

## Woman lost in Caramba

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**Tahquitz Canyon**  
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By Jim Fairchild

It is not unusual to meet friends in a mountaineering shop. Ralph Glenn, whom I've known since he was a Cub in my Webelos Den 22 years ago, and John Noyes, an applicant to RMRU, were there. We were conversing when a certain "beeeep" sounded. The voice following said to call Al Andrews, RMRU's Coordinator. Al told of a lost woman in the vicinity of Caramba, a campsite at 6600' el. about seven airline miles west of Idyllwild. It overlooks the 6000' high escarpment on the east side of the Mount San Jacinto Massif, facing Palm Springs. Within ten minutes I was in the No. 2 rescue van heading for Ann Dolley's home, the roadhead for so many Tahquitz Canyon missions.

During the fifty-mile drive I overheard No. 1 van talking to the Banning Sheriff's Office, and was amazed that they were somewhat behind. just past Windy Corner Don Landells and I conversed about his arrival at the roadhead with his helicopter. We spoke of flying immediately because sundown was not too far off. We did arrive almost together, did some briefing, threw together a pack with radio and other items deemed necessary, and took off.

We quickly rose above the 100 degree plus heat heading up the spectacularly steep and varied canyon. John Burden, a sergeant with the Sheriff's Office who was in Walt and my First Aid classes many years ago, went along to help observe. The object of our search was Melissa Grimshaw, 34, recently of a campsite near Caramba. Her boyfriend had looked for her when she failed to return from a water-fetching errand at 9 a.m. this morning. At afternoon he hiked back to the Tramway up which they had come the night before, and reported her missing. The rangers called the S.O., and they quickly called RMRU. Melissa was wearing blue denim trousers and jacket, and tennis shoes, and was described as being 5'10' tall and weighing 165 lbs. I figured she could help me carry my pack if I were the one to find her, and was not prepared at all for ... I'm getting ahead.

From about the 3600' elevation on up to Caramba we looked diligently into the canyon bottom and along the sides of the canyon. The dense leaves of both the evergreen and deciduous trees prevented us from seeing even half the canyon bottom, but we hoped she could get into the open and wave. After a few circles of the Caramba area we spotted the sleeping bag with note on top the boyfriend said

he left. Then ensued a division of opinion wherein Don espoused the theory that Melissa came up from water fetching and missed the camp, and was now wandering around the thickly forested plateau country west of Caramba. This grizzled upstart dared to think she had become confused and wound up going down. Needless to say, we searched a couple of miles west of Caramba, then headed easterly to descend the canyon, searching, to airlift search parties onto the campsite area to find tracks. We wanted to look closely at the canyon again on the way down. Don circled out away from the campsite and down three-hundred feet, then turned in toward the canyon bottom. There she was, standing on a flat boulder at the stream. Even from our distance of about 400' we could see she was sobbing and no doubt wondering if we saw her. Don hovered lower and lower and I waved, reassuringly, I hoped. Don said he could not get into the well-protected location. Tall, vertical cliffs to the left, tall, vertical sugar pine to the right, tall, vertical incense cedar blocking the downstream approach. No way! The plan now was simple: put me off as near as possible so I could try and reach the woman, take John back to base and bring a couple of RMRU men up to assist. An eminence of boulders on a minor ridge about 300' above Melissa on the sugar pine side was a great helispot, and soon I was picking my way down, fully expecting a couple of drop-offs that would require the use of my rope. Providentially, a gully led straight down to her. Through ant-covered oak trees, of course! About a hundred feet away I called to her and she heard over the sound of the waterfalls and torrents. She answered but did not move. Much closer I called, "Melissa, turn around." She did, and rushed toward me, muttering something like, "I'm lost and am going to stay on this boulder until I die." A few minutes of banter and half a can of peaches brought her around. What I mentioned earlier that I was not prepared for is that Melissa is a beautiful woman not of the dimensions of height and weight described. Why, I even put her only possession at the time, a dented Army canteen, in my pack for the flight out.

By now Don was back and put Kevin Walker and Joel Erickson out above where I started down. just on a hunch, I asked Don to take another look at our location. It appeared that he might be able to guide his powerful Bell jet Ranger III into the hole without shortening his main rotor blades on the cliff or catching his tail rotor on the cedar. He came and looked, and settled down, ever so slowly, into the hole. We talked on the radio about clearance, I waved my hands to indicate position. Almost imperceptibly the bird approached, like a minute hand on a big clock you know is moving but movement is so gradual. Don nodded for me to get into position with Melissa. We climbed over the top of a boulder where the main rotor spun only a foot or two above our heads, then down onto a jutting ledge. The bird neared our hands, again so gradually, so smoothly, I took hold of the skid, and Melissa adroitly stepped up, a very long step, into the back seat. Don then began his escape from the hole. First, move a few feet left toward the cliff to get out from under a menacing limb of the sugar pine. Second, power upward about seventy feet, no deviations right-left-forward-or back, then, because the nose of the bird was facing up stream and a turn around was necessary, perfect orientation regarding the tail rotor in relation to the aforementioned obstacles must be maintained. Fascination, admiration, and prayer melded into my steadfast gaze, and the bird was gone. I

was left with the wilderness.

Don flew up and retrieved Kevin and Joe so they could comfort and monitor Melissa on the trip back to base. I ascended to my drop-off point, thrashing upward through the ant-covered oaks. Awaiting Don's return, I listened to the stream below, and the voices emanating from up and down the walled gorge - the Siren Song of Tahquitz Canyon.

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.