

Fallen Hiker Lost

February 5, 2009
Skyline Trail, San Jacinto Mountains
2009-002

By William Carlson

Having enjoyed my first "lazy day" in over a month, I dozed off reading a book. The loud, unexpected, noise of my pager woke me up. I learned that RMRU had been called out to rescue a hiker who had fallen down an ice chute while on a day hike up the Skyline Trail out of Palm Springs. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt and it was now snowing on him. My dad, Pete Carlson, and I quickly packed our winter call-out packs and headed for the lower Palm Springs Tramway.

We arrived at the lower tram parking lot at 10 p.m. Jim and Grace Manues, Chad, Lew, Nick Nixon, Jim and Robert Bakos, Brian Wood, and Lee were waiting for us in the tram car. Grace had spoken with subject and learned that although he could not see the tramway, he could hear the tram. As we all headed up we shouted from the tram car, and toward the top received word that he had heard our calls. Listening to the wind from the comfort of the tram car we were not terribly excited about heading outside.

Once at the upper tram station we moved all of the team gear to what we call the "command room." There we put the final touches on packing gear and discussed our best course of action. We decided, initially, to send in five members to reach the subject and determine what, if any, other gear and personnel would be needed. Jim Manues, Pete, Chad, Lee, and I would be teamed together as the initial five. We knew the conditions were bad, but were not expecting what was to come.

As our group of five opened the tramway door leading outside, we were greeted by a gust of wind so strong it almost pushed us back inside. Our only hope was to reach the bottom of the ramp, leading away from the tram, where we would be able to turn and put our backs to the wind. Snow was still falling and every wind-driven flake that reached bare skin felt like the pierce of a needle. Once we reached the bottom of the ramp we placed crampons on our boots to help with footing. The blizzard like conditions made for slow going.

As we began to descend the north-facing slope we became a little more sheltered from the wind. Our progress remained slow as we descended a mixture of snow-covered ice, snow covered rocks, and snow covered rocks on top of ice.

We called out to the subject frequently and after approximately an hour and descending almost 2,000 feet, we got a response. A few minutes later we were to the subject.

Emin was huddled against a tree in the middle of a fifty-degree ice chute. He was only wearing a tee shirt, a light sweatshirt, and shorts and was dusted with snow. His boots were still on his feet, but were torn apart from the fall. It was apparent that Emin was extremely cold.

Because of the steepness of the slope it took a few minutes to situate ourselves. We chopped a ledge out of the snow and put down a sleeping pad. We then moved Emin onto the pad and took off all of his wet clothes. We then gave him some dry clothes and placed him in a sleeping bag. Knowing the danger Emin would be in if we were not able to warm him up we also poured hot water into bottles and placed them in the sleeping bag with him.

We continued to warm Emin and learned how he ended up where he was. Apparently he had lost the trail at the top of the ice chute and slipped while looking for it. He had fallen a little more than 400 feet when he was able to catch himself on a tree. After a few attempts he realized he was not going to be able to move without falling further down the ice chute. That's when he called for help.

It was now 1 a.m. and we knew we were not going to be able to spend the night in the middle of the chute. Lee and Pete hiked to the top of the chute and decided that it would be a more suitable location to spend the night. Pete and I climbed back to the top of the chute and set up a tent while Lee, Jim, and Chad prepared Emin for the climb to the top. The wind was really beginning to pick up so once the tent was up Pete remained to keep it from blowing away. I returned to the others to begin setting up a rope system.

We decided the best method would be to set up a system of running belays, which would allow us to safely leapfrog our way to the top. I set the first two belay stations while Lee, Chad, and Jim figured out a way to put Emin's boots back together as they had blown apart in the fall. They then placed crampons on Emin's feet and we began to move. Progress was slow due to the steepness of the chute and the combination of snow, ice, and rocks. Emin was extremely weak and remained cold even while moving. We knew the situation was bad and how important it was to move Emin to an area we could better help him. Lee and I leapfrogged the belay system to the top as Jim and Chad assisted Emin up the slope.

The wind was really gusting when we got to the top. Gusts strong enough to bring us to our knees blasted us as we moved Emin into the tent. It was now 2 a.m. and most everyone was exhausted. Pete, Jim, Chad, and Emin spent the remainder of the night in the tent, while Lee and I stayed in bivy sacks outside. Although each of us did get some sleep, for the most part it was a restless night.

The wind never let up, and continued to batter us though the night. You could hear each gust coming ten or more seconds before it would hit. We were dreading its impact every time.

It continued to snow on and off throughout the night. Morning brought a slight clearing, but the winds continued to blow. Knowing that the helicopter would not be able to fly we packed up and started down the Skyline Trail. The winds began to subside and eventually we all began to warm up. Finally we got the break we were looking for. The sun came out.

Not long after we called for a helicopter we heard the sound of an A-Star from the Riverside Sheriff's Department. In a matter of minutes the pilot picked out a location for a hover-stop a few feet from us. Emin was quickly loaded on board and the helicopter headed back just as the clouds began to rebuild. With another storm approaching we knew we might not have another opportunity to bring in a helicopter. We continued hiking. Because we were now out of the snow and out of water, Robert and Brian started up the Skyline Trail. Their packs were loaded with breakfast burritos and water for all.

A few hours of hiking brought us another opportunity to bring in a helicopter. However, the new storm had already set in over Hemet and the Riverside Sheriff's Department helicopter could not take off. Luck was on our side! Landell's Aviation did have a helicopter available. Within twenty minutes we were back at the lower tram parking lot. A huge thanks to Elaine Landell, owner of Landell's Aviation, for the unexpected use of her helicopter and to Steve DeJesus for his skilled flying. Also, we would like to thank the Riverside Sheriff's Department helicopter crew for taking a chance, and picking up our subject. It would have taken another eight or more hours to walk Emin down to the trailhead.

Members Present: Jim and Grace Manues, Jim and Robert Bakos, Pete and William Carlson, Lee Arnson, Chad Marler, Lew Kingman, Nick Nixon, and Brian Wood.

Photos (by Chad Marler and William Carlson)

Checking the subject's feet



Moving the subject to safety on fixed ropes



The subject in an RMRU sleeping bag and bivy sack



The tent where team members spent the night with the subject



Getting ready to move the next morning



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.