

Skyline Broken Leg

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Skyline Trail below Tramway

2017-007

Written by Michael George

My evening started out just like any other night. I had just finished grilling a mouthwatering steak to my typical 'burnt to a crisp' flare. Suddenly my phone buzzed with a text from Glenda. The text said to report to the tram in the morning for a search for a missing hiker.

The overdue hiker, as reported by his wife, was on the Skyline Trail and was last seen quite a few hours earlier. It's a marvelous trail of almost 10 miles, rising from the desert floor to 8400 feet in elevation. It's one of the steepest trails in North America for its length and one of the most dangerous in the wintertime. We were facing decent conditions of semi-hard snow and ice, behind a cloud cover.

Cameron and I arrived at the tram the next morning. After loading the tram car with lots of gear, we quickly reached the top, where we started to divide up the gear. We were so grateful to find Sharon, from Desert SAR, already running radio relay for us. Soon we were briefed by the deputy on-scene in regards to our subject, David. He was noted to be an experienced hiker, carrying a daypack, additional clothing, snowshoes, and hiking poles. We headed over to the launching pad at the top of the trail. After a short search, we found tracks leading down that indicated the snow-covered trail. We were faced with a 50-degree slope, and an endless field of trees.



**Cameron Heading Down the Skyline Trail
Photo by Michael George.**



**Michael Heading Down
Photo by Cameron Dickinson.**

We skillfully descended almost 700 feet. of snow and ice, when we were informed that, Star 9, the Sheriff's airship, was finally in route to assist with the search. It was windy above the ridge lines, as I saw the aircraft getting buffeted. It took them a long time to finally get down and start searching. By this time the clouds had disappeared and the snow softened. This caused us to posthole more frequently, often falling thru up to our thighs. In addition, there were thousands of ice crystals having had fallen from the trees creating a slippery surface. As we were hiking, the wind kept blowing more crystals down, in front of us. After numerous falls into postholes, with both legs, Star 9 informed us of a recent avalanche debris field 500 feet below us, and over one canyon.



**Avalanche crossing Skyline Trail)
Photo by Michael George.**

My first thought was that it was triggered by David. We had recently been informed of a man caused slide two weeks prior up by the peak. I asked Star 9 to carefully study the run-out area for sign of personal belongings. With the wind turbulence, it took the aircraft about 15-20 minutes to carefully descend through the updrafts and downdrafts to really see the run out area. After struggling with crampons for the last time, Cam elected to put on snowshoes, and made considerably better time traversing over to the slide. At this point the helicopter had been buzzing around like a humming bird looking under trees and around rocks. They utilized their new speaker system directing David to come out into the open and try to signal them.

Having heard them, David dragged himself, with considerable pain from a broken leg, off his insulated bed of leaves and branches, and out into the open snow where Star 9 saw him. He was laying on his stomach using his pack to keep off the cold snow. He was

shivering as much from the excruciating pain as from the cold snow. He was exhausted and could not move anymore. Star 9 informed us of finding the subject and directed us toward him. He was two small canyons over, to the south, in which we needed to pass through the debris field from the slide.

Cameron was ahead of me, and achieved voice contact with the subject quickly. Soon after that Cameron arrived at David's side, and quickly assessed his injuries. He had a compound break with severe lacerations just above the right ankle. After taking vitals, Cameron established our patient to be stable with high level of pain and somewhat subdued. He immediately began stabilizing the right ankle in anticipation of Star 9 wanting a quick pick up, as the winds had temporarily subsided. The helicopter came in and started lowering the 'Screamer' suit, a vest-like jacket with safety straps.



**Cameron with Subject in Scremer-Suit Ready to Hoist
Photo by Michael George.**

Cameron, with his usual efficiency, had the patient wrapped up and the screamer suit on in no time. The TFO Eric had the hook lowered again for the hook up. Cameron quickly connected the hook to the screamer suit, with about 4 feet of slack in the cable. Just as soon as the signal was given to start hoisting, the subject, in the blink of an eye, grabbed the hook, opening the gate (not an easy hook to open) and disconnecting himself from the cable. Cam, knowing that the hook will be up and out of sight in a matter of seconds, quickly moved in and reattaches our subject just as the cable starts to achieve tension.

I am watching the almost flawless hoisting. The helicopter then slides away to the side, and heads down the mountain to the waiting ambulance. While they are gone, we hurry to clean up the site and collect all of David's gear as well as ours. We move quickly knowing that with this calm wind the pilots would want to get us out as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, we didn't have enough time to find his phone that was dropped during his fall, before Star 9 returned. I promised to go back up after the snow thawed to look for it. Cameron is up first, his pack dangling in front of him. He starts off nice but he starts spinning. Not only does he look like he is trying to swim in the sky, he also tries to keep up with the rotation of the main rotor blades. I look up, and soon the pack is flying out, almost 90 degrees to him. Thankfully, he slows down enough to grab the skids and straightens up for a perfect entrance to the cabin.

I am struggling to put David's and my packs on for a quick hook up. This is going on while I am constantly finding new postholes to fall into. At last I see the hook coming down to eye level. I attach the hook to myself and my pack, and without even taking a new breath nor indicating I am ready, Eric wisps me off my feet and I am heading toward the cabin. I spin a little, but within 30 seconds I was sitting in the doorway with my pack resting on the skids between my legs. We started moving immediately, but it seemed forever before we broke free of the mountain drafts and hit stable air over downtown Palm Springs. Cameron and I were flown back to the deputy coordinating the mission, where we were given a ride back to the tram to collect the rest of our gear.

After Cameron departed to head to work, I decided to head to the hospital where David was taken. I wanted to check on his condition, return some gear, and interview him. When I arrived at the hospital, he was sedated and waiting for the operating room to open. I stayed long enough for him to wake and then asked him questions about how he was feeling and how he got to be where he was. David told me he came upon the icy portion of the trail and decided to cut to the south and go up and around the dangerous section. He traversed over two gullies, passing over the previous avalanche, at the 7600-foot elevation. This debris field was particularly interesting to me, because it really sent home the solidity of the snow after the avalanche stops moving. It's one thing to read about the snow becoming almost as hard as concrete, and another to experience the

hardness of it while traversing over it. Our little plastic snow shovels all the sudden look woefully inadequate.

After traversing a bit, he started climbing up the 55-degree slope. He was following what appeared to be previous steps, stomped into the snowpack by someone before him. He was climbing over a rock, carrying his snowshoes on his pack. He estimates he climbed about 200 feet in elevation before he lost his footing, and fell about 10 feet breaking his leg at this point. He then started tumbling back down the slope, stopping just before hitting a tree. After fracturing his leg, and in much pain, he climbed down and around the tree, and took stock of his injuries. He then realized that he was spending the night.

Unfortunately, he dropped his phone at the tree, about 20 feet above him, and was unable to reach it and call for help. It also explains why we were never able to reach him by phone him, all he could do was helplessly listen to it ring, and ring, and ... ring. He had the presence of mind to bed down for the night under this tree and amongst some brush. He pulled down and gathered up some nearby tree branches and made an insulated bed that kept him off the snow. With the limited clothing he brought, he was thankfully only moderately hypothermic when the sun broke in the morning. He spent the entire night shivering. Thankfully he had several things going for him that morning. 1) He was situated near the slide area, which is what caught the aircrew's attention in the first place, 2) He could discern the looped message that the helicopter was playing over the speakers. 3) He was conscious, and had enough strength to pull himself out into the open where Star 9 saw him. Otherwise, we may have completely missed him.

As we were finishing up our conversation, the nurses came in to prep David for surgery. Wishing him well, I left before the nurses decided I needed Evaluating also. I went over to the gift shop where I purchased a couple Get Well cards on behalf of the team and myself. I ran into his wife, Jane, who at that moment looked more composed than David. I learned that David was experienced in backcountry snow travel and normally carried enough gear to spend the night. The day we found him was the third day of their 6-day vacation, and coincidentally Jane's birthday. They were out from the Minneapolis area visiting friends. Jane latter told me that soon after I left the emergency room Dave was wheeled back in having been bumped from the operation room lineup. He would be delayed another two hours.



Subjects ankle after surgery
Photo by Subjects Wife.

After his successful surgery, David and Jane sent me a picture of David's foot in an external rod brace. A few days ago, they sent me an x-ray of his latest and hopefully last surgery. He now has a plate, and wants to go hiking again, in the snow. His wife is planning on buying him an Ice Axe for his birthday, before he goes off gallivanting again! After they have a real vacation.

RMRU Members Involved: Cameron Dickinson and Michael George.

Desert Search and Rescue Team (DSAR) Members Involved: Sharon Ollenburger.

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.