



Five Teens Missing Following Car Wreck

December 7th, 2006
Tenaja Road area, Cleveland National Forest
2006-027

by Patrick McCurdy

On the evening of Wednesday, December 6th, four boys, aged 18 to 19, and a 15-year-old girl decided to mix alcohol, a pick-up truck, and a dirt road at night. Bad combination.

RMRU was alerted at 7 a.m. and responded to the Riverside Sheriff's Office (RSO) substation in Lake Elsinore to search for a wrecked vehicle somewhere in the Tenaja Falls area of the Cleveland National Forest. Some of the kids had stayed with the vehicle, but at least two had hiked to get cell phone coverage to call for help and had subsequently become lost. All of this had been relayed to RSO through a friend who had spoken to the missing kids before getting cut off when their cell phone died at 3 a.m.

By 8:30 we had Jim and Grace Manues, John Dempsey, Liz Sanz, Jim Bakos, Ray Hussey, Dana Potts, and myself prepared to go into the field. We were faced with finding two different parties of lost kids who could be anywhere within a huge search area. After being briefed by Detective Sergeant Evan Petersen, we used John Dempsey's knowledge of the area to plan search assignments for the team, all of which would initially be searching roads with personal four-wheel-drive vehicles.

As John came up with search assignments, I listed our resources and divided the group into three teams, and Grace continued to gather information from the detectives working the case. As Jim Bakos was still en route with the team vehicle, we sent him straight to a field location on Tenaja Road where he could set up a field operations command post. With John's search assignments, I assigned three field teams which were deployed to their search areas. My plan was to stay at the sheriff's station until Jim Bakos got the field command post set up, then go into the field myself.

RSO meanwhile was pulling out all the stops. A team of deputies was making phone calls to family and friends to try to get more information about where the kids might be. Detective Petersen was coordinating with both Orange and San Diego Counties (the search was in an area near where those two counties abut Riverside County), U.S. Forest Service, California Department of Forestry, and the California Highway Patrol (CHP). CHP was going to provide one helicopter and one fixed-wing aircraft, while RSO was going to bring two of their own helicopters in on the search (both a CHP helicopter

and an RSO helicopter had made preliminary searches before daylight without results).

Just as our teams were getting to their assigned search areas, a U.S. Forest Service crew found all the kids near their vehicle at 9:45. Their vehicle had become stuck on Margarita Truck Trail near Sky Ranch, just inside San Diego County. None of the kids were injured. They were transported to waiting Sheriff's vehicles and brought back to the Lake Elsinore station for a dreaded meeting with parents and sheriff's detectives.

All RMRU field teams returned to Elsinore and got a bite to eat before heading home.

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.