

Couple Over-due

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Humber Park - Tahquitz
1999-005

By Tim Wescott

Search and Rescue is Like a Box of Chocolates...

Forest Gump sat on a bus stop bench pondering his "momma's" home-spun philosophies. "Life is like a box of chocolates," he said, "you never know what you're gonna get." Instantly, everyone had the perfect word picture to convey the fact that life is full of uncertainties. Jump in and see what you get!

Since then, this famous "Gump-ism" has been applied to every conceivable context or situation where uncertainty prevails and question marks abound. That being the case, one could easily argue that mountain search and rescue was tailor-made for Gump's immortal words. There are few environments where questions are consistently the rule, and certainty is the rare exception.

Why is it that one is never more tired, and one's bed never feels quite so good, as it does when the rescue pager goes off late at night? Such was the case about 11:30 PM on Monday evening, March 22, 1999. Initial report: Climbers possibly in trouble on Tahquitz Rock, one of Southern California's more sought after climbing venues. Two graduate school students, one male and one female were long overdue. They had begun an ascent of Angel's Fright, a moderate route on the southwest face of the rock. Fellow members of their party were working other routes at the same time, and neither visual or verbal contact with the pair was maintained during the climbing. As darkness fell and all other members of the group were safely off the rock, the two were unaccounted for.

RMRU was called out, and base was set up at Humber Park. Immediately two teams were dispatched; one to run out a well traveled trail in the event the subjects had made a wrong turn on their descent, and the other to recon the base of the rock, eventually attaining the summit of the rock by a non-technical route.

Team One, assigned to Tahquitz Rock, scrambled up the scree slope by headlamp, eventually arriving at the base of the suspected climb about 1:00 a.m. Yelling out the climbers names every couple of minutes produced no results as Team One began to work its way around the base of the south face. As the elevation increased, so did the wind. It seemed to swallow the team's yells as it blew constantly, with gusts to 40

mph.

Headlamps performed only meager assistance in throwing light on the rising granite face. However, as Team One neared the summit of the rock, and looked back across the black expanse of the rock face, a headlamp suddenly appeared. It was 3:00 a.m. Team One maneuvered into a position that eventually enabled some verbal communication, but the distance and the high winds resulted in mostly half-sentences and orphaned words. Even so, it didn't take long to determine that this was the missing pair of climbers.

Both were very cold, but otherwise unhurt. They had managed to get off route, which resulted in much wasted time. When darkness eventually overtook them, they decided it would be better to endure a night of 34 degree cold, rather than risk more climbing. They found a large crack that got them out of the wind and there the two shivered together until hearing Team One's calls. Following communication with base, and more frustrated yells back and forth with the climbers, it was determined that so long as they were not in immediate danger, it would be safest for everyone to wait until first light which was now only about 2 1/2 hours away. The pair's condition at that time, and their actual position on the rock would determine the best course of action. Team Two returned to base to begin preparing for possible support, and Team One hunkered down and began to appreciate what the climbers themselves were experiencing. It WAS cold!

As the sun put an early morning crown on the summit of Tahquitz Rock, Team One made its way to the summit. It was 5:45 a.m. Once on top, the climbers were easily visible about 150 feet below, with mostly non-technical terrain between themselves and the summit. The climbing pair waited until the warmth of the sun had worked its magic, and then under their own power, covered the final distance to the summit where they joined the waiting Team One. It was 7:00 am.

With the climbers warming by the minute, it wasn't long before everyone was retracing Team One's steps back to base. About mid-way down, support teams met up with the foursome, packing hot coffee and encouragement. No worse for wear, and with a greater appreciation for how long a night can be, these rock climbers will enjoy their sport another day...hopefully just a bit wiser and better prepared the next time.

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.