

Climbers stranded by darkness and bad weather

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Tahquitz Rock
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By Glenn Henderson

November 28, 2002, Thanksgiving Day, indeed a day to be thankful for. My family and I spent Thanksgiving at my sister's house in Fountain Valley. I had been home for about 5 minutes when the phone rang. Steve Bryant was calling to say, "Sorry, but we have a mission on Tahquitz Rock". It seems that five climbers decided to climb two routes on Tahquitz Rock on Thanksgiving Day. They split up into two groups with three of them climbing White Maiden's Walkaway, rated 5.1, leaving Sophorn Cheam and Kjetin Kolin to climb Angel's Fright, rated 5.4. They started climbing at 10:30 AM. The trio topped out at 5:00PM and saw their friends on the last pitch to the friction route to the top, which is about 400 feet off the ground. When their friends didn't return after dark they called for help.

I couldn't believe anyone was climbing today since the weather forecast was for high winds, cold, and rain/snow. The report from Steve was that it was snowing in Idyllwild. I told Steve that I would pick up the rescue van and respond as quickly as possible. Since both my sons were home at the time I pressed both of them into service. Travis, who is already a team member, was responding but Jeremy was 3volunteered 4. We arrived at Humber Park at 8:00PM. Jim Fairchild, Ralph Hoetger and Darrell Bell were already there. The report from the R P's was that they believed their friends were on top but were not sure how to get down in the dark. Since Jim was operation's leader, Darrell was communications and Ralph had an injured arm, Travis, Jeremy, and I headed up the climbers trail to Tahquitz Rock. It was very windy and starting a light rain when we left.

After hiking for about 40 minutes we stopped to give a shout to see if we could get a response. To our amazement we did! My spirits rose considerably as we were only half way to the rock. I figured they must be at Lunch Rock so we would be back to base camp in no time. WRONG! We called base and told them that we had voice contact with someone. We continued to shout to them as we got nearer but with the wind picking up we couldn't get a fix on their position. When we got to lunch rock we realized that they were not at Lunch rock and must not be on top of Tahquitz as there was no way we could have heard them in the wind from the top. They must still be on Angel's Fright. We continued south around the base of Tahquitz to get to the top. We ran into a couple of inches of snow, which increased the higher we got. The wind was not too bad on the south side but the closer we got to the saddle, which led to the summit, we could hear

the wind howling on top. Since we lost a lot of time around Lunch Rock yelling, trying to find out where our two climbers were it was almost 11:00 PM when we got to the saddle. The wind was fierce with snow and ice covering the rocks. We could not get to the top as I made a rookie mistake and did not bring a rope. Since Travis and Jeremy had to be at work the next morning, I sent them back and waited for another team of 5 that was bringing in gear to do a raise if necessary.

After a short wait team members Rick Maschek, Will Carlson, Brad Scott, Rob May, and Dino Esades arrived carrying huge backpacks of gear. Since we were below the saddle we put all our warmest clothing and rescue harnesses on. Once to the saddle we belayed each other through the snow and ice to the top. We estimated the wind to be around 25 to 30 mph and the temperature around 25F. With the wind the temp was around 0 to 10F. It was really cold.

We immediately started setting up anchors and sent Will down to what we thought was the friction route to the top of Angel's Fright climb. Another mistake as we rappelled down the wrong side. We had to jummar back up the rope, haul all our gear back to the top and re-set our anchors to the north of our position.

After re-setting our anchors Will was again lowered 150 feet down the face. He carried another 150 feet of rope, which he anchored and rappelled down another 150 feet. This 300 feet is the friction route that many climbs end in and is an easy unroped climb to the top on a normal, dry, sunny day. With the ice on the rock it was not an option to do it unroped. Rick then went next with another rope and joined Will. They added another 150 feet of rope to descend another rope length. They made were finally able to make voice contact with our two subjects but could not ascertain exactly where they were or their condition due to the high wind. It was now nearing 5:00 AM and all of us were worried about our subjects being hypothermic. We needed to get them out as quickly as possible but we were all becoming fairly spent and wanted more manpower. More calls were sent out but only got two more field members to respond. I called base and told them to call Sierra Madre Search and Rescue. They immediately sent 8 members.

Star 80, our Sheriff's department helicopter, was alerted but due to the high winds, I felt that it was too risky to chance it. Pilot Steve Bertling and observer/winchman John Irish said that they would like to fly up and take a look. Thank God that they did. When they arrived at our position they were able to tell Rick where our two subjects were. They were also able to use their loudhailer and ask for thumbs up from each as to their condition. We got only one thumb up with the other subject not responding. This increased our level of concern so Rick, under Star 80's guidance was able to be lowered directly to their position. Rick found them shivering uncontrollably and with extremely cold hands and feet. They would be unable to climb out even with our assistance. Since the wind had inexplicably died down Star 80 was able to lower their cable and winch each of them out and fly them to the county park in Idyllwild. Michael George and the Sierra Madre team members met them at the park and took over with the rewarming process. During their evaluation it was found that Sophorn had taken a fall and injured her hands and had abrasions on both legs. After 30 minutes of

rewarming they decided to go AMA (against medical advice) and return to their friends house in Idyllwild.

Meanwhile Steve offered to fly our gear off the top of Tahquitz. We were extremely excited to not have to carry all that gear back down the mountain and gratefully accepted. I told them it would be about 30 minutes so they shut down in the county park. It turned out to be over 60 minutes during which time the wind increased, the clouds descended and it started to snow. With much regret we told Steve that it would not be worth the risk to fly out gear. We thanked them for their assistance and packed up to start the long decent back to Humber Park. During this time team member Dave Webb had hiked up to the saddle alone to help out with whatever needed to be done. When it was learned that we would need to carry all the gear out again Michael George and all 8 members of Sierra Madre started hiking in to meet us and help transport gear. After a long cold night it was truly a blessing to see the help offered by our team members and Sierra Madre. We all arrived back in base camp at 1:30 in the afternoon.

As I started this story it was indeed a Thanksgiving Day. Our Thanks for Steve and John in Star 80, Sierra Madre Search and Rescue members, the break in the wind allowing Star 80 to winch our subjects out and our team members to be able to help our two subjects in need of help.

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.