

Young man stuck on cliff

March 2, 1986
Northeast of Mecca
1986-007

By Joe Erickson

We were called to this mission to assist the CDF in extricating a young teenager off of a fairly high angle dirt cliff. The area was east of the Salton Sea, outside of Mecca in Box Canyon (highway 195), also known as the Mecca Mud Hills.

The Mecca Mud Hills were first formed as the ancient sea floor of the Gulf of California (before Lake Cahuilla or the Salton Sea). The Gulf shrank, leaving layers and layers of silt, dirt and other stuff. Uplifting occurred, tilting the large slabs into steep angles somewhat like dishes in a dishwasher. Wind and water erosion cleaned out the area between the slabs leaving little washes with steep high cliffs. Some of the cliff sides have broken and fallen leaving some grottos and caves that are fun to explore.

Our friend had climbed along a ridge and got stuck half way down, unable to continue because these dirt cliffs are very unstable, sometimes breaking under any weight.

The CDF personnel had gotten a rope and waist belt to him and somehow he had it on. If he had fallen this could have saved his life if not serious injury. But how to get him down, without unduly risking their lives or his was the big issue that evening.



Jim Patrotila

TECHNICAL DIRT - Who ever said that a little dirt and mud could never hurt you was way out of line. In this series of photos 16 year old David Ochoa is seen being first tied in to safety lines by RMRU member Bernie McIvov, then being belayed by RMRU personnel across the section that had given way behind David hours earlier, and finally back up to the ridgetop and safety. David indeed was a lucky young man, as the photos do not show that David, CDF and RMRU personnel were better than 100 vertical feet above the canyon floor.

When we arrived we could see how challenging and dangerous this was going to be. Fellow team member Rob Gardner had arrived earlier, as he lives in the desert. Rob had hiked over to where he could see David Ochoa age 16 of Indio clinging to the dirt cliff. Rob returned to the road and waited. When the vans arrived, Rob told us of the situation, and soon gear was out and we were on our way over the short distance to where David was, and then up onto the ridge. I looked on the ridge top to try and find a place to set up anchors, but was unable to find anything. Walt and Kevin went down to where the CDF had tossed over the rope to David. Kevin and Walt toyed with several ideas and finally came up with the plan of sending a person across the treacherous slope on belay, secure the line at the other end, and then bring David back across. It was decided that Bernie MCIIVOY would go across, so Bernie put his harness on and got together the gear that he would need as the rest of us prepared rigging and anchors for the rescue operation. Once all was ready, Bernie clipped in to the belay line and carefully set out across where there was once a wide ledge. With Bern's high skill at climbing it took him little time to get to David. Quickly and efficiently Bernie set up an anchor above him, tied David in, and was ready to go. With Walt and Bill Blaschko at one end holding David on belay, and Bernie at the other, David started across. Once David was past the broken section of cliff, he almost leaped into the arms of Walt and Bill. David was helped up to the ridge as Bernie started back across. As Bernie returned some more of the ledge broke away which made for some moderate excitement for all concerned.

David was helped back to the highway as we packed up and then ultimately returned to the vans ourselves. During the mission, we had learned of another request for assistance, so we passed on getting a meal, and headed back to Indio

to find out more about the next call (see Mission No. [1986-008](#)).

On behalf of RMRU I would like to say thank you to the supervision and field personnel from the Sheriff's Department, and especially to the California Division of Forestry for doing a top-notch job of protecting David Ochoa from injury after he became stranded. Hey guys, job well done.

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.