



Two Missing Hikers on Mount San Jacinto

May 30th, 2005

Palm Springs Tram, Mount San Jacinto State Park

2005-019

by Patrick McCurdy

At ten after ten, just moments before going to bed on the last day of a three-day weekend, the dreaded pager went off. "Mission - two lost hikers, meet at the PST." RMRU had already been in the field twice in the previous four days, and none of us relished the idea of a nighttime search in the snow-covered high country, but we nonetheless had an excellent response and shortly thereafter had ten members packing their backpacks in the parking lot of the Palm Springs Tram.

Upon arrival at the top of the tram (whose operators once again were very accommodating in running extra tram cars for us after their normal closing time) it was discovered that the subjects had hiked to San Jacinto Peak and not returned. Jim Fairchild made cell phone contact with them to better determine their location and moments later a "bash team" comprised of some of our strongest hikers (Lee Arnson, Tony Sandrini, and Jim Manues) was out the door and on its way. I swear there were vapor trails behind them when those three blasted out the door and headed up the trail!

Jim Fairchild continued to gather as much information as possible in order to, with the help of Grace Manues, direct operations from the tram's Mountain Station. With more information and more RMRU members arriving at the base, the second team headed out to search. This team included Deano Esades, Travis Henderson, Bill Morris, Jeri Sanchez, and myself.

We hiked up the Sid Davis drainage to Tamarack Valley, and then crossed over to the upper end of Round Valley meeting up at the ranger hut with the bash team who had been searching up on Wellman's Divide. By 4:30 AM Tony and Lee had to leave to make it to work (search by night and work by day!), so Jim M. hiked back with them to the tram, while my team hunkered down to get 60-90 minutes of rest waiting for the sun to come up.

With the first rays of light coming up over the desert, myself, Travis and Jeri started to ascend the trail to Wellman's Divide, while Deano and Bill waited at the bottom of that drainage in case the subjects hiked out on their own. We were constantly yelling for Andy or Amber and, about thirty minutes up the trail, we got a response.

Though we couldn't understand what they were saying, they were definitely calling back when we yelled their names.

From the direction of their voices, we determined they were on the steep slope above us, and below Jean Peak. We left the trail and headed due west, straight up the slope.

Our methodical search pace from earlier was quickly replaced by the fastest pace we could muster, considering the slope. Shortly after crossing over the trail between Wellman's Divide and San Jacinto Peak, I was able to establish positive voice contact. The people answering our calls were definitely Andy and Amber, and they were not injured. I finally was able to see them and shortly thereafter was standing with them, huffing and puffing at 10,040 feet elevation.

They were uninjured, but tired, cold, hungry, and dehydrated. We at first considered a helicopter extraction, as there was a San Bernardino bird on order. Jeri and Travis arrived quickly, however, and the subject's attitudes improved dramatically with warm jackets, clean dry socks, snow pants, food and water.

As we evaluated their condition, they related their story. They had apparently made San Jacinto Peak the previous night about dark. On the way back down they missed the point where the trail tees east and west, instead following the ridge south towards Jean Peak. They bivvied just south of Jean, on the west side of the ridge, though they reported to Jim Fairchild on the cell phone that they were looking at the lights of Palm Springs (which was east of their location). They started a fire with anything they had that would burn. They burnt the pockets off their pants, the pockets off their jackets, their first aid kit, and, inadvertently, Amber's socks! When the sun came up in the morning they realized their mistake, hiked up to the top of the ridge and began to slide down on their butts.

After pumping as much food and water into them as we could in an hour (Jeri's pack is a seemingly bottomless pit of energy food and Gatorade mix!), Andy and Amber felt good enough to walk out. With our crampons on their feet and Travis leading the way down, we took our time with a slow, careful descent. Our own Riverside Sheriff's helicopter, Star 91, came overhead as we got down to Round Valley, and offered to land there and shuttle us off the mountain. We caucused and decided that all of us, particularly Amber and Andy, were feeling strong enough to walk out on our own. About an hour later we were walking up the long concrete ramp to the tram's Mountain Station.

It's always a pleasure when everyone, including the subjects, makes it back to base camp and can laugh and joke about the experience. It was pointed out that this was my first "find" (the first time I was the first team member to the subjects.) While there is a certain amount of pride (and bragging rights!) associated with that, it is also a bit of a misnomer. Every search is a team effort and no one member deserves more credit than the other team members present. Every RMRU member who

participated in this search should take equal pride in the rescue of Andy and Amber.

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.