

Hiker lost footing, tumbled to canyon floor

February 16, 1982
Tahquitz Canyon
1982-007

By Kevin Walker

It was a little after 2:30 in the afternoon when the phone rang at work, with news of a rescue in Tahquitz Canyon. Super! Warm weather and a known location. Fly in, effect a rescue and fly out. Well at least that is what we thought.

The team met at our standard rendezvous point, Ann Dolley's. Also arriving at our location was Mike Donovan with one of Landells Aviation Bell jet Rangers. As we were preparing our packs, fellow member Walt Walker filled us in on what transpired. On Saturday (Feb. 13) David Foster and Brian Vengrin started from Palm Springs up Tahquitz Canyon. As they planned to hike ' up the canyon and ultimately reach the tramway. On (Feb. 15) Monday, while attempting to climb out of the canyon to bypass a waterfall David lost his footing on the near 40 degree slope. David's companion Brian watched in terror as David tumbled and rolled down the hillside, and out of sight. Brian descended as quickly as he could back to the canyon floor. Upon reaching David, Brian found him in a semi-conscious state, with a large amount of bleeding from his head, there was also a large red area staining his upper right leg of his Levis. Brian helped David to a flat area near the creek. There he got David into a sleeping bag after seeing to David's injuries as best he could. Then came a tough decision. To go for help or not. Brian decided on the first. Once David was resting, Brian started up the canyon. After limping up onto the mountain near Caramba, Brian headed in a direction he thought would lead him to the tram but instead was going towards the saddle. Sometime after noon on Tuesday (Feb 16) Brian made it to Idyllwild and called for help.

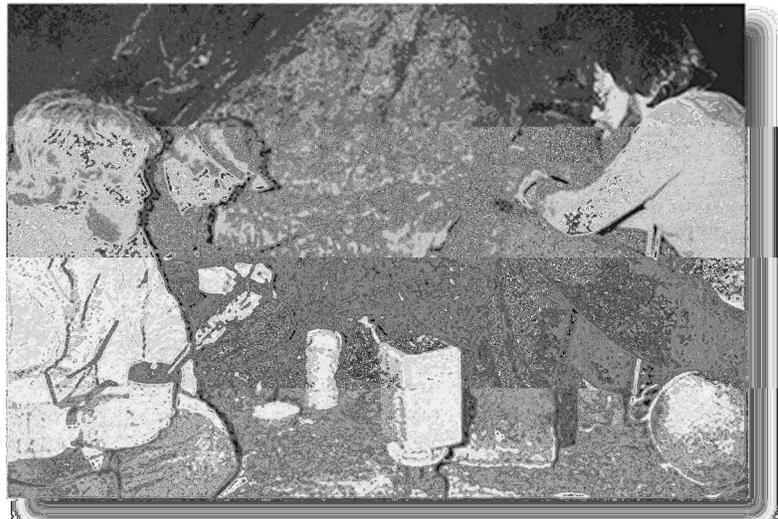
Walt and I would be the first load in. We would try and locate David. According to Brian, somewhere above the Long Valley confluence. With packs and ourselves loaded we were off for the canyon. As Mike flew the powerful machine up the canyon, we could not help but notice the dramatic changes in the canyon floor because of flooding from last Fall. Soon we were passing the Long Valley confluence, Mike slowed the chopper down to a search speed. We slowly made tight circles up the canyon, until we had reached Caramba. So back down to the confluence and then back up again, with no results. The searching did not reveal anything, so we decided to try some calling. Mike let me off on a ridge that required helitac (stepping out off the ground). Once out, Mike and Walt left so that I could shout. Again, nothing, so I was picked up and moved down to Tower to try shouting. No, response, just the

sound of running water below. The light of day was fading fast, so we decided to get field teams into the canyon for a night ground search. Mike moved Walt and I up to the ridge where I had been let off before. Rick Pohlers, Jim Fairchild and Glenn Henderson were let off at Tower. Bernie McIlvoy and Craig Beasley were let off at Grapevine. And finally just as the light was getting dim Mike brought the last load of Joe Erickson and Craig Britton in to our location.

Upon reaching the canyon floor, we stopped to get flashlights out and then started searching. Almost immediately, we found a set of Vibram soles and a smooth soled shoe both going up the canyon, but found that the smooth soled shoe prints went down canyon also. Since we knew that Brian had went up for help we began to wonder if David might have recovered some from his accident and decided to try and hike down. Rick's team who was in the middle and found the same as we did. Bernie's team though, only found the prints going up. Because of the evidence, it was decided to have Rick's team follow the prints down the canyon and for Bernie and Craig to search up. Since our team was much higher we decided to search in our area some more and then go back to the ridge for a morning pick-up.

Since the information was quite sketchy, Walt instructed John Dew back in base camp to try and get better information from Brian. John came back on the radio shortly after, and stated that Brian was at his home in La Mirada. Walt said to call Brian and talk to him, and to also have him in Palm Springs first thing in the morning.

Meanwhile, the tracks that Rick's team were following left the canyon and went up towards the ridge. Along the way Glenn found a new coffee can that had been dropped quite recently. This was then radioed out to base to check on. Shortly thereafter Rick and Bernie's teams met up. They decided to spend the night where they were and then try and continue tracking in the morning.



Jim Fairchild

NOT EXACTLY THE PALM SPRINGS HILTON - RMRU members Craig Beasley, Rick Pohlers and Bernie McIlvoy sit around the Peak I stove, and wait for soup and noodles to finish heating for dinner.

Just as we were starting to doze off John came on the air. He told us that Brian and David were both wearing Vibram lug soled boots, and that they had met up with a canyon local who was wearing smooth soled shoes. As for the coffee can, it was not theirs. What had happened was that Brian and David met up with the local, and he hiked with them for some distance and then went back down canyon. Brian told John that because of David's injuries he was sure that David

would not attempt to hike out on his own. As for his location, Brian said that David was half way up between the confluence and Caramba, and that he was lying in his sleeping bag near a very tall tree. With that, every one went ahead and climbed into their sleeping bags for the remainder of the night.

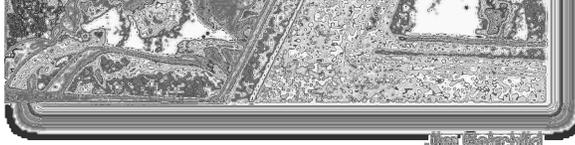
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MOUNTAIN PILOT - Mike Donovan of Landalls Aviation waits for the cargo net (used for flying out packs) to be removed, before flying back into Tahquitz Canyon to pick up RMFJ members Joe Erickson and Kevin Walker. Mike's excellent flying was greatly appreciated on this particular mission.

brush

were just beginning to clip the brush as the right skid came to rest on the boulder. Mike gave me the nod to unload the packs. After that, another nod and I was off on the boulder. Walt was in front, so he had to climb out and go into the back and across to the right side to unload. As he was doing that, I put my pack on and started down approximately 200 feet to the canyon floor. Soon I was down and across the creek to where David was laying. I was greeted with a very large smile and a healthy thank you for coming. David had taken good care of himself while he waited for help to arrive. He had stopped the bleeding in his upper right leg and had apparently only had a mild concussion. He had stayed in his sleeping bag and had been able to eat a little and also drink water. Walt arrived as I was finishing a survey of David's injuries. After looking him over, I found that there was no apparent fractures, just numerous bruises, cuts and abrasions that had formed scabs. Mike went back and picked up Joe and Craig and flew them up to our location to help get David up to the chopper. Mike let them off at a large boulder that had better rotor clearance.

the first glimmers of light started to the ridge tops, Mary Bowman's voice could be heard over the radio "Good morning everyone, Mike is Desert Hot Springs now and will be canyon in ten minutes." Quickly we our packs as Mike approached our ridge top helispot. The air was and Mike was able to set right down because of improvements in the Walt and I climbed in and once we were off and searching. Since now had light and no wind, Mike able to fly low and slow in the canyon. We had searched around bend in the Canyon, and then as went around a sharp left bend Mike there is the first tall tree, and just as finished saying that, we all saw a a sleeping bag below, waving frantically. Mike found a helispot quickly, and maneuvered the helicopter onto a large boulder with above it. The tips of the main rotors

While we loaded David's gear into our packs and prepared to move him up to the helispot, Mike started ferrying the rest of the teams back to base. Soon we were loaded and moving. Walt tied David into a sling and then hooked him up to a call out rope so that we could belay him across the stream. Craig went across with one end and Joe stayed back with the other, while Walt and I helped David across. It was slow, but then who would move fast if they had fallen the distance that David had. The move went smoothly and we were soon up and ready to be picked up. Mike arrived and put a skid down, and Walt climbed in. Then Mike moved the ship around so that David could climb in easily followed by Craig. All that was left now was for Joe and I to load the packs into the cargo net and wait for the return of the chopper. Mike returned and positioned the helicopter over me so that I could clip the line into the cargo hook. Mike applied more power and was again enroute to base with the packs. One more trip back for Joe and 1, and then back to the warm streets of Palm Springs.

Before I end this article, I would like to thank Mike Donovan of Landells aviation for some super flying in the canyon. Because of Mike's expertise, we were able to be let off near David and were able to get him out of the canyon quickly with less pain to him. Mike, thanks for a great job. And to David, we all hope you recover quickly. RMRU



Jim Fairchild

BEATS CARRYING'EM - Pilot Mike Donovan flies a sling load of packs out of Tahquitz Canyon. Actually this technique saves helicopter trips and is a safety measure, as it eliminates many tight one runner loadings.



Jim Fairchild

LIVED TO TELL ABOUT IT - David Foster talks with base camp personnel about his day and a half wait for help. Luckily, for David, his injuries were, not as serious as first thought.

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.