

Missing Hunter Rescued

October 7, 2007
Cahuilla Mountain, Near Anza
2007-020

By: Grace Manues

Opening Day of deer season is much anticipated by hunters. Such was the case for Mike S., a 52-year-old high school wrestling coach, his son, Nick, and Jared, his assistant coach. On Saturday, October 6th, what should have been a great day on Cahuilla Mountain took a turn for the worse after Mike left the group at 0830 to take a look around and never returned.

Although being an experienced outdoorsman, Mike made a critical mistake. Only expecting to be gone for a short time, Mike left his pack. The pack contained his food, water, radio, cell phone, flashlight; items that might have prevented him from becoming lost in the first place or that may have effected a faster and simpler rescue once he became lost. Being as knowledgeable as he is about the outdoors and being a teacher, I don't think Mike can believe he made such a basic error. That error could have cost him his life.

Once he realized he was lost, Mike decided to head downhill. Cahuilla Mountain, after all, doesn't seem very big; about 4 miles from side-to-side. There are homes around three sides of the mountain and a service road to its north.

Not knowing what had become of his father, Nick and Jared tried to track Mike but his prints disappeared into the brush. They returned to their vehicle expecting to find Mike there. He was not. The two went back up to look for Mike, alerting other hunters they came across about Nick's missing father. There were now many hunters actively looking for Mike - to no avail.

At 1900, Nick reported his missing father to the Riverside Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff's helicopter canvassed the mountain for almost two hours. No sign of the missing hunter. Of course, Mike had no light source with him. Everything he could have used to signal the helicopter -a flashlight, cell phone, even the light from his watch - was in his backpack. Everything, that is, except a rifle and a pistol that he had with him. (Mike later told us that he had shot a round from his rifle to signal the airship. Being in a narrow drainage would have made the muzzle flash difficult to spot.)

RMRU members started arriving on scene at first light, Sunday morning. A hasty team was dispatched to the Point Last Seen (PLS) to determine the direction of travel.

Several members of the Riverside County Search Dogs arrived. As the day progressed, more and more resources arrived to aid in the search including one of the Sheriff's helicopters, Star 9, seven members of the Desert Search and Rescue Team (DSAR), and an additional seven members of RMRU who had just finished a strenuous three-day training exercise.



There were several major concerns about the missing healthy, athletic, experienced hunter.

Why had he not responded to verbal calls from the numerous hunters on the mountain? Why had he not used 3-shots to signal his distress? Why had he not responded to the helicopter? Was he hurt? There had been multiple mountain lion sightings and large mountain lion tracks could be found all over that mountain. Had a mountain lion gotten him? Things were not looking good.

My team (Jeri Sanchez, Patrick McCurdy, and Grace Manues) had been given the assignment to clear a drainage that extended west from the PLS to a dirt road. The drainage started out broad and naturally narrowed as we descended.

Early in the assignment, we came across a hunter that told us he and his partner had looked part-way down this drainage and the drainage to the north, both last night and again this morning. They had found nothing. When I thanked him for his efforts and apologized for ruining his hunting that day he shrugged it off. He said, "*We have to look out for each other.*" That sentiment is at the heart of Search and Rescue whose motto is, "*These things we do so that others may live.*"

Our search down the drainage yielded potential clues: a broken branch here, a possible footprint there. By 4 o'clock that afternoon, we had descended 1400 feet in elevation over 1.5 kilometers. Although we hadn't found Mike, we could say with confidence that he was not in that drainage; important information for Base to have when formulating their search plan. Just about that time, Jeri thought she heard something. We gave another shout out. We got the response we were looking for. "*Help me. I need help. I'm Mike S_____.*"

Given our location and the terrain, we were unable to communicate directly with Base. A team further up the mountain was able to relay the good news. We had verbal and visual contact with Mike and, best of all, he was unhurt. Within minutes, Star 9 executed a flawless hover recovery of the very grateful hunter. Soon thereafter, as daylight was fading, Star 9 extracted 13 personnel from the field. It was a great end to a successful mission.

Mike's distance from the PLS, the terrain, and wind conditions worked against him and may explain why the hunters and the helicopter couldn't find him on Saturday.

Huge thanks and kudos to all who made this a safe and successful mission including members of the Riverside County Search Dogs, the Desert Sheriff's Search and Rescue Team, our heroes of the Sheriff's Aviation Department - you guys are the best! - the six members of RMRU (Gwenda, Patrick, Michael, Steve, Jeri and Grace) who responded Sunday morning, and especially to the amazing seven (Glenn, Kevin, Lee, Rob, Lew, Jeff and Marty) who after spending three hard days training in the field hiked with full packs from Wellman's Cabin back to the Palm Springs Tram then drove 50 miles over to Anza to fulfill their commitment to RMRU.



I want to suck up to, I mean acknowledge, the President of our Team, Gwenda Yates, who mission after mission is there to get us out of bed, get us organized, keeps tabs on us in the field, and makes sure we get home safely. She never gets the thanks she deserves. We hope you know how much you are loved and appreciated.



That a wrap of Mission 2007-020. See ya tonight!

Video

If you have trouble viewing the videos, try downloading the latest version of Apple's free [QuickTime Player](#). If you're still having trouble, it is probably due to the slow speed of our server. Try starting the video, then immediately pausing it. Come back to it in a few minutes and click "play" again. We're working on a higher-speed web hosting solution.

[Star 9 Landing](#) Sheriff's Star 9 bringing searchers into an area near the top of Cahuilla Mountain."

[Star 9 Pick-off](#) Star 9 pulls off a beautiful hover pick-off of the missing hunter.

[Jeri Hoist](#) Of the three in the canyon who spotted the hunter, Jeri Sanchez was the first to be hoisted out.

[Grace Hoist](#) Grace Manues was next on the hoist.

Audio

Listen to radio traffic from the search.

Team One warns of [cats](#) in the area.

Steve Briant at the command post reviews the initial [team assignments](#).

Team One encounters [hunters](#) who may have seen the missing man.

Jeri Sanchez on Team One radios in that the man has been [found](#).

Helicopter Star 9 has the subject [on board](#).

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.