

Two hikers not prepared for storm

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Mt. San Jacinto
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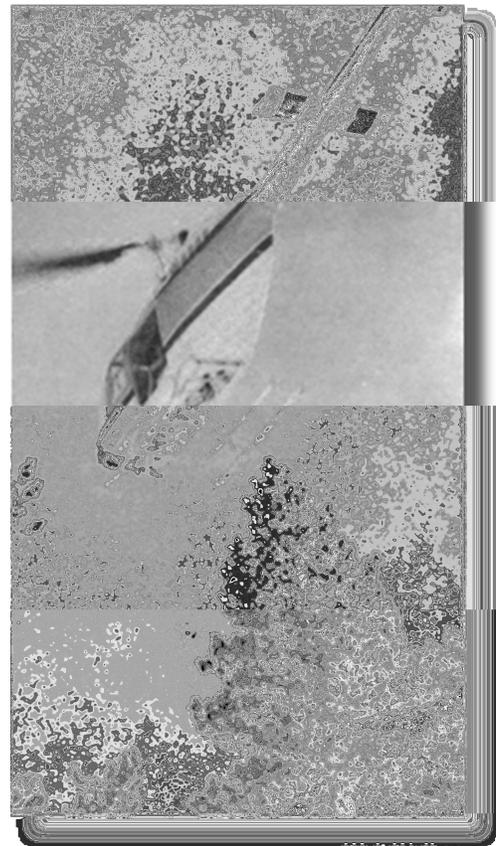
By Joe Erickson

Thanksgiving day came none to soon for Roger and Cathy Caldwell. Young and healthy these two were going to have a wonderful four day weekend backpacking in the San Jacinto Wilderness. They were also looking forward to a future seven day trip through the High Sierra next year. This was a preparatory trip, so they carried everything they thought they would use.

Their itinerary would be numerous points in the high country. After leaving the Palm Springs Tram around 11:30 they obtained the necessary permit from the Long Valley ranger station. Not wanting to quit so soon the couple ignored the rangers warning about an incoming storm, and shouldered their heavy packs and trudged on.

It was snowing by the time the Caldwells made camp Thursday. The heavy packs exhausted them, the altitude made them nauseous, the cold and exertion dehydrated them, Cathy pulled a muscle in her thigh and they didn't have the energy (or desire) to eat. So they crawled into their bags and tried to sleep. In spite of their misery the two pushed on Friday. Roger had taken part of his wife's load, but this helped little in their cold and weakened condition. It took two trips that day to get all the gear up to the stone cabin just below the summit. After another grueling day they found the door to the cabin would not close more than half way. The wind and snow whipped around the cabin so much that they pitched the tent inside.

There they stayed for two more days until Sunday when they were up and preparing to hike out on Monday. They were slow to start Monday



Walt Walker

ON THEIR WAY OUT - Roger and Cathy Caldwell are flown out from the Mt. San Jacinto summit shelter by pilot Mike Donovan. Mike returned and picked up RMRU member Walt Walker.

am, with melting snow and all so they were going to stay until Tuesday.

A foot of snow fell over the weekend, and these two only had summer boots and no snowshoes, so it was good they did not try and make it to the tram or they would have been hurting.

Monday morning a little after 10:00 my pager went off telling me of the search. I called in to say I was going and would meet at the Palm Springs Tram (my gear is always in the car, so there is little delay). My promptness paid off because as I pulled up I saw Walt and Kevin putting on their boots, and Kevin said the chopper was on the way. As Mike Donovan landed with one of Landells Bell jet Rangers, Walt, Kevin and I were ready to go. And off we went.

It is always nice to fly the high country after new snow fall, but with the doors off (for observation and loading ease) it was chilly. Flying over the fresh snow is most advantageous, because if someone has traveled over the snow, you can follow the track quickly.

We followed a few tracks until they went down to some steep canyons. Hoping those were not Roger's or Cathy's, we looked up higher and found that they had made it to the hut where Roger was standing by the door waving. The pilot came in close enough for Kevin to motion 'Stay there!' Kevin and I were dropped off at Round Valley to lighten the load so Mike could maneuver the bird and drop Walt behind the cabin. Walt had them pack up and get in the chopper. On the way down they picked me up and continued to base. Mike flew back up to pick up Walt and Kevin, and the rest of the Caldwell's gear. Bernie McIlvoy, Craig Beasley Rick Pohlers, Mark Rhoads and the sheriff deputies were there to help.

I'll say from experience that it is most disappointing to get off work (without pay) rush to base to find that the helicopter has taken the first crew up, searched, and found the subjects. All the while you standing at base hoping to get to go into the field. Sure, we are all very happy that they are found quickly and relatively unhurt, but I am no good in base camp, and I don't like to be there long.

The mountain is beautiful



Kevin Walker

BACK AT BASE - RMRU member Walt Walker listens as newlywed couple Roger and Cathy Caldwell tell of their cold stay in the summit shelter on Mt. San Jacinto. Enjoying the story (from middle) an unidentified sheriff's deputy, Capt. Ray Canova and Joe Erickson.

and we are looking forward to the purity and aesthetics of a fine Winter season, 'Slap them boards on and slide downhill.'

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.