

## John Donovan Body Recovery

June 4th, 2006

Long Valley Canyon, below Hidden Fork  
2006-06-04

by Glenn Henderson

We were able to finally begin the search, and we hoped recovery, of Jonathan Donovan on Sunday, June 5. Johns pack had been recovered during a search of a missing couple from Texas (see related story). It was truly amazing how far John had gotten off the trail. He was not anywhere near the search area from the previous year. We met with Sheriffs deputy Kim Judge, Detective Kevin Duffy, and helicopter Star 9s pilot Steve Smith with observer Kevin Boss at 07:00 at the lower Palm Springs aerial tram parking lot. First in was Jim Manues and myself. We flew to the site but had trouble finding the burn area.



Photo: Patrick McCurdy

Fighting our way through the brush.

We were looking for a forest fire area that was started by the Texas couple. We finally found it, estimated at  $\frac{1}{2}$  an acre, but a VERY hot fire. Due to the heat, (mid to high 90s), and high altitude, (4300 feet), we had an extremely hard time finding a place to put us out. We searched for over an hour and then had to fly to the Palm Springs airport for more fuel. While waiting to fuel up we decided to take Jim back to base and try to do one rescuer at a time. This we were able to do but were about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile away from the burn area. The distance was not the problem, the terrain was. It was extremely steep and covered with thick brush. Jim was flown in next followed by Steve Sanford of



Photo: Patrick McCurdy

Looking down the canyon toward John's camp.

the Riverside County Search Dogs and his German Shepard. Patrick McCurdy and Will Carlson were the next two members flown in. We worked our way down to the Long Valley drainage that would lead us to the burn area and Johns campsite. We had two machetes and used them extensively. We finally jumped on top of the brush and kind of rode, rolled, over it to get into the creek bed. Once we were in the creek bed we had to do some 3rd and 4th class climbing around waterfalls to get down to Johns camp.

Once there we found that there had been an extremely hot fire that somehow did not burn Johns gear. While we had been getting to Johns camp Star 9 had been doing an aerial search and found a stick with something tied to it. Will went up the canyon to check it out while Jim, Patrick and I searched around the campsite. We stood on top on a 25 waterfall and saw what looked like something green in the water below. We knew John had a green tarp and assumed that it was Johns. While Patrick and I searched around Jim went around the waterfall and found John. He was completely intact, something no one expected. We think he may have slipped from the top of the waterfall and died in the fall. He was caught in a tree in the middle of the stream. We called Will back from his climb and radioed base with the information.

We waited for instructions from base that finally radioed to get John out and ready to fly back to base. This we did along with his gear. Star 9 dropped a long line which we hooked to the cargo net and John was flown back to base camp. The four of us remaining hiked back to the LZ (landing zone) and were flown out one at a time.

It took many personnel to accomplish this mission. There was base camp personnel, a relay team that relayed information from the field team to base as the canyon was so steep that we did not have direct communication with base. We also had personnel at the lower tram parking lot directing and assisting the helicopter landing and takeoffs. It also took great skill by our helicopter crew, Steve and Kevin. It was really delicate flying to get us all in and out safely. Our deepest gratitude to them.

This was a bittersweet mission for all of us as well as for other Mountain Rescue Association teams that spent many hours and days searching for John. Many of our personal trips to the mountain were always with an eye out as where he might be. It was an extremely beautiful area that John finally ended up. We were glad that we could finally help to send Jonathan Donovan home.

AUDIO: Listen to audio from RMRU radio transmissions during the mission:

- [Glenn plans the helicopter insertion](#)
- [Kirk describes the area of the search](#)
- [Glenn describes the abandoned camp](#)
- [The team finds John's remains](#)

VIDEO: Watch several videos taken during the mission:

- [The flight into the canyon](#) (12MB)
- [The helicopter coming in to the helispot](#) (1MB)

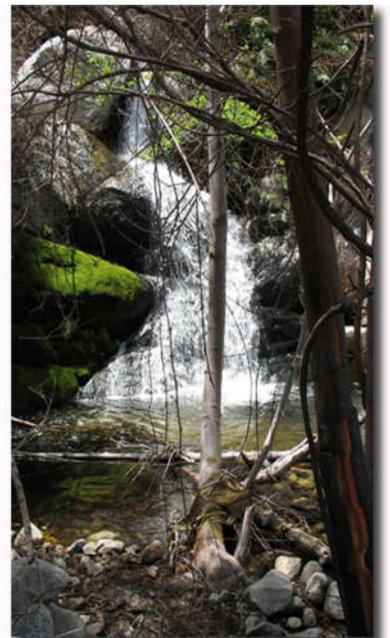


Photo: Patrick McCurdy

Waterfall and pool were John was found.

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.