



## **PCT Broken Ankle**

**April 4, 2019**  
**Desert Divide, Apache Peak**  
**2019-017**

Written by Blake Douglas

It was just after the morning traffic rush on a Thursday, and I was driving back to Riverside with fellow RMRU trainee James Eckhardt following mission 16. We were less than ten seconds from parking the car when our phones went off. Again. Evidently the universe didn't want us to go to our jobs today.

Our subject was a PCT hiker who fell in the exact spot that team member Tyler Shumway had warned us about at the monthly meeting the night before: the north side of Apache Peak, where a steep angle and lingering snow and ice made conditions perfect for untrained or unequipped hikers to take a potentially devastating fall. All we knew was that our subject had some sort of leg injury; further attempts to communicate had been unsuccessful.

While in route we reviewed terrain maps and conferred with the team via Slack to determine the best path to take, settling on Spitler Peak Trail per Tyler's recommendation. James and I were assigned to "get up there and figure out what's going on" while Glenn Henderson and Vinay Rao ran base. Hoisting the subject out via Star 9 would be ideal, as is often the case, but weather was making this look unlikely. A technical extraction would involve, at the least, carrying the subject down the mountain in a litter.



Map of Trail and Subject Location  
Photo by Blake Douglas.

Spittle Peak Trail begins in sandy chaparral conditions, climbing steadily across the western slopes of Spittle Peak and transitions to shady oak woodlands along the north. After crossing Spittle Creek, it ascends quickly in a series of switchbacks through the skeletal remains of hundreds of oak trees gutted by the 2013 Mountain Fire, although we saw signs of slow recovery. As we ascended the switchbacks, we were advised that Star 9 was preparing to take off with Tyler aboard - welcome news, since Tyler is a former EMT, and would be better able to evaluate the subject than James or myself. We also received word that Eric Holden and Shani Pynn were now on the trail as Team 2, carrying the litter. They were joined some time later by Team 3, consisting of new members Derek Donovan, Jordan Antol and Michael Cara, who would be essential in providing backup and relief if we had to go through with the technical extraction and carry-out.

A short scramble up the final switchback deposited us on the Pacific Crest Trail atop the Desert Divide, with an excellent view of both Coachella and Garner Valleys; a view we enjoyed just long enough to catch our breath before proceeding north. We were, after all, determined to beat Star 9 to our subject.

Star 9 passed over us as we approached Apache Peak East, where the trail curves around the east face, with our subject's coordinates on the opposite side. Star 9 located the subject but departed again to configure for a hoist. Rounding a curve in the trail we sighted three hikers at our coordinates, but none of them were our subject. Two were PCT hikers who had stopped to help if possible, and the third was our subject's adult son, who had been hiking with him when he fell. We were pointed in the general direction in which the fall occurred, but there was no obvious sign of the subject from the trail itself.

James and I descended around 100 feet of a 40-degree slope strewn with flat, loose rock, quickly reaching a small promontory overlooking a nearby drainage, but still with no sign of our subject. We decided to stay put and wait for the hoist to locate the subject for us, rather than risk descending in the wrong direction. James returned to the trail to communicate with our subject's son, establish a radio relay, and ensure that no one else descended the slope.

Within five minutes Star 9 arrived and approached closely enough for Tyler and me to share a wave before he hoisted down. The subject was 100 feet directly below me in the drainage, but invisible from my vantage due to the steep angle and substantial amount of detritus. Star 9 departed as I descended, and I found Tyler already tending to the subject, with two other uninjured subjects nearby. It turned out these were not really subjects, but simply more PCT hikers who had descended to render what aid they could. Tyler quickly assessed the subject and we radio-relayed up to James that the subject had a leg injury and needed a hoist; all others would walk out. Thanks to the expertise of Tyler and RSO aviation, the entire sequence from hoist-in to hoist-out only took around ten minutes.

While Tyler negotiated the hoist, I gathered the other two hikers to me, having them secure their gear and shield themselves from the rotor wash while we waited for the helicopter to depart. Although lightly equipped and untrained for the conditions, they were in good shape, confident and cooperative, and they graciously packed out the gear belonging to our subject's Son. As they ascended, I descended to Tyler's location to assist him in retrieving his own gear, as well as that of our subject; both packs had fallen another 100 feet down the canyon.



Star-9 at Apache Saddle  
Photo by Riverside Sheriff's Aviation.

Once all gear had been retrieved, we reconvened on the trail and headed to the Apache Peak saddle, where Star 9 had landed to await our team. We thanked and bid farewell to the PCT hikers, and Star 9 took Tyler and our subject's son back to Hemet. James and I made a quick hike to the top of Apache Peak while we waited for Star 9 to return, enjoying snacks and rest while we watched clouds pile ominously over the ridgeline, threatening to cancel our easy exit, but Star 9 returned just in time to avoid the worst of it. We met up with the team at Lake Hemet and had a well-earned dinner at the Paradise Valley Cafe.

What went wrong:

Our subject was unequipped for the conditions; specifically, a steep, snowy ledge on a north-facing slope in early spring, where ice formation is likely to occur, and a slip requires an immediate ice axe arrest. Our subject fell into the ice axe arrest position (head upslope, on his belly) but made the critical mistake of digging his feet into the slope beneath him, which caused him to flip over and tumble even farther down the slope, aggravating his injuries. Emphasizing these points is the fact that a nearly identical mission occurred one week (April 12, 2019) later in the same location.

Written by Tyler Shumway

RMRU received a call out 8am on Monday for a rescue near Apache Peak. I was unable to respond right away due to work so I called in as soon as I could. At 11:30am I contacted Call Captain Glenn Henderson to get an update on the mission. I was told to



respond to Hemet Ryan for a possible hoist for an injured hiker who had fallen approximately 150 feet on snow and ice.

After gearing up I was in the air at 12:30pm. Riverside County Sheriff's Aviation Unit flew directly to the north east flank of Apache peak which was covered in snow and ice. The injured hiker was located just below the snow line on a talus slope. Due to the elevation and winds Star 9 needed to burn off fuel in order to perform the hoist. We landed at Lake Hemet and were quickly in the air again with a lighter load.

Technical Flight Officer Eric Hannum was able to lower me to the victim who had company of another PCT hiker and his Son who had climbed down from the trail to help. Steve (injured hiker) had multiple contusions to his head and appeared to have a possible ankle fracture. Despite his injuries Steve was very calm and in good spirits. Due to the extremely loose and precarious terrain I quickly put Steve in a screamer suite and Star 9 hoisted him out so he could seek medical attention at Lake Hemet.

Blake Douglas and James Eckhardt were making their way down the steep slope to help Steve's Son and the other PCT hiker to help get them back up to the trail safely. We all made it back to the trail without incident and made our way to the saddle of Apache peak where Star 9 was able to land. Steve's Son and I were flown back to Lake Hemet so he could be with his Father.



Everyone from RSO and RMRU at Lake Hemet Helipad Base  
Photo by Riverside Sheriff's Aviation.

Thank you, Riverside Sheriff's Aviation Unit, for a successful and safe rescue.

**RMRU Members Involved:** Jordan Antol, Michael Cara, Derek Donovan, Blake Douglas, James Echardt, Glenn Henderson, Eric Holden, Shani Pynn, Tyler Shumway, and Vinay Rao.

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.