



Two USFS Workers Stranded

July 21, 1999
Allandale CDF Station
UTM 11S 0521218, 3737593, NAD27 CONUS
1991-014

By Tim Wescott

Surrounded! That is the word that came to my mind as 21 members of RMRU and myself, responded to the Sheriff's Dept. page on Wednesday evening about 8:30 PM, July 21st. "Surrounded" was the right word too, because that essentially describes what happened as team members carried out their assignments. Here's how the mission unfolded. Team members received a "heads up" (advance notice) that a possible search for two missing Forest Service personnel was going to be required. An hour and a half-hour later, official word was given and the search was on. The subjects (a male and a female) were conducting amphibian research in the upper drainage of the North Fork of the San Jacinto River. This is rugged terrain with significant elevation drops, a watercourse that snakes through a boulder-strewn ravine, and vegetation that is incredibly dense on the surrounding slopes. The area's redeeming feature on this night was that Forest Service roads and a main highway literally surrounded the search area on all sides. In many places these roads actually overlooked the search area, greatly increasing the chances of contact. With this advantage, RMRU's ops leader was able to deploy teams from a variety of different directions in hopes of converging on the area the subjects were known to be in.

I say, "known to be in," because the lost duo had a radio and were in contact with Forest Service personnel. A fixed wing aircraft had actually located them before dark when the two had called in to say they were lost. Apparently they had descended into the drainage much farther than they had supposed, had lost their bearings, and were unsure of the best way to proceed. Although the fixed wing had given them a direction of travel that would bring them to a Forest Service road, darkness overtook them. Without light it was impossible for them to continue. They found a bivy sight, built a small fire, and waited for first light... or help, whichever came first. Their bivy location was right beside the river, in dense forest growth, with steep slopes rising up from the river bottom. A team would have to be almost on top of them before they would be found.

Unfortunately, little of this information was known in the early going. In fact the ops leader was working with information he had been given which said the pair were in a relatively open area, and not near water. Incorrect information would prove to be the most frustrating part of this mission. Teams were sent down the Noah Fork drainage

from the PLS (point last seen). Vehicle teams were assigned a four-wheel drive road that overlooked the drainage to try and make contact by headlight or horn. Another team was sent several miles below the PLS in order to work their way up the drainage. Although the subjects were not yet found, they were certainly surrounded!

I was part of the team that began hiking up the North Fork drainage about 10:15 PM. It was tricky going in the river bottom, but by boulder hopping our way up the watercourse, we were able to make good time and avoid much of the thick growth on the riverbanks. Yelling the subject's names at regular intervals, we had traveled about a mile up stream when we stopped once more to yell. Being in contact with the subjects by radio, word suddenly came that they had heard yelling far away. Nothing excites a search team like that kind of information! We knew we were on the right track. Another 1/4 of a mile of rock hopping and we were with the subjects. Aside from being extremely weary, hungry, and a bit bruised, both subjects were fit to move on their own. RMRU support teams soon joined us, and we all made our descent down the riverbed, arriving at about midnight at a Forest Service road that crossed the river. The subjects and our teams were transported back to Rescue Base, and we were all on our way home by about 1:00 AM.

I only wish every search had some of the luxuries that this one did. We knew generally where the subjects were, we knew they were not in a life-threatening situation, and we could effectively surround them with our search teams. It was not a case of "IF" we would find them, but "WHEN." Those are the best kind of search missions!

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.