

Man Missing for 5 Days

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Joshua Tree National Park
2003-009

By Jeri Sanchez

The fact that Marvin Matsumoto was found alive is quite an amazing story.

Riverside Mountain Rescue Team members were called to Joshua Tree National Park to assist in the search for Marvin Matsumoto. He was hiking with his 16-year-old son, Mark, on Monday when the two split up near Barker Dam on a one-mile loop trail. On Monday April 21, 2003, Marvin was reported missing when he did not arrive at the pair's prearranged meeting place. On Wednesday night, April 23th, RMRU was called to help the National Park Service and San Bernardino Rescue teams.



Thursday we searched most of the day and early evening. No sign.

On Friday things were looking grim. The Park Service and San Bernardino Sheriff Department organized the search and gave us, Will Carlson, Kirk Cloyd, and (me) Jeri Sanchez, our assignment. We had been searching all morning with a search dog team and returned to base camp around 10:30 AM. We were ready for our next assignment.

William was very interested in getting our team WAY out there, which made me run through reasons I shouldn't go with 2 young mountain climbers. We were sent to an area that was going to be difficult to get to. Will Carlson is an 18-year-old High school student from Arrowhead, who ditched school to be at the search. Will has 6 years experience rock climbing and was our self-appointed team leader.

We were lucky enough to travel across the designated heliport, William was determined we needed a helicopter ride; he went to ask about getting us to our location. There were no helicopters available. We started on our way. However,

within 2 minutes a helicopter flew in, and it was the Riverside County Sheriff Helicopter. The same team we trained with 3 weeks ago. Now why did I lighten my pack and take out my helicopter equipment, stupid me. They took pity on us and loaded us into their helicopter and were nice enough to lend me a helmet.

The terrain would not allow the pilot to drop us very close to our search area so he put us in about a mile from where we were to begin our search. Kirk and I got out our GPS systems, now, where was that "ON" button. I bragged about how I won the SAR City GPS contest a few years back, as I was trying to remember how to plot the "goto" coordinates, hmmm?? My mind questioned, when was the last time I used this thing?!

We all agreed where we needed to get to and inputted the numbers; however, we ended up about 1/4 mile north of where we wanted to be. How could that be? I couldn't recheck my GPS because it had taken a header out of my chest pack and bounced off a boulder, ouch! Taking another look at the map and Kirk's remaining GPS, we reevaluated our location and plotted a plan to get to our search area. I was trying to find a flat route, (not likely) Will decided we needed to go up this steep drainage, oh goody.

"Spiderman", Will, was at the lead as I continually questioned whether this route was logical because there was no way that a 60-year-old man would be climbing in this difficult terrain. (which later turned out to be true, he was crawling not climbing).

We climbed through boulder crevasses on our hands and knees; we lifted and pulled each other through high and steep areas (well, OK, Kirk and Will mainly were helping me). Our goal was to get to the top where we were going to start our search. I secretly hoped, OKI was complaining a lot, that it would flatten out after we got to the top. As we were near the top, I made another comment (there were many) about how there is no way a 60-year-old with no previous climbing experience would be in this area.

After saying that, I, without much force, called out Marvin's name. And that's when we heard Marvin call back, Kirk and I, in shock, stood staring at each other, for a few seconds, our thoughts racing, was that another searcher playing a trick on us??. Kirk called out again, and Marvin responded. Will yelled out, "we got him!!" My thought was, "that is Marvin" and he was within 30 feet of us.

We all hit a new adrenaline high and scrambled over huge boulders to get around to where we could see him. He was lying on his side down at the bottom of a 12-foot drop. I was able to slide down one side and jump into the hole, while "Spiderman", jumping boulders at a single bound went up to try and make radio contact.

I sat with Marvin at the bottom of that hole assessing his injuries and being totally amazed that we found him. He was ALIVE!! And he was able to talk with me. After a few sips of water he asked about his son. I reassured him that his family was fine and

waiting for him. We provided first aid until a helicopter brought more medical supplies. Marvin was very cold and dehydrated (5 days with no water will do that to you). We put our jackets over him, started an IV to get fluids going in, and splinted his badly bruised and injured ankle. He had a head injury and was scraped up pretty bad, but overall, I told Marvin he looked really good, and he was a lucky man.

Only 2 rescue workers would fit in the hole with Marvin and the next challenge was getting him up to a point where the helicopter could lift him.

San Bernardino Sheriff Paramedic "Tim" from the rescue helicopter and I worked on getting Marvin into a scoop device he would lay on before we could place him into the litter. Kirk and Will had set up a pulley system. We had asked for more technical rescue support. It was going to be difficult for them to get there in a timely manner, and we sure weren't waiting around for them.

We packaged Marvin. That was the first time I had to splint an ankle while laying on my stomach, working with only a few inches of clearance, trying not to tangle the duck tape or get sand all over it. (Remind me to test for that on the next emergency responder course.)

We had to move Marvin through a hole to get him turned around so we could lift him up vertically. But when it came time to lift him, Marvin's medical condition deteriorated rapidly. The color of his skin turned ashen gray, and his body was getting limp, he could no longer respond to verbal commands to open his eyes.

We were having difficulty getting the metal litter over the granite wall; it was sticking on a lip. Kirk and Will pulled and Tim and I pushed. The thing was stuck, and Marvin did not look good. Tim wanted me to get up on top and help them pull, as I tried to find a way to get back up I wondered, "How the heck did I get down here?? Luckily, the TV news cut off before showing the world I couldn't get up there. Will and Kirk were able to overcome the difficulty and Marvin popped up to the surface. Marvin's condition improved when Will took the bottom of the litter and held it up to improve blood flow to Marvin's vital organs. Then we made sure Marvin was secure for his helicopter ride and off they went to Desert hospital.

WOW. We stood on that granite rock in total amazement watching the helicopter fly off. We made a big group hug, shook hands and patted each other on the back. Then it was silent. The buzz of the helicopters was gone, we were out of radio contact, and we were faced with the fact that we still had to hike ALL the way out of here!!

Spiderman went up to check out the possibility of going up and over the boulders. Kirk and I sat back and wondered why we weren't in better shape. All the time hoping we didn't have to climb up any more boulders. Luckily, Will determined that "up" did not look good, we were going out the same way we came in, oh goody.

Going down meant we would have a longer walk out, but easier than climbing. And

after all, Will had to conserve energy he had a 24-hour bike race the next day. We walked, crawled, shimmed and jumped down to get off that wonderland of rocks. I was glad to see a nice flat trail even though it was sand and 50,000 miles out of our way.

We made it out to the Boy Scout trail and walked along in disbelief at Marvin's amazing luck and ours as we watched a picturesque sunset. We recounted the chain of events that led us to Marvin: an unexpected helicopter ride to an area still a mile away from our search area, one wrong number inputted into a GPS taking us about 1/4 mile north of where we were suppose to be. Then tracking up a steep boulder filled wash to even get into our search area. Talking about how there was no way a 60-year old man would be in this area, then calling out his name with no expectation. (Remember that when you're searching in the wrong place.)

We will never forget those few seconds of disbelief and shock when he answered back.

We were able to visit Marvin in the hospital a week after the rescue, and he is recovering well. His body temperature was 86 degrees on admission, he was severely dehydrated and he had sustained a fractured right ankle and a compression fracture in his lumbar spine. He was in kidney failure, which was reversed fairly quickly. His doctor said it was a miracle he survived.

William took a group out to the area where Marvin was found and they backtracked and were able to follow Marvin's footprints (backwards). Marvin had fallen into a cave system under the huge boulders, there were drag marks where he crawled along in the dark. There were pools of standing water within a few feet of where he passed, but because of his head injury, he never saw them or doesn't remember. His first question to us was "How far off the trail was I??" Will told him "about 100ft".

The miracle was both finding him alive and finding him at all.

I think I'll have my helmet with me next time, you just never know when you'll be flyin high!

RMRU Members Present: William Carlson, Kirk Cloyd, Jeri Sanchez

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.