

Hikers separated, one stranded

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Lower Tahquitz Canyon
1983-002

By Jim Fairchild

"Aced again!"

"Snicker, snicker."

More about the above later.

Chris and Holly were hikers. They climbed a long way up the south ridge of Tahquitz Canyon, to an elevation of over 2,800 feet which is considerable considering the elevation, 450 feet, of Palm Springs, where they started. According to Chris, after they started down, he and Holly took slightly different routes, resulting in his seeing her on a sub-ridge before he descended back to the origin of their hike. Holly did not show up, so Chris reported her missing and the Palm Springs Mounted Police, a local search group, responded.

The Mounties hiked up a ways, shouted and got Holly's calls in return, but were unable to pinpoint the location, and were recalled to base by their department. The best description they could give us regarding the area from which the calls emanated was "on a ledge on the south wall of the canyon." We too, would have some problems later pinpointing the location.

Chris said they separated about 2 p.m. he returned to town about 5 p.m., the Mounties were called and hiked during the early part of the evening, and we (RMRU) were called about 11:30 p.m. The writer had just finished printing pictures of the recent search and body recovery of a young man who did not survive a 400 foot slide down an icy slope near the tramway, had only fifty minutes before crawled into bed, and Al's phone call precipitated a quick drive to the road-head near Ann & Chester Dolley's home at the west edge of Palm Springs near the mouth of Tahquitz Canyon.

We had slim manpower, meaning that we could field two teams, Bernie McIlvoy with Cameron Robbins to ascend the south ridge of Tahquitz Canyon, the writer with Craig Britton and new member Bill Blaschko, M.D., to ascend the canyon bottom itself, going around the first falls and onto the infamous 'belly-roll' trail.

The three of us lumbered across the desert toward the canyon's mouth in high spirits, confident of victory (finding Holly, taking care of her, and getting her out of the hostile, threatening, frightening, very dark environment). The reader please refer back to the

opening words of this narrative.

A half-mile up we crossed the creek, with only one wet foot, and proceeded along the many branched trail toward the lower falls. Bernie & Cam were now on the ridge and would occasionally flash their super-powerful light down on us. The noise of the tumbling stream blocked any calls Holly may have made as she watched our progress from the other side of the canyon, two thousand vertical feet above and a half-mile south. Of course, we did not know until after returning to base that she had a ring-side seat and view of our struggles upward. After some false trails we got above the falls and headed into the narrowing Canyon along the belly-roll trail. One false step along it and we'd plunge 200 feet and more to join the ranks of certain unfortunate predecessors. Most of the way up the trail we stopped for a break and waited to hear when Bernie and Cam were the same lateral distance along, but a 1,000 feet above. Our powerful lights verified this, and we continued. At the belly-roll, a series of parallel upthrusting ledges with a cramping overhang above and open space below, we skittered across. Shortly we fumbled over a steep, slabby descent to almost meet the stream, below the second falls.

Bernie radioed he had response to his yells, very faint westward, up the mountain. We turned south and up to climb the headwall and reach that aforementioned 2800' level. It was steep and treacherous. I kept hearing weak calls, but finally believed it was the Tahquitz Maidens tormenting me with their plaintive, compelling voices. Higher and higher, then Craig, now 200 feet below me, called. 'What,' Holly answered.

Of course, by now the greatest search vehicle known was on hand, Mike Donovan flying one of Don Landells' jet rangers. Kevin Walker and Rick Pohlers were aboard with the loud-hailer, an electrically impelled voice-magnifying device. I asked them to fly the huge, high canyon wall across from us, where beautiful sunshine illuminated the rocks and shrubs. They did some zig-zags, not quite as high as where the 'what' seemed to originate. Kevin and Rick were put out on the pinnacled ridge above the steepest, narrowest part of the canyon to call. They were answered, it sounded to us, on the ridge top now that it came from below them. They called again, this time they nailed her down as being north of them (away from the canyon) at the same elevation. Search is over. Mike flew back, spotted her, picked up the victorious orange-parkaed RMRU men, and Holly was soon aboard, being flown back to civilization, where she was looking down on most of the night and this early morning.

'Aced again.'

Bernie and Cam were 699' below us, and were picked up first, then we three were plucked from our roost.

Back at base I walked up to Kevin and said, 'Aced again!' He answered, 'Snicker, snicker.' just kidding, but it's a terribly frequent format: some of the troopies struggle and sweat all night, locate the subject, then the fellows at base climb into the helicopter (strenuous move). Fly up, and away, and grab the subject from under our runny noses.

So what? That's our job, we love it, and we are forever grateful that Holly and so many others are alive because the Lord grants us the strength and skill to accomplish such things.

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.