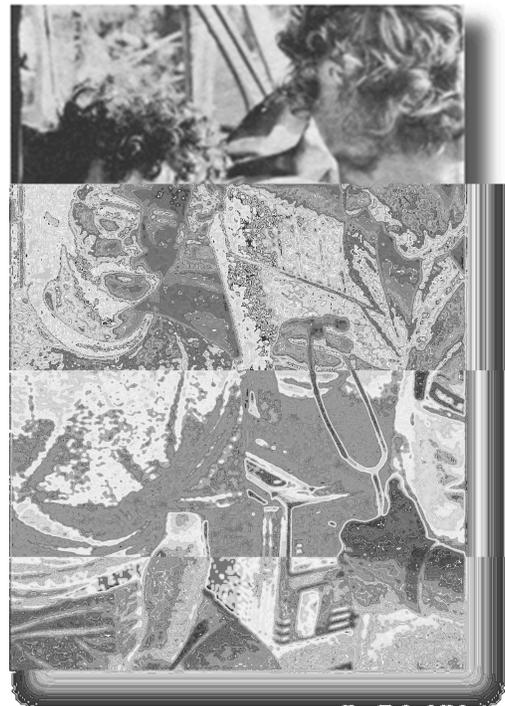
up the mountain to Caramba Camp. Soon, Pete and I were loaded and the bird headed towards Tahquitz Canyon. If the drive up the mountain was grand, then the "chopper ride" to the canyon was magnificent! Riding just above the trees, searching for Joe on the way in, the mountain top lay in spring-time renewal. The shaded areas under the trees were still burdened with snow, but the sunny meadows and the trees along the stream banks were pregnant with budding greenery. The sunlight danced and glittered on the streambed that ran full with icy cold snow melt. The air, though cool and crisp, smelled fresh and felt invigorating.

The chopper dropped into the canyon from the high country and soon we were standing on the Tower helispot. This helispot is literally a tower of rock and dirt that rises several hundred feet out of the canyon bottom; the tower is situated on the end of a long ridge and at the confluence of Tahquitz Canyon and several other drainages from the east side of San Jacinto Wilderness area. From here, a collecting basin, we could check the floor of the canyon and see if Joe had hiked this far. We called the Caramba team for a radio check and was informed that they had tracks heading downward, through thick brush, towards our location. We acknowledged and began our climb downwards through the brush and over the loose dirt and rock. Reaching the canyon floor, we quickly decided that Joe had to be traveling high on the ridge due to water conditions. The high, raging water, coupled with the cliff like walls of the canyon, would force Joe to travel out of the canyon bottom. We radioed out that we thought Joe was still above us, probably making very slow time through all of the thick brush on the ridge lines. Unfortunately, the helicopter was not able to stay with the search due to other commitments during the day, so the search would have to stay on the ground until Don could return about 1630 hours that afternoon. Pete and I climbed back up on top of the Tower and sat watching the various skylines above us; what thick brush!

Just about 1630 hours, we heard a shout and straight across the canyon, atop a water fall, stood our missing hiker. While I climbed back into the canyon and over to the victim, Pete radioed for a bird evacuation. Soon Don was back, picked Pete up, located a tight helispot close to the water fall, picked up Joe and me, and soon we were back in the ball park. Several more shuttles and the rest of the team was off of the mountain also.

Joe was tired, dehydrated and his poor, exposed arms and legs told the tale of his 4500' descent through the thick brush. He got some nourishment from Mary's camper before his hiking companion took him home. (photo by Jim Fairchild)

I thought about the memories that I would have of an almost perfect day (how many times do rescues



Jim Fairchild

occur from 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM on a beautiful, sunny Monday when you should be working?) compared to Joe's grueling, 24 hour bushwhack on a freezing mountain. I wonder if he will ever go backpacking again? If he does, will he get the training to SAFELY enjoy the country he travels in? I hope so; this time he was lucky!

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.