



Man Missing After Car Wreck

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Deep Canyon
2008-030

by Lew Kingman

The text messages were sent out to RMRU members regarding a search for a 42-year-old man whose new Hummer had gone over the side of a mountain road. The location was given as Cahuilla Vista Point on Highway 74, about 10 miles above Palm Desert. The point overlooks Deep Canyon, which is a very steep, deeply cut drainage running north out of the Santa Rosa Mountain area towards Palm Desert.

On arrival at the turnout, I saw a group of Sheriff's deputies, BLM Rangers, and several RMRU members. Apparently the 42-year-old man and his father had driven over the burm at the viewpoint and descended a few hundred yards before the car turned on it's side. Able to extricate themselves, the father proceeded up the slope, while the son inexplicably ran down slope. Initial efforts to find him by firefighters and deputies only caused him to run away from them. The word was that the subject had removed all of his clothing at this point.

So this was not going to be an ordinary search for us. Considering the mental instability of the subject, and his apparent lack of physical injuries, and the onset of nightfall, the Sheriff' department told us we could initiate the search in the morning, and all teams in the field would have a Deputy accompany them for their safety.

The BLM Ranger suggested that we could utilize the Visitor Center for the Santa Rosa/San Jacinto National Monument as our base camp where support facilities and a helicopter landing area were available.

We met at 6 a.m. to organize our resources, where we were joined with a large number from the DSSAR team. As the Riverside Sheriff helicopter was not yet available, a helicopter came to our assistance from the CHP. With team members aboard as observers, the subject was quickly found. He was making his way down the canyon carrying an old tire, a piece of plastic sheeting, and a few other assorted items. And yes, he was still more or less without clothes. It was confirmed that he had on shoes, and what might be a jacket! The subject did not respond when efforts were make to communicate from the helicopter, and he would not even acknowledge them by looking upward. The CHP ship was not able to land any team members, but his condition and GPS coordinates were brought back to the base camp. A second flyover a short time later had difficulty finding the subject until the old tire he was carrying was

seen outside of a cave-like entrance. When taken to a low hover, the subject was spotted lying inside with obvious physical injuries. He now seemed to acknowledge the helicopters presence with an arm wave. The CHP helicopter returned with the new coordinates and information.

It was here that a unique tool was utilized for the members of all the elements of the search. The Visitor Center had a large plasma screen installed as an educational tool which utilized Google Earth. A center employee entered our subjects coordinates and "flew" us into the canyon to see the point where the he was located. It was a unique setting, to see all members and agencies involved standing in a half circle around the large screen, and able to see where we had to go and what was needed to get there, all at the same time. An insertion point was chosen about a quarter of a mile below our subject where we could easily move up to his location. A team was selected to be inserted by the Sheriff's helicopter including one deputy, a member of DSSAR, and myself for medical assessment and treatment. About this time, our RSO helicopter arrived.

Taking two trips to shuttle the three of us into position, we were dropped on a rock several miles up in the narrow canyon. The canyon walls even sent down small rocks from the steep and loose material as the helicopter flew away. We walked up to the point where the cave-like entrance was, clearly like the image seen on the Google Earth screen. Our subject was lying at the base of a dry waterfall in a crevice deep enough to look like a cave. He acknowledged us, and allowed us to begin examination and treatment. His only garments were a black cape attached around his neck, a leather belt around his waist, and tennis shoes on his feet. With a follow up flight to bring medical equipment to stabilize him for the flight out, we carried him out enough into the open to have him hoisted up by the helicopter winch. He was then flown to medical care.

The three of us in the canyon waited for the return of the helicopter, which extracted us in two separate flights. When I was flown out, the crew needed to refuel at Thermal Airport, so I actually got three rides that day. And that was the end of a not so usual search and rescue operation.

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.