

Snowstorm surprised hikers

November 12, 1985

Skunk Cabbage Meadow, San Jacinto Mtns

1985-048

By Glenn Henderson

The first major storm of the season finally arrived, coming in from the northeast instead of the usual northwest route. Thus, it's arrival on Sunday was a surprise to everyone and especially to anyone caught out in the San Jacinto Mountain wilderness area. RMRU was called out on a Tuesday afternoon. Four people were overdue on a two day round trip hike from Humber Park to the upper Tramway station, and back. We had information that a ranger had talked with the hikers at the Hidden Lake divide on Monday morning and because of threatening weather the hikers decided to cut short their trip and return to Humber Park.

We arrived at the upper Tramway station late Tuesday evening only to find that possibly two more solo hikers may also be missing (See missions [1985-049](#) & [1985-050](#)). Two teams were sent into the field that night, one team to Hidden Lake divide in search of the party of four, and another to Round Valley for the solo hikers. It had snowed hard all day Monday and Monday night so the snow was very soft and deep. Some of us could not stay past midday the next day due to job commitments so it was decided that group would form a team to break trail to Hidden Lake divide and return to the upper Tramway station, thus leaving a fresh team at the divide for an early start on Wednesday morning. Randy Iwasiuk, Mel Krug, Kevin Walker and myself were trailbreakers and Rick Pohlers, Rob Gardner, Ray Hussey, Joe Erickson and Cameron Robbins were left at the divide. Others were sent to the Round Valley area at the same time to search for the two solo hikers.

The snowshoeing went slow as the wind was picking up and the snow was so deep. In many places we were wading through up to our thighs. With the cloud cover and a new blanket of snow it was hard to find our way in the darkness but I must grudgingly admit that Kevin did a great job in getting us to our destination with very little waste of time in route finding. It took almost three hours to get to the divide and once there some of us went to the edge and tried calling out but there was no reply. The rest were putting up tents or bivvy sheets to spend the night. Four of us then went back to the upper Tramway station. The trail was now well packed and marked so what took almost three hours going one way took only thirty minutes to return. We got back to the Tramway about midnight, rolled out our sleeping bags and got some sleep.

Landells Helicopter Service was contacted and would be landing on top of the upper

Tramway station at first light. Mel and Randy had to be back at work so Kevin and I were available for one quick search in the helicopter before we too had to return to work. Pilot Steve DeJesus was right on time so we took off with Kevin and Steve in the nice warm front seats (with heaters) of the helicopter, and me in the back (without the back doors on) of the bird. It was very cold and major wind chill factor back there at that time of the morning. We searched along Willow Creek drainage to Caramba and along the drop into Tahquitz Canyon. We searched up Willow Creek and over to Saddle junction, when I thought I saw someone waving to us. The trees were so thick that it took two more passes to locate the waving man again. We could only see one person but it was our only hope so far. Steve let Kevin and I off at Tahquitz Meadows and we zeroed in using the hovering helicopter as a guide. When we got to them it was indeed our four missing hikers.

They were all okay though cold and hungry. They said they had been to Hidden Lake divide and had turned around in the face of the storm. There was very little snow on the ground at that time but as they hiked along, the storm picked up until it was a virtual whiteout. They could no longer find the trail so they stopped and set up one of their two tents and waited the storm out. A wise move as the storm got much worse before it cleared up. Their stove quit working so they were soon out of water and couldn't melt snow for more water, nor cook any food. It had been a long cold day and night for them.

We radioed out that we had found the subjects and we needed more snowshoes and people to carry the subject's gear out to the helicopter. Members from RMRU, San Dimas, and Sierra Madre SAR teams were flown in. We got everyone and all the gear back to Tahquitz Meadow. Everyone was flown out, thus ending on a high note, another successful RMRU mission.

P.S. I have been on search and rescue teams for over eight years and this was my first real "find" of my own. Being volunteers our only pay is thanks from the people we help and their friends and relatives. I've been on a lot of missions but these people through their letters, Christmas cards and donations have made the past eight years of literally blood, sweat and tears worthwhile for me. Thanks to all of you who support us.

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.