

Stranded climber

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Tahquitz Rock
1987-006

By Walt Walker

It was late in the afternoon when I was contacted by the Hemet station of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department that they had received a report of an individual calling for help from somewhere up on Tahquitz Rock. Since there was the possibility of injury and there was not much more daylight, I requested the use of a helicopter. The call-out procedure was put into motion and I quickly drove home, changed into my uniform, loaded my gear and drove over and picked up the unit's No. 2 van.

As I arrived at the camp Maranatha ball field (used as a heliport) I was met by fellow RMRU member Ron Pierson. We discussed the situation and started pulling gear out of the van. Deputy Reed advised us that Western Helicopters of Rialto had dispatched pilot Dorcey Wingo in a Bell 206. Since Ron was a climber and knew the rock well, I decided that he and I would go on the first flight. We were packed and ready when the bird arrived.

Ron and I quickly walked over to the Jet Ranger and I explained the details of the mission to Dorcey. With the daylight falling fast we took off immediately and headed up towards Tahquitz Rock. We spotted the solo climber on the first pitch of the Trough. Since Dorcey was new to the area I asked him to circle back around to Lunch Rock, a 60 foot tall boulder at the base of the rock, to see if he thought we could use it as a helispot. (Helispot – usually a boulder large enough to put one skid down sometimes both skids, but power must be continuously held as you cannot actually land.) After one pass Dorcey headed into the rock, placed both skids on the rock, and he gave the nod for Ron and I to climb out. I slid out and Ron started passing packs and gear to me. Ron slid out and we both crouched down and I gave the thumbs up signal to Dorcey. Ron and I climbed down off the rock and started over towards the Trough as Dorcey returned to Camp Maranatha to pick up RMRU members Jim Fairchild and Bud White.

Since there was a fair amount of snow in the shady areas Ron and I had to carefully traverse ledges that had patches of snow and ice on them. We worked our way to within about 100 feet of the Trough route. We made voice contact and found out later that the climber was not injured, just stranded. About 60 feet of a 50 degree slope of hard crusted snow was the next problem. I set up a belay and Ron carefully

led across the steep slope. Getting across the slope he climbed upward until he found a spot that he could place some chocks and set up a belay for me. Ron belayed me over to him and I clipped in to the anchors. Jim and Bud were dropped off at Lunch Rock and while Dorcey headed back, Ron and I discussed the situation and he said that he could rock climb the route with no major problems. I decided that since it was almost dark and the climber was not injured we would not have any more members flown in.

Ron started climbing the route with his boot soles wet and having to contend with some ice on the rock and in the cracks. He placed a few chocks for protection as he led up to the ledge where the 30 year old Michael DePatie was waiting. (Ron made that somewhat dangerous climb look easy but it was only because of his skill as a mountaineer.) When Ron got to Michael he found a somewhat embarrassed and cold subject who had climbed up the Trough route without a rope and had become stranded by ice on the ledges.

The next problem was setting up some anchors to use so that Michael and Ron could rappel down. Ron solved that problem and assisted Michael in getting ready to descend. Michael rappelled down to me and I clipped him into the anchor and Ron then Rappelled down. Ron had set up a double rope for the rappel and we had some anxious moments as we started to pull the rope down and it felt like it had become stuck. With another hard pull the rope became loose and slid down to us.

Ron then led back across the steep slope to the first belay spot and we both belayed Michael across. Ron then belayed me back across. I then belayed first Ron and then Michael across a ledge and a small chimney crack. One more set of belays across some more ledges found us off the snow and we were met by Jim and Bud. We then carefully hiked down to lunch Rock and radioed bas that we were ready to be picked up.

It was now dark and there was about a 3 to 5 mph wind blowing across the face of the rock. We had planned with Dorcey that we would use flashlight wands to help in guiding him to the helispot. We also used Jim's new bright Tekna light to illuminate a large pine tree that was fairly close to the rock. As Dorcey flew towards us I advised him of the wind and our plan for loading the bird. Bud and Michael would be flown out first, then Jim with all the extra gear and finally Ron and I.

When Dorcey was about 500 feet out I turned on the light wands and held them horizontally in my outstretched arms. Dorcey turned on the landing lights and I began motioning to him with the wands. The powerful bird softly touched down and I signaled for Dorcey to hold and placed a foot on the skid to assist in keeping the bird there. Bud and Michael climbed aboard and I signaled for Dorcey to lift off. We repeated the process two more times and we were all back to Camp Maranatha by 10 p.m. I personally would like to thank Dorcey Wingo for some very fine flying under difficult conditions.

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.