

Missing solo horseback rider

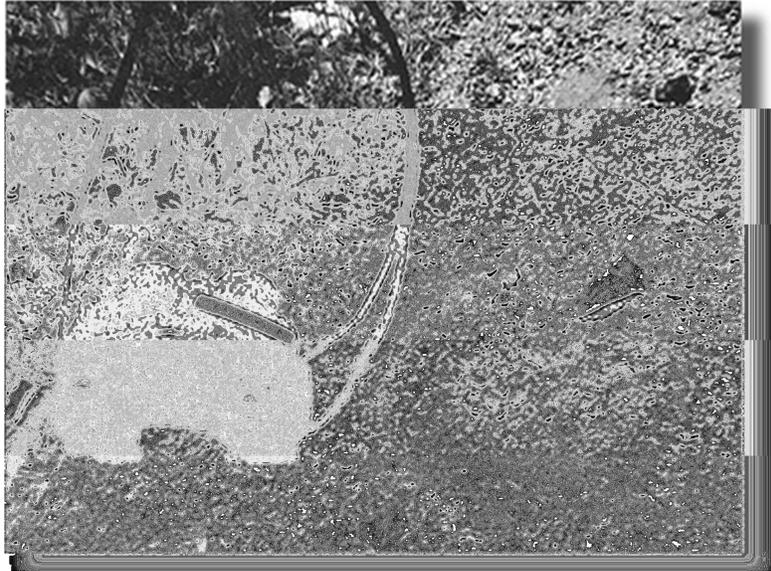
**July 07, 1981
Upper Drainage, Palm Canyon
1981-022**

By Bob Attride

At a little after 9:00 pm I received a call from my call captain Jim Fairchild. It brought news of a search. Details were sketchy, more information would be available at the rendezvous point, which was at the Anza turnoff on the Palms to Pines highway.

Once at the meeting point Operations Leader, Walt Walker informed us that Sylvia Birrage, age 35, was overdue in arriving at her residence in Piñon Pines. Her planned route of travel on horseback started at the Tom Parr Ranch in Garner Valley. From there she would ride up a fire road that led to a trail which would take her over the ridge and down into Palm Canyon. Then she would ride up the rocky wash to Piñon Pines and her home. Sixteen hours had elapsed since she was last seen, so this meant that she could be most any where between starting and stopping points. Team 1 consisted of Bernie McIlvoy and Kevin Walker. Their assignment was to get to the Desert Divide ridge as soon as possible to see if Sylvia had got that far. Hal Fulkman and Mark Rhoads would start searching near where she was last seen. In the event that team 1 did not find anything, Hal's team would be responsible for pointing the rest of the group in the right direction. Team 3 consisted of Rick Pohlers, John Dew and myself. This team would start at Piñon Pines and hike down canyon and possibly find Sylvia in the canyon. Two 4WD vehicles would be needed to get teams 1 and 2 to their respective starting places, so the Hemet team was contacted. After a short wait Bob Elliot and Pete Boss arrived. Soon after everyone was walking.

Knowing that the following day would bring high temperatures all the teams hiked straight through the night to take advantage of the cool air. As planned, team 1 found the unusually square hoof-print on the trail that Sylvia said she would travel. With that, Hal's team was pulled off their assignment. Base was moved around to Piñon Pines. As the sun rose over the desert ridges it found Bernie and Kevin still following tracks, and my team still walking down



Jim Fairchild

HOOFING IT - Just to the right of the pair of binoculars is a print left by Sylvia Birrage's horse. Tracking is quite slow on this type of terrain.

the rocky wash in Palm Canyon. The silence of the morning was broken with a transmission from Bernie, "We've found something." Come to find out, Bernie and Kevin had walked across Twila Wellman also on horseback. She was a friend of Sylvia, and the country like the back of her hand. She had also been searching for Sylvia. Twila had also been following hoofprints, and she felt that Sylvia would double back. So Twila went on her way, and team I stayed with the tracks. Our team was finding that Palm Canyon was not a sandy wash, just the opposite. It was quite rocky, which slowed our travel. Even with this inconvenience, we had something very important, water. At about 9:00 am Bernie radioed to base that they had used the last of their water. And to make matters worse, they could find no more tracks. Base informed them to find shade and wait.

At 9:30 the sheriff's fixed wing was overhead and joining the search. At 10:30 the plane had to return to the desert. Because Sylvia had not been located yet, and team I needing water before being able to continue, Don Landells was requested and okayed.

At 11:15 Don arrived at base camp. From base, Don flew Jim Fairchild and Hal Fulkman into where Bernie and Kevin were. Jim and Hal would try and find tracks and Bernie and Kevin would fly



Jim Fairchild

TIRED BUT RELIEVED - Sylvia Birrage rests in the No. 1 van after being located and flown out. Sylvia had been lost for nearly two days.

air search with Don for awhile and then return to base for a brief rest. The initial air search brought no results. Don flew back to base, Bernie and Kevin climbed out and Walt Walker joined Don. Then flying down to our location in the canyon, I was picked up to help search by air. We had searched for some time and were about to fly back to base and get the rested troops back into the field, when we thought we saw something. Don turned the powerful machine in the direction of the object. Sure enough at 1:46 we found Sylvia. Only thing is we could not take the credit for the initial find. Twila's theory of Sylvia doubling back was correct, and Twila had located her resting under an oak tree. Don found a helispot nearby and landed. After giving Sylvia liquid refreshment, she was flown out. A friend of the family volunteered to ride Sylvia's horse back out. So, after he was airlifted in, and the rest of our members were brought out, the mission was secured.

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.