



Hoist Corona

November 7, 2013
Corona Area
2013-035

Written by Helene Lohr

The call comes in at 3:30 AM. It's my partner Lee. "They need a helicopter hoist team for a lost hiker on Skyline". My bed is warm and my fuzzy flannel sheets are so comfy... But this is more important than a few hours' sleep! "Count me in", I slur with sleep still in my voice. Shaking my head to clear it, I throw the warm covers back, roll out of bed and head straight for my gear closet. Perfect! My Go-Pack is still full from the last mission. I dig around inside - ticking off my mental checklist. Good, everything is accounted for in my pack. I refill my Nalgene water bottles, pull on my pants, and shrug into my fluorescent orange uniform shirt.

Within 15 minutes I'm already on the way to pick up Lee. Another speedy half an hour drive down the mountain puts us in the parking lot at Riverside Sheriff's Office Aviation Unit. One more check of gear and we head straight into the hanger. Pilot Chad Marlett and Technical Flight Officer (TFO) Manny Romero --- are on tonight. The Aviation crew members are amazing guys and exceptional at what they do - we really enjoy working with them and readily trust them with our lives.

Following protocol we do a brief review of the Screamer suit and rescue gear, then load our packs and ourselves into the helicopter. I clip the seat belt together, strap on a headset and snug it down over my ears, bending the microphone down directly in front of my mouth. "Good to go?" Lee and I give Manny a thumbs up and a verbal confirmation of "oh yeah"! Manny confirms we are securely strapped in, then cranes his neck around out the door, scanning one last safety check of the environment as Chad preps for takeoff.

One minute we're on the ground feeling the increasing thup...thup...thup...thup...thup of the accelerating rotor, the next the ground swings eerily away beneath us, disappearing into the black. We discuss the mission on our headsets as we watch the twinkling city lights cruise by beneath us. "Want to hear the transcript?" Manny briefly reviews the mission notes and original call text with us.

Our subject called 911 for help with a weak cell signal. He had been hiking all night

and was now trapped off trail in the thick brush of the coastal mountain range, unable to hike any further. He was scratched up, dehydrated, exhausted, and utterly disoriented by his efforts. He described seeing red blinking lights on a nearby hill. The 911 operator told him to stay put and await further contact, but RSO has not been able to raise him again. He has likely run out of battery. As is often the case in emergencies, people don't think to conserve their batteries until it is nearly too late. The only "red blinking lights" in the area are a set of radio towers. A ping of the subject's cell phone put his location at 2 miles Southeast of the towers, but it's best not to put complete trust in these coordinates. Over the years we've learned that since they tend to ping to the nearest cell tower, they can sometimes be miles off.

Chad suggests we start in the vicinity of the towers. In the subject's description he said he could see the flashing lights on a NEARBY hill. I agree. "That ping is too far south for him to see the lights clearly." It's generally best to trust a subject's physical description over a set of cell coordinates. Hopefully our subject has followed instructions and hasn't moved. We reach the edge of the city lights and venture out and above the inky black mountain slopes. Manny hands back a pair of night vision goggles. As I raise them to my eyes the world below lights up with an eerie green brightness. Ridges and valleys jump out in a rough grainy contrast. I pass them over to Lee for a quick acclimatization.

We start our search near the radio towers, cruising slowly in the air, up and down each ridge and Canyon, eyes intently searching for something, anything that will signal us that our subject is here. In addition to a spotlight, we also have a set of cameras that allow us to pick heat signatures and the night vision goggles which will starkly reveal anything more reflective/bright than the background of dense scrub brush. Manny, Lee and I scan the landscape as Pilot Chad concentrates on the added difficulties of mountain flying. The steep ridges guide and magnify any wind into strong updrafts, and each time we cross a ridge he must slow down to compensate for the increased rpm of the blades. Even a slight breeze over this rugged terrain can increase the risk of our flight. We know our subject is likely on top of a ridge, since he was able to see the radio towers. We fly for a while, scanning the ridgelines, seeing nothing but thick brush and short stumpy trees crammed in tightly along the hillside and steep slopes.

The goggles make everything much clearer, but nothing is jumping out at us. We're starting to get discouraged. The Eastern sky is just starting to lighten, and now we're racing against time to try and find him at night. Most people don't realize that it's easier for us to see most signals at night. Anything bright or reflective will instantly jump out at us. The contrast of even a small light or reflection stands out against the dull black of night far more than during the bright light of day. The pilots say that in

the right conditions they can see the light from a cell phone 3 miles away.

Hunting as a child with my father, I learned to let my eyes go slightly unfocused to search the terrain for patterns and movement. When searching, focusing your eyes or your mind too hard on any one point can give you a myopic view and make you overlook what's right in front of you. The guys are scouring the ground with their night vision goggles, and I am left with my naked eye. After what seems like an eternity, but is probably just another half hour, something on a ridgeline snags the edge of my eye.

"Wait. Go back to the North, I saw something." Chad swings the helicopter around. I verbally direct the beam of his spotlight to a spot on the ridgeline below us. There, silhouetted in the circle of light is our subject a tiny dot with a white shirt jumping up-and-down wildly. It's nice to get confirmation on our decision- the cell ping was definitely off! Alright, I can hear the grin in Chad and Manny's voices. We examine the ridge nearby. It's a jumble of high brush and short stunted trees, "there's no place to land" reports chad and nowhere to easily hike in from. "We'll have to hoist him out".

We circle over him for a better position and Chad turns on the loudspeaker. "Wave your hands if you can understand us". A few enthusiastic hand waves from the subject later, the flight crew gets confirmation that he can indeed hear us and will stay put as we fly away to reconfigure the helicopter for a hoist. The subject hunkers down under the shelter of the tall brush to wait as we fly away. Chad beelines the helicopter to landing area at the base of the foothills, and the aircrew rapidly reconfigure the helicopter for the hoist. Still this takes time, by the time we are flying back through the canyons the first rays of the sun are hitting the mountain slopes. Since our subject looks like a heavy guy, it's decided that we will leave Lee on the hillside after we hoist the Subject and come back for him later. Chad sets the helicopter into a hover and Manny hoists Lee and then me down directly onto the hillside near our subject.

Lee pulls the bright Red screamer suit out of his pack. It looks like a combination between a jacket and a diaper, designed to be simple to put on in an emergency and very secure. We help the subject strap himself in "put your arms through the holes like a jacket" I cinch the inner waist belt tight as Lee brings the straps together from each shoulder and between the subjects legs. He secures the front rings together with a locking carabiner at chest level. After a quick but thorough briefing for the subject of what's going to happen next and helicopter safety, we signal the TFO that we're ready to hoist.

In a great show of piloting Chad manages to put the hoist directly into my hand on the first try. I clip in, wave my hand in our exaggerated "lift me up" signal and enjoy the

ride. Before you know it I'm at the skids and walking my hands upward to the TFO's chest carabiner. Into the helicopter, clip into the seatbelt, unclip the hoist and hand it to Manny. Soon thereafter the anxious face of the subject appears over the edge of the deck. He stares straight forward, clasping the cable tight, petrified by his first hoist and helicopter flight, but manages to follow all of our instructions perfectly.

Within minutes we are back at the landing zone. Everything goes smoothly in the subject handoff to the deputies on scene and we head back for Lee. In a great mood, we fly back to the hanger in Hemet and a much anticipated breakfast!

RMRU members: Lee Arnson and Helene Lohr.

RSO Aviation: Pilot Chad Marlett and TFO Manny Romero.

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.