

Hiker left group behind

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Devil's Slide Trail
1983-010

By Jim Fairchild

Practicing climbing, rappelling, jumaring, and other cliff side skills on the high boulders of Mt. Rubidoux, with a friend and his teenage children, is a fine Sunday afternoon activity. Then the pager activates. A frantic scramble ensues, with the result that the writer arrives home fifteen minutes later, our having disassembled riggings and anchors, coiled ropes, loped down the hill, only to get "busy" signals when attempting to call the stated number. Finally, I got Joe Erickson, and learned that a person was missing above Idyllwild. Enough information to drive to the fire station and transfer gear from pickup to the No. 2 van, drive to the Sheriff's office in Idyllwild.

Here was a scene of men readying for the hike into the heights deeply covered with snow, and the leaders planning the who, where, when, and how. I contributed a number of suggestions, then faced the packing process in a mound of scattered gear.

Earlier on Sunday four people ascended the trail from Humber Park, heading toward Skunk Cabbage Meadow (8000el.) a short mile east of Saddle Junction (8100'el.) which is two-and-a-half miles hike up from Humber Park (6400el.). They were, Greg Knickerbocker, 23, Chris Martin, 21, Kevin Knickerbocker, 13, Troy Wyatt, 14, all of Mission Viejo. About two-thirds of the way up to the saddle the stamped-down trail ended on a very steep, deeply drifted switchback below Powder Box Spring. Greg said he would continue, and climbed up and out of sight. When he did not return for some while, Chris told the boys to stay with their packs and his while he went in search for Greg. After waiting the hour, Chris asked them to, they descended to Humber, without packs, to report both men overdue. In due course, RMRU was called, its members notified by phone and pager, and we drove to Idyllwild. The village center where the Sheriff's Office is has an elevation of exactly one mile, while Humber Park, our roadhead is 6400'el., as noted above. The village was mostly free of snow, while the park had depths up to a foot.

Back at base Kevin Walker and John Dew tussled with such considerations as gathering further information, trying to reach and call out more RMRU people, and checking with the boys to see if they could remember anything more. Mary Bowman worked the radio and log. Theirs was the hard part of the operation, we on the trail would have to carry heavy packs up a steep, snow/ice covered mountain, but that's fun, sort of, ever so much better than a sedentary or confining task. Then, there are the tremendous benefits of mountain rescue: moonlit scenery of reflected light on glistening snow with conifers

giving mute silhouettes, mighty Tahquitz Rock and the spires above showing alpine crag character. We are fortunate to be in mountain rescue, because it takes us to places during times we would not otherwise frequent. Anyway we did not see anyone else taking a midnight hike up there.

Mel Krug and the writer were a team, followed by Glenn Henderson, Bruce Gahagan, Mark Hebert and Joe Erickson, then the Hemet team of Pete Boss, Steve Vaughn, and Mike Kincaid. Later, Ed Hill would arrive and join us. We toddled along ever upwards, soon reaching Jolly Springs then Middle Springs (halfway to Saddle junction), generally enjoying the slip-slide, crunch-plunge sequence of hiking. This last, crunch-plunge, is when we took a step from a hard, slippery portion on the trail to one where half our weight broke through the crust and we "post-holed" from ankle deep to knee deep. Rather disconcerting to me, the heaviest (200lbs. of unrefined chicken gristle, with 60 lbs. of gear thought to be needed).

Nearing the area the boys had described as where they left their packs, we gave another yell and were quickly answered by Chris who was bivouacked at the packs between two large boulder formations. He soon became a buddy by sharing his Snickers bar and cereal bars, and importantly, telling us of his attempt to find Greg. Seems he followed tracks up the trail a ways, then, when the trail ended, straight up the steep, icy slope. In the vicinity of Saddle Junction and south of it, he lost the tracks, but saw a woman who was cross-country skiing. She said she had seen Greg nicely camped 'in back of Tahquitz Peak' (8826'el.). That struck us as rather farfetched, because of the distance and difficulty with terrain, not to mention the timing, for she had seen him camped shortly after 2 p.m.

We left Chris at his bivouac and proceeded the ever deepening trail of snow and ice. At the switchback below Powder Box Springs, where snow often drifts upwards of twenty feet deep due to some peculiarity of wind currents, the trail ended, and the footprints went straight up.

By now the searchers behind us who had not returned to base for reasons of helping injured searchers or demands of employment, were Ed Hill, Pete Boss, Mark Hebert, and Glenn Henderson. They caught up to us and gave added strength and support.

Leading off up the alternately



DOWN THE DEVIL SLIDE - Subject Greg Knickerbocker is guided down the Devil Slide trail by RMRU members Mark Hebert, Mel Krug and Ed Hill after having been located a short distance out from the Saddle the night before.

hard and soft steep snow was tiring, and we began to switch leads. Mel soon found a nice icy face of 45 degrees, and packed steps up it. The configuration of the rock ridges indicate we were just south of the switch-backs that lead up the old trail to the junction. Before long, after more steep pitches, the angle decreased and we encountered a single set of ski tracks. Another hundred yards and we really thought that Greg's camp could be not too far south of us. We gave a group yell, and there was Greg, about 200 yards away. He was ensconced in his tent on an open flat area between huge pines and firs that were loaded with tons of ice. Radio messages to base were gladly received as far as our finding Greg was concerned, but the request for helicopter flights to get us out of the backcountry proved futile (we knew that) and we prepared to stay the balance of the night. High-technology packs disgorged high-tech pads and sleeping bags, high-tech bivvy covers and high-tech stoves. Surrounded by warmth and comfort, we relaxed and had a hot supper. The gusty wind bombarded us with small chunks of ice from nearby trees, and at times tried to get under the shelters and roll us over, but we slept anyway.

The first hints of dawn were lost on us, but by about sun-up we stirred. A hot drink, some packing, and we hiked. The return to Humber Park might have been anticlimactic had not the scenery been superbly resplendent on the sun light with some small clouds scudding over. We belayed Greg down the icy slopes, then marched along the trail to the cars. The mission had been 'no big deal" but certainly could have been.

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.