RMRU

Search for missing hiker, Search and Rescue member injured

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Tahquitz Peak
1997-034

By Lee Arnson

Search...RECOVERY...**RESCUE!**

As of Sunday, December 15, it had been almost two months since RMRU had received a mission call-out. When my pager went off that evening, I excitedly called the rescue room and was told that there was an overdue hiker who at last report was somewhere in the Tahquitz Peak area. I responded to Humber Park, where Henry Negrete was setting up base as Operations Leader.

Henry said that the reporting party had informed him that her husband, Alex Toubia, had left earlier in the day eager to try out his new in-step crampons. He was expected home by 3:00pm. It was now 9:00pm and he had not yet returned. Time was considered a critical factor in light of the weather, so the decision was made to call in other rescue teams to assist us.

I was paired up with Ralph Hoetger, a new member to the team, and we were assigned to hike up Devil's Slide Trail, intersect the Pacific Crest Trail, and proceed towards Tahquitz Peak. We would eventually intercept a second RMRU team (Bill Blaschko and Jim Taylor) coming up South Ridge Trail towards the Peak from the opposite direction. There was no snow at base, but within half an hour hike up the trail, conditions became somewhat dangerous with 20 inches of hard packed snow and ice. Ralph and I proceeded, wearing 12-point crampons and with ice axes in hand.

Shortly after passing through Saddle Junction, (2.4 miles from base) we picked up a set of in-step crampon tracks heading in the direction of the peak. Ralph and I took turns following the tracks in the light of our headlamps. We radioed Bill and Jim who were investigating similar tracks they had just come upon below the peak. The tracks both our teams were following led us to each other, and then abruptly disappeared.

It was now about 2:00am. We were at 8,500' elevation, and were encountering high winds that were pushing a dense fog up the mountain face from the valley below. We were on a 50 degree slope and knew that our next task would be to search the main snow chute. We did not need four people for this job, so Jim and Ralph headed back to base via Devil's Slide.

Bill and I searched two separate fall lines that were about 25’ apart, until they merged together some 300’ below our current position. Visibility had grown increasingly worse, but we eventually spotted Mr. Toubia’s body. It appeared that he had fallen about 250’, his body coming to rest against a large pine tree, probably dying instantly.

Bill and I needed to get back to base to discuss the details of what had now become a body recovery...there was nothing more we could there. We arrived back at Humber Park at 5:00am. Henry determined that recovery operations could best be managed from the Keenwild Heliport, and base was moved to that location. Bill, Jim, and Ralph had to go to work, so I was teamed up with long time member Bob Baker for the recovery. We were to be assisted by four members of the San Gorgonio Search and Rescue team who had arrived the previous evening to help with the search. The Riverside County Sheriff’s helicopter flew us to Chinquapin Flats, a good landing zone that was just a short hike to the recovery site. In the now clear light of day, Mr. Toubia’s body could be seen from the trail. I anchored a 300’ rope to a large pine tree on the uphill side of the trail, and Bob and I rappelled down to the site. We were followed by Tom Rutledge and Phil Calvert of the San Gorgonio team.

Pictured above, "Star 80", the Hughes 500E turbine powered helicopter owned and operated by the Riverside County Sheriff's Department during a recent training exercise. The helicopter played a major role in saving a life during the rescue mission

The recovery itself was text-book. We congratulated one another on a job well done, and began to gather gear so that we could head back to the landing zone. I was ready first and started to make my way to the rope anchored above. The snow conditions were perfect for ice axe and crampon travel and I was happy to be on my way. An unfortunate assignment seemed to be successfully completed.

I paused to catch my breath and check on the progress of those behind me, when I heard someone yell. As I looked back at the recovery site, Tom Rutledge from the San Gorgonio team had fallen and was sliding feet first on his stomach down the steep snow chute we had just recovered Mr. Toubia from. I yelled for him to self arrest with his ice axe, but within a matter of seconds he must have accelerated to 40 mph. Tom was

heading straight for a large Ponderosa Pine which I thought might stop his fall. When he hit the tree, it knocked him completely out of control. Now, with or without his ice axe there was nothing he could do. He continued to pin-ball off of trees and rocks for about 1,000' until I lost sight of him.

Bob immediately began to descend the chute in pursuit of Tom, while radioing base for an emergency evacuation. It took me a moment to get over the shock of seeing a fellow volunteer rescue member fall like this, but I was soon descending the chute to assist Bob in what had now become an emergency rescue. Tom had come to rest face down in some tree branches about three feet off the ground. He was unconscious and bleeding from the mouth. When we first arrived, Tom's respirations were as low as eight, but within a few minutes rose to fifteen. His breathing was labored and he was having a very difficult time. Even though he was unconscious, we verbally assured him that help was on the way, believing that he could somehow hear what we were saying.

Within minutes, Henry Negrete was flown in to this new accident site with the Stokes Litter. The three of us placed Tom into the litter, packaged him, and lifted him into the hovering helicopter as the pilot performed a very tricky one-skid maneuver. He arrived at Desert Hospital four minutes later! Henry, Bob, myself, and especially Tom were very fortunate to have had the County's best pilot and observer flying for us that day. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Tony Bowen and Kurt Franklin of the Riverside County Sheriff's Dept.

Tom Rutledge spent the next two weeks in a coma with several broken bones, including cracked ribs, a ruptured spleen, and severe head and neck injuries. We are very glad to be able to report that Tom came out of his coma on New Year's Day 1998, and is currently in rehabilitation.

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.