



## Man signaled rescue crews with fire, turned into forest fire

**July 1, 2000**  
**Skyline Trail**  
**2000-017**

By Pete Carlson

On Saturday July 1 at 10:00pm a page went out for a overdue hiker on the Skyline Trail. Sean Stewart, 32, of Cathedral City, went for a day hike up the Skyline Trail from Palm Springs to the Tramway. He did not know the Tramway was closed for maintenance work. He left at 10:00 am on Sat. with 2 gallons of water and a day pack. In the afternoon he ran out of water around the 5,800 foot level. He then turned to go down to Tahquitz Canyon to get water. He got lost and spent the night out. The day time temp was around 100 degrees and the night time lows where around 70 degrees. The problem for everyone was going to be the heat.

RMRU sent two teams up the Skyline Trail starting at 1:00am. Around 3:30 a team of 4 members was at 4500 feet. There they stopped to get a few hours sleep. A team of State Park Rangers had started down from Long Valley, The Tramway upper station, and stopped at 6,500 foot level. At first light the RMRU team started up hoping to find Stewart. The RMRU team found one set of tracks going up that seem to match the subjects. We got the CHP helicopter and they pickup two RMRU members from the 4 on the tracks and took them up to Long Valley to check for tracks. Around 5800 feet the tracks left the trail and were hard to follow. Two more RMRU members were taken from Base up to the 5800 foot level by helicopter.

We also had the 4 Hemet SAR people who were sent to the lower tramway to check bottom area in case the subject had tried to hike down under the tramway. We also had the Desert SAR team with us. We got 7 of the Desert Members ready to be flown in on a ridge area above Tahquitz Canyon to descend into the Canyon by different routes and look for tracks. The Tribal Rangers who patrol the bottom of Tahquitz Canyon also were very helpful and sent one of their Rangers up with the Desert Team Members to help them find the best places to go and avoid the hard places.

While we were flying them onto the ridge the Helicopter spotted smoke from the Canyon bottom. As we all watched from base the smoke turned into an out-of-control forest fire within 2 minutes. The CHP helicopter spotted Stewart by the edge of the fire but could not find a place to pick him up. As the CHP helicopter returned to base we contacted CDF and the air tankers at Hemet-Ryan airport to start up and come put out the fire.

The CHP came back to the Landing Zone and pulled all extra gear out of the ship and prepared their long line to try and lift Stewart out on a 100 foot steel cable. Within minutes they were back in the air heading back up the Canyon. They dropped the cable down to Stewart with a full body harness on the end. All he had to do was step into the body harness and clip it shut. But the fire and smoke made this very difficult. Stewart, clad in a Superman-logo tank top, had to jump through some flames to get the harness. He was into it in less than 60 seconds and they lifted him out. He got quite a ride on the end of a 100 foot cable from the canyon back to the Landing Zone.



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They slowly put him on the ground as RMRU members unclipped him from the Helicopter and walked him to the Medics who checked him out. The subject was out but we still had 8 SAR people on the mountain above the forest fire. Again the CHP bird quickly got ready and started flying them out in groups of two.

In the mean time CDF was on scene as well as 3 fire crews, two water dropping helicopters and air tankers from Hemet-Ryan were starting fire retardant drops on the fire. By 3:00pm all SAR teams were off the mountain and we left the scene to CDF to get the fire out. They were already getting it under control as we left. The fire ended up burning at least 20 acres by late Sunday.



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This was quite a mission involving multiple teams and at the end the

CDF fire crews. Everything went very well and everyone worked well together. The CHP helicopter and its crew did a excellent job in making this mission work and pulling Stewart out of the canyon in the middle of a forest fire.

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.