

## Two Stranded Hikers on Skyline Trail

**January 11, 2003**  
**Skyline Trail**  
**2003-002**

By Glenn Henderson

Saturday and Sunday, January 11-12, was our annual winter shakedown training. I attended the California Region Mountain Rescue Association meeting in Sierra Madre so I didn't get to the training until 4 P.M. I met the team practicing a raise near the upper Palm Springs Tramway. We finished the raise and went to have dinner at the upper tram restaurant. At about 7:30 a Forest Service ranger approached us and said that we



may have a mission. The wife of one of two men hiking up the Skyline Trail from Palm Springs to the Upper tram reported that they were overdue. While we were talking with the ranger the wife approached us and said that they had just called via cell phone and were stuck in snow just below the tram. They said that they could hear the tram. Steve Bryant called the sheriff 2s department and got the authorization to do the mission. We returned to the chute below the tram where we had just been practicing. Max Brummett, Rob May and I packed up to descend the chute. We kept the rest of the team at the top of the chute as reserves until we found the two hikers. We hoped that they were indeed as close to the tram as they thought but from previous missions knew that you can hear the tram from a long ways down the trail. We took extra food, water, clothing, and two sets of instep crampons in addition to ropes, and technical gear if needed. We just started to descend the chute when we got a radio call that the men had called again and told the wife that they were hanging onto a tree and were concerned that if they let go that they would be seriously injured or worse. This lent a greater urgency to our mission.

We kept going down the chute through a mixture of thigh deep snow and hard ice. Crampons were a necessity. I kept saying to Max and Rob that we should turn to the right after a while on the trail but Max kept saying not yet. Good thing I

listened to Max because he hit the trail perfectly. We started following the trail south shouting as we went. We quickly made voice contact but were unable to pinpoint their location.

While we had been descending base camp had been busy. They called the sheriff 2s aviation unit and they launched their helicopter. We knew our two hikers had a flashlight with a little life left in it so we radioed base camp and had the wife call them with instructions to save the battery until they heard the helicopter. When Star 95 arrived they immediately saw us using their night vision goggles. They then spotted the two stranded hikers, put their spotlight on them and hovered above them until we were able to climb up to them. They were about 75% of a mile further down the trail but quite a ways up above the trail. Our two subjects were in good shape but starting to get cold. We thanked Star 95 and they returned to Hemet Ryan Airbase. The helicopter saved us countless time searching because shouting voices echoes all around the canyons making it difficult to pinpoint where they come from. Our two hikers, Josh Lovingfoss and Akin Hammond were indeed in a precarious spot sitting on a tree in an area just able to support two people. We got clothes on them and then decided how to get them out. The two had been hiking for some time in snow when it started to get icy. They looked up and thought that they could hike straight up to the top and cut off the last 1.5 miles of trail. Instead they realized that the top was nowhere near and to go down could be fatal. Wisely they stayed put and called for help. We decided to lower them back to the trail and hike them back to Palm Springs rather than go back to the top since they were not dressed to go through the deep snow and patches of ice that would be waiting for us. We quickly rigged up sit harnesses on them and set up a belay system to lower them to the trail. I took 4 lowers using a 150-foot rope each time to get them back to the trail, 500 feet! We were impressed with their climbing ability given their lack of proper equipment to climb what they did.

Once we got back to the trail we radioed base that we were on the trail and headed back to Palm Springs. If you have ever hiked the Skyline Trail you know that the trail is ALL up going up and ALL down going down. Palm Springs is about 400 feet above sea level while the upper tram is about 8500 feet. Needless to say it was a very long night. We finally arrived in Palm Springs at 7:00 A.M. with knees that had turned to jelly. Akin and Josh were great hiking companions. They never complained and helped carry some of the gear out. Remember that while Max, Rob, and I hiked 11 miles down the mountain they hiked 9 1/2 miles up and 9 1/2 miles down, all in less than 24 hours!

Since we had been up all night and most of the team that camped near the upper tram did not get much if any sleep listening to our progress down the mountain, Sunday 2s training was called off. We gathered in Palm Springs for breakfast, sorted gear in the parking lot, and headed home for some sleep.

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.