

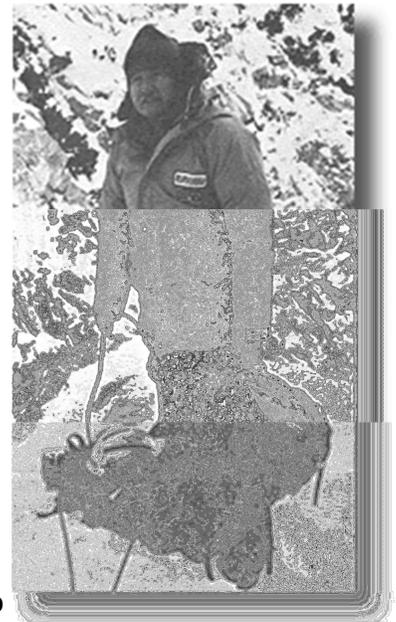
Overdue solo climber on North Face

January 13, 1985
North Face, Mt. San Jacinto
1985-002

By Walt Walker

After 23 years you would think I might get used to having the telephone ring in the middle of the night and not receive a rush of adrenaline. As you will find out as the mission unfolds I should have saved the adrenaline for a couple of times later that day.

Yes, the telephone call was from the Banning office of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department. A 32 year old man, Kenneth Kenaga, was overdue from a solo climb of the North Face. A trio of men had planned to drive to the Snowcreek roadhead Thursday evening. The weatherman had predicted that a storm would probably hit the mountain Friday. Two of the men decided they did not want to go ahead with the climb due to the weather. However, a very determined Mr. Kenaga decided he would do the climb "solo", He left his residence at about nine o'clock Thursday evening, planning to arrive at the roadhead by eleven. He carried minimum gear and planned to climb the face in one day and hike out to the Palm Springs Aerial Tram by Friday noon. At best this was a fairly difficult climb and the worst was that the wind chill factor Friday evening at the tram was minus 27 degrees and that the missing man was only slightly familiar with the area.



The team members started arriving at the Snowcreek roadhead at seven a.m. and began packing for a full winter mission, ice axe, crampons, gaiters, mittens, goggles, and a whole lot more. Then there was the long underwear, wool pants and shirts, wind pants and parka shells, down jackets, stocking caps, vapor barrier socks and insulated hiking boots.

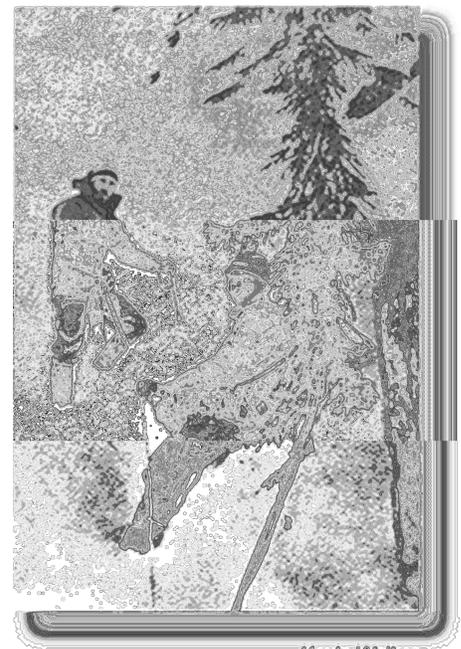
Shortly before eight a.m., pilot Mike Donovan arrived in a Landells Aviation turbine powered helicopter (Jet Ranger). Rob Gardner and I loaded our packs and climbed in. Mike applied power and we were off for the North Face. We flew search over the Isthmus and both Falls Creek and Snowcreek up to the neck of the Isthmus. We continued on up the North Face flying contours from the Falls Creek drainage over to the Snow Creek Drainage. Some 30 minutes later we reached the top of Mt. San Jacinto and began a

search pattern from Round Valley to Long Valley. It was decided to drop Rob off at Round Valley and bring two more RMRU members back up to form a team of three.

As Mike and I descended the North Face, we searched our way back to base. We spotted Ken in a side canyon at about the 7500 foot level. He was stranded on a very narrow ledge in a very steep area. Mike maneuvered the bird back and forth and all around the steep slope trying to find a spot to put a runner down on. This was hampered by the irregular wind gusts that pushed the bird around occasionally. He gave up trying to find a spot really close and started looking for anything in the general vicinity. Mike tried one above and to one side, the cliff was just too close to the main rotor blades. He flew out and we climbed up another 150 feet. Mike spotted a promontory and began to hover over it and inch his way toward a rock cliff. I looked up through the Plexiglas and watched as the main rotor blades came closer and closer to the granite. Just then the runner on the pilot's side touched down. In RMRU terms, "this was a big helispot." As we circled around the area I tried to estimate the rope and hardware that would be needed to pull off a very difficult technical winter rescue. I also motioned to Ken to stay put. As we descended towards base I radioed ahead my list of needed equipment. Since this was such a tight helispot we had to minimize our exposure time during the time the helicopter was so close to the rock. We would be flown in by two's and I figured we might be able to do the job with six members but I told base to have six more members ready to go.

When we touched down Bernie McIlvoy was ready to go and he quickly climbed aboard and we were off for the North Face once again. When we got back to the face where Ken was we had Mike maneuver the bird up and down the area so Bernie and I could make, what we hoped would be a successful plan. We had to consider a route of travel from the helicopter to the subject that would be as safe as possible for him and us.

Both Bernie and I were in the back of the Ranger with our packs in our laps and our ice axes on the floor. As Mike slowly and carefully worked his way down to the helispot, Bernie asked me to hand him his ice axe. Once the pilot's runner was down Bernie slid out of the seat and carefully stepped onto an icy one foot wide ledge. He had done this with his ice axe in the arrest position because of a 300 foot drop off on one side and a 100 foot drop off on the other side. I handed him his pack and then mine. Then I did the same as Bernie had done, ice axe in hand I slipped out of the seat and stepped onto the ice. It was a few seconds of very tense waiting as Mike applied power to the bird and lifted off, the main blades creating first a downward blast and then a sideways blast. Once the bird was gone I held the packs as Bernie got out a rope and worked it around a horn of



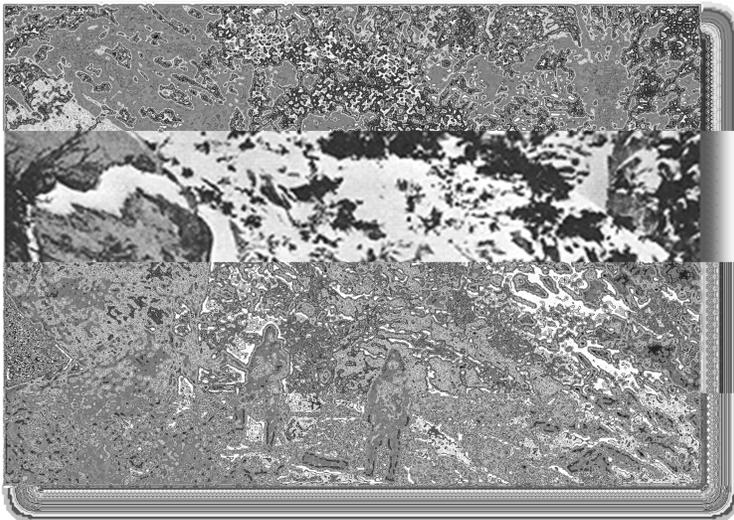
Kevin Walker

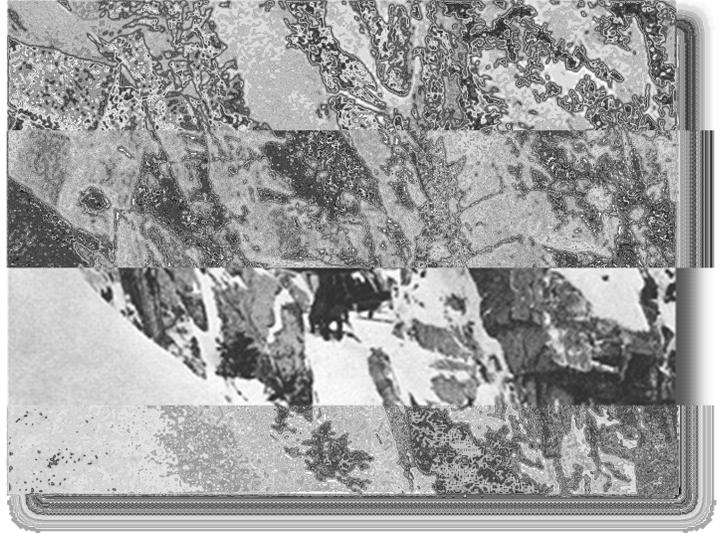
RESTING - RMRU member Mel Krug and stranded climber Kenneth Kenaga take a break, before moving on across the safety rope on the North Face of Mt. San Jacinto.

rock. We clipped onto the rope and moved our packs over to the horn and clipped them on.

Bernie tied into another rope and started across the slope as I belayed him. He ran into a steep section of water ice and detoured around a large boulder. As he was climbing along, about every 25 feet he would place a runner (a nylon like strap) around a rock or tree and snap the climbing rope into it with a carabiner as a point of safety. Bernie finally reached a group of small trees approximately 275 feet away and about 100 feet higher than the helispot.

The helicopter came into view and Mike worked it into the tight one runner helispot. I was standing there waiting with the safety rope in hand as first Kevin Walker and then Cameron Robbins climbed out and clipped onto the rope. With the long rope secured at Bernie's end Cameron quickly snapped onto it with his Jumars (mechanical ascending devices) and started over with more equipment. Once again the helicopter returned, this time with Mel Krug and Bruce Gahagan, and Kevin and I went through the same safety procedures as the time before. Mel, Bruce and Kevin quickly started over to the small group of trees to assist Bernie and Cameron. I remained at the helispot in case we needed more manpower.





Bernie McIlvoy

WINTER TECHNICAL AT ITS BEST (AND DANGEROUS) - in the first of these photographs, RMRU members Kevin and Walt Walker stand on the narrow ledge that was used for a helispot during the rescue of Kenneth Kenaga. Walt standing furthest to the right is near where the right skid of the helicopter touched down. Kevin on the left is standing approximately where the end of the rotor blades were turning by the rock face. The second photo shows members unloading gear from the bird. From one side of the ledge there was a drop of 100 feet to the main chute, and on the other side it was better than 300 feet to the bottom.

As Bernie tied into the end of a 300 foot PMI rope, Mel, Cameron, Bruce and Kevin set up an S.E.A. (Self Equalizing Anchor) to two of the small trees. After that was completed a multiple brake bar system was secured to the S. E.A. Bernie was then lowered 290 feet down broken rock, water ice on top of rock and soft snow. The mixed terrain made for a very interesting descent to the ledge Ken was on. As soon as Bernie arrived at Ken's narrow ledge he secured Ken to the same rope he had been lowered on.



Bernie Melroy

PEOPLE DOING WHAT THEY DO BEST - From left to right RMRU members Bruce Gahagan and Mel Krug cling to the safety rope on the small ice covered edge on the north Face of Mt. San Jacinto, as Kevin Walker holds onto rescued subject Kenneth Kenaga, while Walt Walker (furthest right) helps to guide pilot Mike Donovan into the extremely close helispot.

The entire time we had been working we were in the shade of the massive North Face and standing around begins to be a problem in keeping warm, particularly hands and feet. Since Ken was in good physical condition we would not need any extra manpower on the face. So I clipped onto the safety rope and jumared my way over to the trees. just after I arrived Bernie radioed up that he had helped Ken pack his gear and they both were ready to Jumar up the 300 foot rope. Kevin radioed back that the rope was secured and ready. Ken clipped onto the rope and Bernie did the same thing right behind him. It took quite a bit longer for them to come up than it had taken to lower Bernie down.

It was time to start back to the helispot and Kevin clipped onto the rope first and led off. Ken clipped on next and he was closely followed by Mel and then Bruce. Bernie, Cameron and I started to clean up the system for the 300 foot rope. With it almost done I clipped onto the safety rope and headed across. Cameron followed along slightly behind me and Bernie waited to untie the safety rope. Once we were all across, Cameron set up a belay for Bernie, Bernie untied the safety rope and tied it to his harness. While he was climbing across we planned our helicopter loads. With that completed I radioed to base that we were ready to have Mike come back and start flying us off the face.



The photograph that Bernie shot of us getting ready to load as Mike maneuvered the bird into the infamous tight helispot does

OFF THE MOUNTAIN - With mountain pilot Mike Donovan at the controls, the helicopter has just set down after flying off the mountain with Kenneth Kenage and RMRU member Walt Walker in the back.

not begin to show the real danger for all of us on the ground and Mike in the air. 'the main rotor blades were very close to huge granite rocks and gusting winds added to the problems that Mike had to fly under. We were faced with a brief moment, when we had to unclip from the safety rope, and then climb into the bird with huge drop-offs on both sides.

When Mike had the runner down on the icy ledge I unclipped and climbed aboard. Ken was assisted to the bird by Kevin and Mel. He was unclipped and helped into the bird and Kevin and I made sure he was buckled into the seat. Kevin signaled Mike for the lift off and we were off for the base at the Snowcreek roadhead. When we landed at base we were met by a large group of RMRU members who assisted Ken away from the bird.

Mike flew back to the ledge again and this time Bruce, Mel and Kevin jammed themselves into the back seat of the jet Ranger for their flight out. Back again Mike went and Bernie and Cameron had the task of standing on the ledge without a safety rope while Mike put the bird on the ice for the last time. They carefully climbed in and were on their way back to base.

At slightly after 2:30 p.m. the mission was completed and my adrenaline was just about used up. We had pulled off another one on the North Face and to many I'm sure it seemed like just another rescue, but not to those of us who were involved on the face and to a whole group of RMRU members who worked and waited at base. I want everyone to know these people were ready - Glenn Henderson, John Dew, Rob Gardner, Joe Erickson, Rick Pohlars, Jim Fairchild, Kathy Davis, Craig Britton, Bud White, Bill

Blaschko, Dave Ezell, Gordon Lee, Colin Chambers and Jack Bowman at the radioes.

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.