

Volume XXI, Issue II, February, 1985

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Search and Rescue

SEARCH

Mission No. 8507M

4-5 February, Mon.-Tues.

North Face,
Mt. San Jacinto

By Rob Gardner



At about 6:00 a.m. on February 2, 1985 four strong hikers began pursuit up the steep North Face escarpment of Mt. San Jacinto. It had been snowing in nearby Banning since 4:00 a.m. The heavy storms continu-

ing, it was snowing in Palm Springs by 7:30 a.m.

Christopher Jones (age 31, from San Diego), Terry Hartig (age 26, from Balboa Island), John Collett, and Doug Kosti continued their hike up Snow Creek Canyon in spite of the adverse weather conditions. Their goal was the peak of Mt. San Jacinto. The hikers had been unable to get a permit because the route has been closed since November 1984. Nonetheless, the climbers got past the water company at the bottom of the canyon and continued up toward the Isthmus area.

At about 8:30 a.m. the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway began to close the road to the lower Tramway station, eventually closing the road to all traffic due to the unsafe icy road conditions. This road leads from Palm Springs (at about sea level) to the lower Tram station at 2,500 feet above sea level. Snow in Banning is uncommon and snow in Palm Springs is a rarity. It snowed all day Saturday and through the night.

Chris, Terry, John and Doug proceeded up the North Face, past the Isthmus and on towards the snow tongue area. They



RMRU PHOTO BY KEVIN WALKER

AT THE HELM — Mountain pilot Mike Donovan keeps watch over the instruments of the Bell Jet Ranger, as he attempts to get in close to the summit of Mt. San Jacinto, to try and locate missing hikers Chris Jones and Terry Hartig. It was not until early evening that Mike could get a team onto the summit because of the breaking winter storm.

bivouaced Saturday night and resumed the climb on Sunday morning. At about 5,000 feet altitude Chris suddenly lost his footing, taking a fall on the loose snow. In the fall Chris' ice-axe accidentally struck John Collett on the head. John was not seriously injured, however, it was eventually decided that John would turn back. Doug Kosti accompanied John on the hike back to Snow Creek Village. Chris and Terry continued forward, climbing up the main chute over Snow Creek on the steep northern face of Mt. San Jacinto.

Late Sunday the storm subsided and the clouds thinned. Chris and Terry planned to achieve the 10,804' peak of Mt. San Jacinto on Sunday afternoon and to then hike over to the upper Tramway station in Long Valley (8,500'). They were to then ride the Tramway down to Palm Springs, where an automobile had been left for them in the lower Tramway station parking lot.

Sunday afternoon was of gentle weather, but still very cold. Even in Palm Springs temperatures were dropping to freezing in the night. Long Valley was dropping near zero degrees Fahrenheit,

before adding on the chill factor.

Chris and Terry did not make their destination on Sunday. On Monday Chris Jones' wife, Jerri Jones, contacted the California State Park Ranger at Long Valley and reported that Chris and Terry were over-due hikers. Jerri gave the Ranger information on the planned route, the gear and clothing the men had with them, and information of their experience. Both men reportedly had climbed the North Face before and were high caliber mountaineers. They had good clothing and adequate gear with them.

RMRU was called out by the Riverside County Sheriff's Office (RSO) at 2:10 p.m. on Monday, February 4, 1985. It was very surprising and concerning to hear that the call-out was to the North Face of Mt. San Jacinto. With the heavy fall of new snow in that area the immediate concern was of avalanches in the chutes, with particular concern for the higher altitudes of the main chute. It is generally agreed that the prudent do not enter this route after new snow until enough days and proper weather conditions have occurred to allow the snow to consolidate.

The **RMRU** team members met at Snow Creek Village. With only a couple of hours of day light left and clouds around the top 2,000' of the mountain a helicopter was requested. The RSO cleared for a helicopter to be dispatched from Landells Aviation Service. Pilot Mike Donovan arrived at Snow Creek Village, where **RMRU** team members, Jim Fairchild and Kevin Walker, boarded the chopper and proceeded on to make an immediate visual assessment. The other **RMRU** members prepared for a cold night of searching in the mountains.

About twenty minutes later Kevin made a radio contact with base and reported that two sets of clear foot prints had been located in the snow at the bottom of the snow tongue. The footprints were in the main chute, at about 5,100' altitude.

It was only a few more minutes before Kevin was on the radio again and advised that the helicopter was at 5,700' altitude, where the clear footprints vanished under the tail end of a massive avalanche. Mike flew the helicopter up the chute to 9,000 feet altitude and the origin of this major avalanche could not yet be seen. The avalanche covered the chute, obliterating all that was in its path. The avalanche had started above the 9,000 foot level. Mike could not check any higher due to the cloud cover. The avalanche was major, the snow having fallen down the sides of the chute as well as from the top. The avalanche covered over 4,000 vertical feet.

The chute was too unstable to place anybody in it on Monday. Two teams were flown up and around the clouds and then over Mt. San Jacinto peak at 10,804'

and left on the peak. Darkness was setting in and the helicopter headed home in the dark after leaving the second team on the peak.

The search went on through the night to cover areas between the peak and the upper Tramway station. This area was searched on the premise that Chris and Terry were not under the avalanche, but may have made it out of the chute, the avalanche wiping out their foot-prints. One team on the peak was to check the summit area for any signs that Chris and Terry had been there, and if no signs were found, that team would hike to the rock house near the peak to see if the over-due hikers might be there. If not, the team was to await daylight, at which time they could re-evaluate snow conditions, etc. and give assessments from the peak to Long Valley, seeking out any tracks or other signs that the over-due hikers may have been in that area.

Randy Iwasiuk and Curtis Pontynen were assigned to the summit. Joel Ericson later joined that team. Bernie McIlvoy was assigned to check the route down to Long Valley. The cloud cover had dissipated, allowing Bernie to ski the route by moonlight, traversing and covering miles and miles of the terrain. Bernie only found the tracks that Jon Wallace of the Nordic Ski Center had left, when he searched the area earlier in the day. Other than Jon's tracks no signs of people were found by Bernie. Bernie did see the results of another avalanche on the eastern slope to the summit.

The rest of the **RMRU** team moved from



RMRU PHOTO BY KEVIN WALKER

INCHES TO GO — With clear morning skies, veteran pilot Don Landells brings in more members to the summit of Mt. San Jacinto. As Don sets down to the summit boulder **RMRU** member Ray Hussey prepares to unload. From the summit teams, would head in different directions according to assignments, to try and locate some sign of Chris and Terry.

Snow Creek Village to the Tramway Mountain station to reestablish a base camp. Cameron Robbins and Colin Chambers were dispatched on Snow shoes to cover the area from Long Valley to Tamarack Valley, by the route through Shangra-La. They then hiked over to Round Valley and returned to Long Valley on the standard route. They returned to base at about 2:30 p.m. reporting no signs found of Chris and Terry. A few months earlier two Marines two days over-due from the North Face had made their way to Shangra-La after getting off route.

John Dew managed the radios and logs at base camp and Bill Blascho checked out the Long Valley vicinity.

The night went on without any clues to the whereabouts of Chris and Terry, except for the footprints ending at the bottom of the avalanche.

Kevin Walker was the Operations Leader for this mission. Kevin worked into the morning hours planning new strategy for daylight on Tuesday. State Park Ranger Rick Brown remained on duty through the night making numerous telephone contacts and interviews, gathering detailed information regarding the over-due men's ability, equipment, clothing, experience, attitudes, personality, etc. National Weather Service Meteorologist Carl Garczynski was contacted for a forecast for Tuesday. The forecast was for clear skies, a definite positive as **RMRU** wanted to have the helicopter in the air at daybreak on Tuesday, if at all possible.

The **RMRU** men that were not already in the field got a good meal and grabbed about three hours of sleep to be prepared for dispatch into the field at first light. Thanks go to Mr. Sherman Harris and the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway for their support and cooperation.

It was difficult to get much sleep during those three hours as the haunt of the main chute avalanche remained in probably everybody's mind.

At daybreak the next search phase was put into motion. Three more teams were placed on the peak to search towards Little Round Valley, Jean Peak, and Cornell Peak. Once those teams were in position the helicopter was to pick up a team member as a spotter and drop over the North Face to continue an air search in that vicinity. As the helicopter was about to depart for the spotter, it was called back to transport Joel Ericson down from the peak. Joel had been flown in to the peak on Monday at sundown. He had made a quick gain of about 10,000 feet altitude and was now suffering serious altitude sickness. Once Joel was off the mountain and getting medical attention the spotter was picked up and the air search resumed.

At the peak, Rob Gardner located about ten deteriorated foot prints in the icy snow. The prints included signs of cram-

pons. This was the first new lead as the teams departed on their assigned routes. It was not more than fifteen minutes before Cameron Robbins broadcasted over the radio that he could see clear and continuing tracks in the snow on the Western side of the mountain. The helicopter was brought up from the North Face and very quickly followed the tracks until two men were sighted. The helicopter, piloted by Don Landells, found a clearing in the trees and descended to a hover on the snow covered slope. The **RMRU** spotter, Walt Walker, jumped out of the bird and sank into the powdery snow clear up to his mid thighs. Don lifted off and flew away so that Walt could shout to the two men. It was quickly established that they were Christopher Jones and Terry Hartig, the over-due hikers. The men were in good condition but very far off route, which they did not know until told so by Walt.



RMRU PHOTO BY KEVIN WALKER

P.S., I LOVE YOU — RMRU member Mel Krug's facial expression shows great relief as he walks off the tram car at the lower station of the Palm Springs Aerial Tram. It is safe to say that all present felt that way after Chris Jones and Terry Hartig were located and flown to safety.

Chris and Terry reported that they had left the main chute of Sunday, taking a chute to the West. They reported that about ten minutes after changing route the major avalanche occurred in the main chute. Chris said the avalanche "sounded like a freight train going by." They had continued hiking up the side chute and inadvertently went to Folly Peak. Upon getting to Folly Peak, they recognized this error and climbed over to Mt. San Jacinto Peak, arriving there at 10:00 P.M. on Monday night. Being only five minutes from the rock house, where three **RMRU** men awaited, Chris and Terry were ap-

parently disoriented and hiked the opposite way by 180 degrees. When located they said they were hiking to the Tramway Station. In fact, they were hiking farther away from the station. Although they were off route, they had not suffered injury and were still strong. However, they were not too resistant to a helicopter ride back to the Snow Creek Village. John, Doug, and Jerri were happy to see that Chris and Terry were okay, as were **RMRU**, State Park, RSO and Tramway personnel.

Chris Jones and Terry Hartig were probably spared by a combination of skill, proper gear, and a very lot of good luck. The moral to this story is, stay off of Mt. San Jacinto's North Face when there is fresh snow! • **RMRU**

Publisher's Note: **RMRU** learned recently that one of the mountaineers in the previous mission did indeed suffer some fairly serious frostbite to the toes. We were happy to hear also that he is not going to lose any of the toes.

CALL

Mission No. 8508C

**19 Feb., Tues.
Baja California**

At 7:00 A.M. we received a call from the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team that they needed a few members to go with them into Baja California to effect a rescue for a group of American hikers. While we were in the middle of the call out the San Diego team called back and stated that no assistance would be necessary. • **RMRU**

ABORT

Mission No. 8509A

**26 Feb., Tues.
Imperial County**

In the early morning hours we received a call for a search in Imperial County near the Riverside County line. The search was for a 55 year old man now missing for better than one day. Members responded to the All-American canal, and as they arrived or were enroute the man walked out. Members were turned around and returned home and to work. • **RMRU**



Winter Training

**9-10 Feb., Sat.-Sun.
San Jacinto Mountains**

By Kevin Walker



Friday night was like most other long winter nights except for one thing, it was raining. And for a fairly sparse winter that was indeed unusual. With great anticipation I waited for the following morning to see what I could see. When Glenn Henderson and Bruce Gahagan picked me up at 6:00 it was still raining and as we drove we talked of how great it would be to go out hiking in a heavy snow storm (I know we are warped, but what the heck). As we were driving through Banning something hit me, "Where are the radioes." I had forgotten them. "Glenn, stop, we have to go back to my place and get them." Later I would receive the teams coveted "Green Weenie." Finally we made it to the tram, hurriedly grabbed our packs, and rode up. As we walked down the concrete walk to Long Valley and the ranger station we were talking how it had to be better up higher on the mountain. Upon going in the ranger station we learned from Rob Gardner that everyone had become tired of waiting for me and had left a little earlier. By doing this we had obviously been selected to stay as the tram patrol for Saturday. The team did have one radio with them and did inform us that Rick Pohlars and Mel Krug would come out Sunday morning and relieve the four of us so that we could hike in and join the group for a hike up to Mt. San Jacinto.

We spent the main part of the day snowshoeing or skiing around the Long Valley area prepared to help someone in distress, but all that was needed of us was some directions back to the tram from a tourist lost in the snow storm. Meanwhile the troops in the field wandered around aimlessly in the snow until sometime in the afternoon when they made it to Tamarak Valley where camp was set up. As Mel and Rick, who Glenn, Bruce, Rob and myself were to have camped with, were having their macaroni and cheese and ham chunks up in Tamarak, the four of us

dined on prime rib of beef in the upper station.

The next morning the four of us got a very early start and went up to Tamarack. It was a beautiful morning, clear and cool. Being a small group, the hike went quickly and we were soon with the rest of the team in camp. Mel and Rick headed down to the tram, and the rest of us headed out, some on snowshoes and some (yours truly) on skis. In contrast to Saturday it was still clear and warming up fast. The trip up was great. Everyone gathered up on top. After a short break we went back down. Those of us on skis provided comedy relief for the rest of the group. And for some reason Glenn and Bruce thought it was fun to play ambush Kevin the skier. Back at Tamarack we had lunch, gathered gear, and went back out the Sid Davis drainage to Long Valley, where we found large crowds in the valley, and a tram patrol/ranger carryout of an injured snowplayer to the tram. Gear was sorted as we waited for a car down to the valley station, then onboard and down the mountain. • RMRU



RMRU PHOTO BY RANDY IWASIUK

10,804 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL — RMRU members Ed Hill, Rob Gardner (kneeling), Kevin Walker, Glenn Henderson, Bruce Gahagan and Jim Fairchild pause in front of the summit boulder on Mt. San Jacinto. It may not be Mt. Everest, but we like it all the same.



RMRU PHOTO BY KEVIN WALKER

TRAM PATROL During the winter months RMRU members take turns when volunteer time allows, to assist the Long Valley area and around the tram. Here RMRU eager beavers Rob Gardner and Bruce Gahagan slide through one of the many snow play paths of the valley.



RMRU PHOTO BY KEVIN WALKER

UP THE CONCRETE TRAIL — After returning from the high country, RMRU members assisted tram patrol members Mel Krug, Rick Pohlers (front) and rangers in a carry-out of an injured skier from the snow play area in Long Valley to the mountain station of the tram.



RMRU PHOTO BY BRUCE GAHAGAN

SKIER BITES THE BIG ONE — RMRU member Kevin Walker lies in a heap after being ambushed by RMRU Ninjas Bruce and Glenn. It was Kevin's first descent of the mountain on skis, and it may have been his last.