

Hiker fell down cliff

February 13, 1978
South Ridge, Chino Canyon
1978-005

The following mission had two, very different segments, so it was decided to have one write-up for each.

By John Dew

It was about noon on Monday. The whole team was tired, having been up all night bringing a man with a broken ankle out of Round Valley, on a rescue toboggan, which is nothing but pure hard work. We were looking forward to a good lunch and then home to bed for some much needed rest. We were just ready to board the tram for the trip down when we were informed by the Sheriff's Department that two men were reported missing in the hills just at the bottom of the lower station.

Our first question was, "How can anyone get lost in the low hills at the bottom of the tram?" Their car was parked on one of the lower parking lots, tracks were leading to the nearby ridges and the Palm Springs Mounted Police had already been called to search the area around the car, as this was still in the Palm Springs city limits. (We were called when it proved to be up the canyon beyond their jurisdiction.)

The Mounties had secured a "bird" and had flown the ridge and nearby territory. They reported that they had seen tracks at about the 6000' elevation and they seemed to be going both up and down.

The RMRU team went to lunch as they had not eaten since the night before, then returned to take up the search. The Mounties had ceased searching and left the area sometime earlier than our return and we made team assignments as soon as possible. The day was nearing a close and we needed as much time as possible to use the helicopter during daylight to place men on the ridge near the 6000' level to evaluate the reported tracks.

The afternoon had been very stormy and the clouds were at just the 6000' level making the landing of men there very difficult.

Immediately tracks were found which looked as though at least two people had been walking each direction. RMRU really questioned if this could be the two young men we were looking for, as their car was down at the 2000' level and these tracks

were at 6500' and the men were reported as being in canvas shoes. In addition to this, the snow from this storm had piled to about three feet and they were wearing nothing more than light summer clothes.

After searching for about an hour or an hour and a half darkness was coming and the cloud cover lowered and the decision was made to lift the teams off the ridge. Darkness and the deteriorating weather are both detriments when using aircraft. In addition it didn't seem logical that the missing persons would be that high. All teams were lifted off except one consisting of Bernie McIlvoy and John Muratet who had started searching up the ridge, following these tracks, and found themselves in the clouds, too high to get back to the helispot before dark. They were informed by Base Camp that they would have to remain on the ridge all night.

Just as this bit of cheerful news was radioed to them, they sent word back that they had voice contact with someone. "It sounds like it is about a thousand feet above us." they said. So instead of making camp and trying to get some rest and sleep these two continued to press upward, calling, waiting for a response to their shouts, and pressing on again. This was extremely difficult as they had been up all night before and were nearly exhausted.

At about 2200 hrs. (10:00 p.m.) and at the point of complete exhaustion these men radioed Base Camp that they had found one subject. This was good news to RMRU. We were very concerned, however, when we learned that he was one of two brothers for whom we were searching and he did not know the whereabouts of the other. The other one he told us later had fallen near the spot where the helicopter had been landing men on the ridge, where the tracks had first been seen. (The finding of the brother is in another place in this issue.)

This young man was alive. For this we were thankful. He had suffered much from the cold. His clothes were literally frozen to him. His feet were near freezing and showed evidence of much frost bite, he had severe snow blindness and he was very hungry. He confided in the team members who were up there with him that he had actually given up and did not think he was going to make it.

Bernie and John got some warm food into him, found a nearby rock formation which gave them some shelter from part of the wind and cold and snow and with the skimpy amount of clothing the team members had with them, put some dry clothing on the subject. They put him in one sleeping bag and by using every available thing left, kept themselves from freezing during the night.

When morning finally dominated over that long cold night for them, they fed the injured man some more warm food while we in Base Camp were making arrangements with the helicopter to lift them off that mountain.

We were glad the ordeal was over and we at last could return to our homes. We were happy that we were able to save one life, yet saddened that the brother had

not been so fortunate.

The following write-up is the second part of Mission 1978-005.

By Ed Hill

A swiftly moving storm on February 12th and 13th kept RMRU busy. A cross country skier sprained his ankle above Round Valley and had to be evacuated by toboggan. At the same time, two brothers, Ray and Joe Soucie were attempting to climb the ridge east of Chino Canyon to the mountain station of the Palm Springs Tramway. After evacuating the skier, we started searching the ridge. We soon had tracks at the 6000 foot level going up the mountain. After some hard travelling two of our men reached Joe Soucie who reported that his brother had fallen over a lip at the 6000 foot level. He had heard a scream and then nothing. He had continued up to get help for his brother. At the 6000 foot level the mountain station looks close, but in actuality, it is hours away.

Tuesday was clear and we were able to search by helicopter. The bird soon spotted a body in the snow at the base of a 200 foot wall. Tom Aldrich, Don Chambers, Steve Zappe, Steve Jensen, Darrel Hand and I were flown into the helispot at 6000 feet to recover the body. We were able to crash through the brush to an outcrop at the edge of the lip above the wall. Here we could put in anchors. We decided to send two men down a rope to the base of the cliff to look the situation over.

They would tell us if more men were needed, below. Don was lowered over the side, and Tom rappelled as soon as Don was off the rope. They reported that they were at the body and no more men would be needed below.

They loaded the body into a body bag and dragged it to a point where the helicopter could hover above them. A cargo net on a long line was dropped to them. The body bag was loaded into the cargo net, and the bird flew back to base.

While Tom and Don were jumaring back up the rope, a Marine helicopter started



Jim Fairchild

While airborne in the helicopter, Jim shot this photograph which shows the upper part of the steep cliff that Ray Soucie went down, as he fell to his death.

flying lazy circles around us burning off fuel. When everyone was back on the outcrop, we packed up and went back to the ridge top helispot. A number of plans were considered and rejected. Finally we were told to load our packs in the cargo net. They would be hauled aboard, and we would be winched through the "hell-hole" into the bird. The helicopter hovered above the helispot and dropped the cargo net. We loaded all of our gear into it and, it was winched up. The problems began when the helicopter crewmen could not wrestle the gear into the cabin. Finally, the cargo net was lowered back down into the brush, and we took off half of the gear. This time the crew could get the gear into the cabin. Back came the cargo net for a third time, and the rest of the gear made it to the cabin. The bird flew off, but we soon realized that the pilot was going to put the rear end of the helicopter into the brush and lower the ramp. Once done, we scrambled up the ramp, and were flown back to base.

Our thanks go to the Marines who flew us out of an awkward spot on the ridge. I personally was saddened by the fact that another person paid with his life for being unprepared in the mountains.

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.