



## Hiker Missing In Snowstorm

**December 9, 2006**  
**South Ridge Trail**  
**2006-028**

by William Carlson

Laughter and joy filled the room as many team members enjoyed our annual Christmas party. Once again team member Rob May offered the use of his home. The last few months were filled with excitement as we planned this get-together and prepared for the first presentation of the Founders Award. The party was in full swing and the presentation of the award was to follow. It was nine o'clock when the fun came to an abrupt halt. Kevin announced we had a mission. This was not what we wanted to hear, knowing that the first major winter storm was moving in over the mountains.

Realizing we couldn't leave without completing the presentation of the Founders Award we quickly gathered in the living room. It was a great moment for the team to recognize the people who created RMRU in 1961. This was also an emotional moment with the recent loss of founding team member Walt Walker. The award recognized the sacrifices team members made to help others in need. At this moment it was only fitting that we were to head out on that same mission, to save a life.

Lee Arnson and I arrived at the trail head first. A brief chat with a deputy provided us with the basic information we needed to begin the search. A woman set out around 12:00 p.m. heading to Tahquitz Peak by way of the South Ridge Trail. She called a friend around 3:00 p.m. from the summit. The next phone call to her friend was around 5:00 p.m. stating that she and her dog were lost; no one heard from her since. About this time other team members began to arrive.

Lee and I headed out as team 1. Team 2 consisted of Jim Manues, John Dempsey, Brad Scott, and Travis Henderson. Pete Carlson and Mike George comprised team 3. The last team formed up for the night was Kevin Walker and Jeff Toscas; team 4. At base, Grace Manues, Steve Bryant, Glenn Henderson, Patrick McCurdy, Lew Kingman, and Gwenda Yates performed operations, communications, and set in motion the mutual aid callout.

Lee and I initially headed down the lower South Ridge Trail to a point where we could give a yell covering most of the main drainage coming off of Tahquitz Peak. No luck! Next we headed up the South Ridge Trail. Our assignment was a hasty

search of the South Ridge Trail to the summit, and possibly from the summit to Chinquapin Flats. Teams 2 and 3 followed the same route performing a more thorough search. Team 4 set out along the Ernie Maxwell trail which was a probable area for the subject to hike out.

As the teams entered into the field we all felt confident that we would find the subject quickly. By 1:30 a.m. Lee and I neared the summit in 4 to 6 inches of fresh snow. We continued to yell for the subject; there was no response. The wind made it extremely difficult for our voices to travel far at all. Between a strong gust of wind I asked Lee, "Did you hear that?" I had heard a dog bark. We hiked up the last switchback and onto the deck of the lookout tower. Lee said he saw fresh dog prints in the snow. A moment later the dog found me. We were getting very excited. We figured the dog would remain close to its owner.

We yelled and yelled and yelled, moving to all sides of the summit. No response. We were frustrated, tired, and cold. A quick call to the FICC (forest service dispatch) provided us with the combination to the lookout tower. We let the dog inside to escape the wind and continued down to Chinquapin Flats. The hike across the bowl hammered us with some of the worst conditions either of us had been in. We returned to the shelter of the lookout tower to warm up and wait for John, Travis, Brad, Jim, Pete, and Mike. We were able to get the wood burning stove going to provide some heat. Around 2:30 a.m. the other two teams arrived. We were all very worried about the condition of the subject. After a quick discussion we decided it would be best to bed down for the night and head out at first light.

Six a.m. brought a sliver of light, along with poor visibility and strong winds. Many out of county teams began arriving as well. We reorganized our teams and set out again. Our hopes remained high for finding the subject near the summit due to the fact that her dog was at the lookout tower. Teams searched every aspect of the summit as well as spent time searching across the bowl to Chinquapin Flats again. We checked off of every switchback of the trail as well. No one wanted to say it, but we thought the subject could be down and unresponsive.

Afternoon quickly came about. Fresh teams entered the field as the teams that were out all night began to make their way out. Around 2:00 p.m. the radio crackled. "All teams, this is base. Stand by at your current location." This was the first positive news we had. The next thing we heard was the teams from Saddle Junction and Tahquitz Valley being pulled out. Our level of excitement rose as we realized we were in a good area. Next our team was called and base said, "Team 1, your hunch last night may have been right." Lee and I began running down the trail having an excellent idea where the subject might be. We joined team 15, or rather, they joined us. We ran a good 3 miles to a point located part way down the lower South Ridge Trail. Finally we found what we were hoping for. "Base, team 1. We have voice contact."

It was a great relief to hear her voice. However, it was a long ways off through a sea

of bushes. After what seemed like an eternity (it was later determined to be under 8 minutes) we reached the subject. She was cold, but overall in good condition. Some hot drinks and warm clothes made conditions more bearable for the subject. Two out of county teams, including Rob May and Jeri Sanchez of RMRU, arrived to assist with the hike out. A couple of hours later we were all back at base, thinking back to when this mission began in 1961. This one is for you Walt! Thanks for watching over us!



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.