

Three Hikers Stranded in Snow on Skyline Trail

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Skyline Trail, San Jacinto State Park
2008-002

By William Carlson

The long holiday weekend had left me physically drained, and the idea of going to bed early had provided pleasant thoughts throughout the day. As I crawled into bed around eight p.m. I felt like the luckiest person in the world. The notion of a full night sleep, however, is often short lived at the end of a holiday weekend. With a storm lingering amidst Southern California, this Monday night was no exception.

I never heard the pager go off. Nearly sleeping through a phone call I reluctantly answered. Gwenda asks, "Were you sleeping?" My response was, "YES!" Then she asks, "How fast can you get to Hemet-Ryan?" "It will take me about an hour." "We have some stranded hikers on San Jacinto; you and Lee will be going up." "Ok, I'm on my way."

Lee Arnson and I met pilot Tony Bowen and Tactical Flight Officer (TFO) Andy Rasmussen at the hanger. We outlined every detail of the mission, including what we would do if the subjects were in serious condition. With the details of the mission worked out we loaded our packs into the helicopter and lifted off for the lower parking lot of the Palm Springs Tramway.

Once at the Tramway we shut down while Tony and Andy reconfigured the ship for a hoist operation. The plan was to lower Lee and me into an open area on a ridge line just east of the subject's location. With a radiant full moon overhead, we took to the skies again. The temperature dropped rapidly as we ascended the mountain. Bare ground quickly turned to snow and soon we were over the subjects.

I was lowered first and within a few minutes Lee was on the ground. Together we walked over to the subjects and their campfire. The three men were cold, but otherwise in good condition. One of the three was colder than the others. We decided that he would need to go first to assure he made it out if any situation arose that would hinder our whole group flying out that night. Well, that situation arose quickly. Tony came across the radio, "We need to make this happen now! We have a bank of clouds pushing in from the West. We really need to get moving!" From a rescuers standpoint, these are not encouraging words.

We quickly pulled the three harnesses out of our packs and within three minutes had

the first subject on his way up to the helicopter. The entire operation of hoisting the subjects into the helicopter took no more than fifteen minutes. As the ship flew back to the tramway the air became very still and quiet. Lee and I could not think of what to say at the time. If we could have it would have been something to the extent of, "This is so cool!"

All alone for the time being, we spent a few minutes putting out the subjects warming fire and reminiscing of past rescues. Lee and I joined RMRU around the same time and have experienced the highs and lows of search and rescue. All of the memories are unforgettable. With the fire out, we strolled back to the ridge-line where we would be picked up.

Soon the silence was shattered by the sound of our ride home. A beautiful night to stay on the mountain... well not tonight! We landed at Hemet-Ryan Airfield around one in the morning and added another textbook rescue to our memories of search and rescue. An extra thanks to Tony and Andy for their precision flying and professionalism.

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.