

Lost six year old boy

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Thomas Mountain, Santa Rosa Mtns.

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By Joe Erickson

Riverside County has a wide variety of terrain that a search and rescue team needs to be familiar with and able to operate in. From below sea level in the lower desert to the top of Mt. San Jacinto (10,805 ft.) Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit (RMRU) will respond to a call for help. We perform rescues for people known to be hurt or stranded, and searches for those who are lost, regardless of the terrain or time of day. Most often the call for help is received at night, usually when the readers of this Newsletter are snuggled in their warm blankets.

This mission started out as a lost female in the San Jacinto Mountains. While en-route the pagers relayed the message of a change in the operation. The RMRU volunteers were advised to proceed on to Thomas Mountain road, off Highway 74, in Garner Valley. A search was being initiated for a lost six year old boy.

Several months ago the RMRU solicited several thousand dollars from donors and service clubs. The goal was seven thousand dollars for a new pager system to replace our old "unreliables." Thank goodness for the new system. This system enabled the RMRU to respond to the Garner Valley search much more expeditiously. We arrived just before dark.

In the eight years I've been with the RMRU I have heard comments regarding how long our response time is and how long the operations are in length. Riverside County is huge. It takes me an hour and thirty minutes from the call-out time to my arrival time in the Idyllwild area, and I keep my gear packed and in my car for almost instant response.

A search involves many methods and each situation may utilize many or all the methods that we know. Basically, we determine the general area and the closest road or trailhead. We interview those involved in an effort to get a good description of the person, their clothes, and footgear. It helps to know if the lost person has been in the area before, if they were prepared for the terrain and weather. We go to the Point Last Seen (PLS) and search for tracks to determine a direction of travel.

A group of eleven children had gone camping with some adults at one of the remote campsites on Thomas Mountain. They chose a site near the summit where the fire

lookout tower used to be. The children explored and hiked and had fun all day. In the afternoon, about 3:00 pm, a group of the children spotted a deer and charged off to find it. One of the boys, Gregory, six years of age, had decided to return to camp and was last seen going in that direction. (Two mistakes here: 1) Children should be supervised at all times in the mountains, 2) never let someone travel alone in the mountains.) Gregory never made it back to camp.

RMRU volunteers were paired off for search area assignments. They carried gear for an all night search. Extra flashlights are standard equipment in our packs, as are extra bulbs and batteries. When tracking at night one flashlight that is dimmer works well because it has less tendency to wash out shadows.

We arrived at the campsite before we needed flashlights and had two areas of immediate concern. A visor was found above a campsite opposite from the PLS. The other spot to start from is the PLS (more on that later). The visor was on the side of a dirt road leading up to the summit. There were many children's footprints around that area. I went back to the group's camp and asked for all the shoes in camp so we could use the process of elimination to determine Gregory's shoeprint. We were told that the other children in camp had spent some time searching, resulting in many footprints up this road and down from camp, past the PLS, on another dirt road.

Darkness quickly overcame us and we concentrated our efforts on these dirt roads, working the prints. One team on the left berm, one in the middle, and one on the right berm. Many vehicles had, and were, driving up these roads, obliterating most everything, making our work go very slowly.

To Gregory's favor the weather was in the seventies. After many hours of fruitless searching, we decided that if he was on the mountain he was probably sleeping comfortably. At almost 4:00 am we opted to get some sleep for a fresh start at about 6:00 am.

Gregory's mother had come up to the camp. She did some calling around and I assume someone told her the search had been on for about twelve hours. She told us her son had been educated about strangers and she felt he may not respond to searcher's calls. I had explained earlier to the adults in camp that Gregory probably would be up and moving in the early dawn when it was the coldest, and first daylight appeared. I also explained that we would most likely see him by air from the helicopter within the first two hours of flight.

Six a.m. came soon enough for me as I did not sleep well. I'm sure the other RMRU team members on this call, Rick Pohlers, Kevin Walker, Steve Bryant, Glenn Henderson, Rob Gardner, Walt Walker, and John Dew, slept fitfully also. We resumed the search, concentrating on the PLS and all the terrain downhill from there. We all had ideas as to where to search. Probability said Gregory had not made it up to the dirt road or he would have seen camp, and most likely arrived

there. Further, there was no significant evidence to support that he was on either dirt road.

We had Rob Gardner and John Dew go down to the highway to meet the helicopter at base. They were flying when the foot search restarted. (Hurry up and find this little boy before the chopper does, you guys!).



Kevin Walker

PRIDE IN WHAT WE DO - A very proud RMRU member by the name of Joe Erickson prods young Gregory into smiling just before the helicopter lifted off to fly Greg back to base camp and his waiting mother. Seated on either side of Gregory are John Dew and Rob Gardner, who were flying as observers when Joe located the missing boy in dense brush below Thomas Mountain.

Glenn Henderson and I started down a minor drainage looking and calling. Moments later I yelled over to Glenn that I heard a

faint voice in the distance, downhill and a little to the north. I heard the voice again and reported into the radio somewhat excitedly that I had voice contact. The response was delayed, but the expected "where" came back. I really didn't know exactly where I was, so I said "downhill from the PLS." This didn't help much as this is big country, with several drainages leading away from the PLS. Walt came back on the radio and said guide the helicopter in. I couldn't because I was under trees and brush, running full steam in the direction of the voice. The helicopter was out of my sight. The voice was more distinct now and I could yell to Gregory telling him to stay where he was.

Gregory had found some large rocks for shelter. I was about twenty yards away now, separated from the little lad by some dense brush. The chopper had made it's way over and with the help of the men in the helicopter I found my way around the brush. When I reached Gregory and began to talk with him, I said his mother was looking for him, and he began questioning me. "What's her name," he said. "I don't know" was my response. He said, "What does she look like?" So I described her and he came right along. We crawled under some bushes to where the chopper had set down in a small clearing. Just then Glenn and Kevin popped out of the

surrounding brush, evidently led by the sounds of the chopper.

We flew Gregory down to base and waited for his mother to arrive. Gregory was refueled with many cups of hot chocolate and warmed up. I had gotten a ride to retrieve my car and missed the happy reunion. However, when I showed up at the Garner Valley fire station where everyone was gathering, Gregory stood up and announced to his mother, "that's the man who saved me," as he walked over to me. And, that six year old boy shook my hand and said, "thank YOU."

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.