

## Teenager from church group wandered off

**July 13, 1986**  
**Reeds Meadow**  
**1986-026**

By Rob Gardner

Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Uh, cough, cough, uh, hello."

"Hi Rob, this is Kevin!"

"What time is it?"

"5:30 a.m. We have a search."

"Hello."

"Come on, Rob, wake up. We have a search. A missing nineteen year old man last seen between Reeds Meadow and Red Tahquitz."

"Okay, I'm awake now. Where are we going to meet?"

"Camp Maranatha in Idyllwild. A helicopter has already been authorized. Landells Aviation will have the bird at Maranatha by 7:00 a.m. to deploy teams and do air search."

"Great. I should be there at about 6:45 a.m. You know I have fifty-five miles of mountain road between me and Camp Maranatha."

"Well, get moving and we'll see you there. Hopefully, we'll wrap this one up in a few hours."

"Okay Kevin. Good-bye."

I hung up the telephone and loaded my SAR (Search and Rescue) gear into my car. As I got underway it did not occur to me that what had the appearance of a routine search in a plateau like area would become a thirty-six hour search with a regional callout.

As I arrived at Camp Maranatha a good turn out of RMRU was present at the base camp. Many had remained in Idyllwild overnight, following the traditional July RMRU Bar-B-Que at the Mellor's cabin. They had intended to go sport rock climbing but plans were now changed.

Information on the lost subject was limited. His name was David Vague, nineteen years of age, from Oceanside. He had been camping with a group from his church for a couple of days. While the group was rock climbing at Red Tahquitz, David wandered away from the group, reportedly in a non-social mood. He was last seen at about 4:30 p.m. on Saturday walking towards Reeds Meadow.

As the helicopter flew in at Camp Maranatha teams were ready for deployment. Teams were placed to search the Caramba area, Reeds Meadow to Caramba, Red Tahquitz to Caramba, Skunk Cabbage Meadow to Willow Creek, Laws Camp, Humber Park to Reeds Meadow, and upper Tahquitz Canyon. Many hours of hiking to assignments were saved by use of the helicopter to deploy people. Searchers on the ground were very important as the forest area hampered aerial search. The weather was good, to the advantage of both the lost man and searchers. Everybody was at their field assignment by 8:30 a.m.

It already had been over fifteen hours since David had been last seen by friends. When the friends had returned to their camp site Saturday night and David wasn't there they did a hasty search of their own before one of the group leaders hiked out to call for help. The Riverside Sheriff's Office (RSO) alerted the RMRU at about 5:00 a.m. and a call out followed. David was described as about 5'7" wearing glasses, and clothed in black jeans and a blue T-shirt with a Ghostbusters logo. He had left all of his gear and food at the group camp site.

The last team boarded the helicopter as spotters for the aerial search. The ground searchers scoured their assigned areas, frequently called David's name out, and interviewed campers and hikers in the area. The helicopter concentrated on Tahquitz Canyon and Andreas Canyon and occasionally moved ground teams to new assignments. Tracking was difficult due to the poor description of David's shoe, the great amount of tracks from other hikers, and ground cover that included rock and a thick carpet of pine needles.

As the day wore on no positive leads were found. Base camp personnel interviewed friends and relatives of David, looking for information which might be helpful in locating David. Eventually, it was determined that the RMRU could use some assistance. A call out of the California Region of the Mountain Rescue Association was made. The search was about to expand.

JOSAR (Joshua Tree Search and Rescue), a volunteer group associated with the National Park Service at Joshua Tree National Monument, arrived just before sundown. Their men were placed at key sites for the night. They lit lanterns to light the way to help for David. By Monday morning SAR team searchers from San Dimas, China Lake, Sierra Madre, JOSAR and CARDA (Calif. Rescue Dog Assoc.; had joined RMRU on the scene.



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With team members from JOSAR onboard, and veteran mountain pilot Don Landells at the controls, helicopter 816 leaves Tahquitz Valley for the Caramba North helispot, as field team leader Kevin Walker looks on.

Don Landells was flying his jet Ranger III helicopter and our other SAR helicopter friends from El Toro Marine Corps base, were flying search as well. The search had been in progress for over twenty-four hours without turning up a sign of David. We became concerned that he was injured or for some reason was unable to come out into the open to be found, or to signal to a helicopter. Searchers continued to comb the search area.

The night had been warm, hopefully helping David to avoid hypothermia, and Monday was overcast, hopefully helping David to avoid dehydration. There was plenty of water flowing in the streams. Hopefully David was finding and staying near water.

Monday began to wear on, as Sunday had. What to do next? On searches like this it must be lonesome to be an operations leader.

2:30 p.m. Monday. The radio crackles. "RMRU base to all field units, the subject has been found." The radio continued on that the subject was in Palm Springs, that teams should now hike to trail heads or helispots. The search was over, almost forty-eight hours after David had become lost.

David was tired and hungry. He had not eaten in two days, as he journeyed farther and farther from his camp site, down the treacherous Tahquitz Canyon. After David had decided he was lost, at about 6:30 M. on Saturday, he had come across a deer trail that led him to a small ridge looking over the lights of Palm Springs city. David said it looked close, but he soon learned the deception of "close" in the mountains.

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.