



Stranded Hikers West Face Face Mount San Jacinto

December 28, 2009

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2009-020

By Les Walker

My pager went off about noon with a heads up, that a rescue might be needed for 3 hikers stranded on the Mount San Jacinto summit. I prepped my gear and spoke with Team Leader Lee Arnson about what to expect. "Who knows on these things he tells me, we will probably hike into them and lead them out but you never really know until you get there" Knowing the summit temps where around 22 degrees I packed for cold winter conditions crampon's, ice axe, and warm winter clothing. Just when I was finished with the last details of my packing the page went out that we where actually needed and Lee was on his way to pick me up.

On our way to the meeting point "The Lower Tram Station" Lee received a call that the Sheriff Helicopter had spotted the hikers in a remote area of the mountain at the 10,300-foot level, they where physically spent and somehow got info that they where suffering from early stages of frostbite and hypothermia. We where then directed to the Palm Springs information center at the 111 and the tram entrance road to meet with the Sheriff Helicopter and determine what the plan would be to get these boys off the mountain! We pull into the parking lot and meet with the deputy who responded to the call. We where told that three college students, Max Conniff, 18, of Santa Cruz, Steven Tam, 18, of Simi Valley, and Josh Frank, 18, of Los Angeles who had planned to hike from the Palm Springs Aerial Tram- way mountain station to Idyllwild, but somehow made a wrong turn and ended up on the west face. The Helicopter was inroute to our landing location as team members Dana Potts, Patrick McCurdy and Ralph Hoetger arrived. Lee and I gear up for a helicopter hoist, this being my first hoist, and having just done the Helitac training I felt confident and familiar with the procedure. I was to focused on a safe and professional hoist I did not have time to really stop and think, that I would be soon be lowered on to a slippery icy sloop at 10,300 feet. I asked Lee to direct me in all my duties so there would not be any confusion on my part! I could not of asked for a better teammate on my first hoist rescue. Lee has many under his belt in worse conditions that we where going to experience. And before you know it, we where loading on the

helicopter and off the west face. It was a beautiful ride around the mountain, seeing the North Face in all its glory with the late afternoon sun glow from a perspective you don't normally get to see. Just around the corner from the North Face we head right to the 3 stranded hikers, you can see them clear as day on the steep slope. The pilot flies the helicopter to a position just below the hikers, and we get the thumbs up to hoist down to the mountain, Lee proceeds to exit the helicopter as I hook on the needed rescue suits for the hikers to hoist up! Lee descends down under hoist power to the mountain face and unclips, we see Lee slip around a bit on the slope due to the conditions and fierce blade wash from the helicopter! The TFO "Technical Flight Officer" brings up the hook and directs me to clip in to descend, I lower down smooth and easy until I step onto the mountain face that is a surface of 4 inches or powder snow over ice. The powder fools me into thinking there is plenty of grip so when I planted my feet onto the surface I slide out and down the slope and back onto taunt line cable of the copter thus swinging me out a little then back onto the slope. Good fun!! I unclip and ascend to where Lee is already getting one of the hikers into his hoist harness, Lee hands me the other harness and I ready the 2nd Hiker. We then descend a little to a better hoist spot, the copter lowers the hook and I hook my hiker on and away he goes, Lee awaits the copter for the second hoist, all the while we are in a fierce ice blizzard stirred up from the blade wash! Lee hooks his climber and the copter takes them to the landing zone. Lee and I prep the final hiker and all their gear to get hoisted out. After 20 min the copter returns to hoist up the hiker, all goes smooth and the hiker is loaded up 150 feet about our head. Lee and I then attach the gear and watch it rise above us in the ice storm that is created by our ride! As soon as the TFO loads the gear, we get a radio call from the pilot that they need to refuel and hope to return to us before nightfall. The pilot tells us it is approx 19 degrees at our elevation and wants to know if we have the gear to survive the night if they can't return. No worries, we are with in a mile of shelter! The copter leaves and the wonderful silence and beauty reveals its self to us. There is a beautiful sun setting over the pacific and we get a great silhouette of Catalina Island. It gives us time to reflect on the last few minutes and just what an amazing organization RMRU is. Before long the copter returns and hoists Lee and I up and out right at dark. We land at the LZ and are greeted by the family of the hikers and our awaiting teammates. Thanks all around and dinner with the team.. What an amazing day for us and the hikers!

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.

