

## Injured Hiker at Deer Springs

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Written by William Carlson

“Something is not right,” I thought to myself as I drove to the local coffee house to meet a friend for breakfast. It is nearly June and it’s snowing. Not just a flurry here and there either. This storm was so unexpected and underestimated that at 1100 the snowplows remained in garages across the mountain. The roads were a mess. I had just finished a bagel sandwich when my phone began sounding the all too familiar loud beep indicating a search and rescue callout. Staring at the message with a blank expression I could not begin to comprehend what was to come. The message was a callout for a man with a broken ankle at 10,400 feet in the San Jacinto Wilderness. The message also stated, “... whiteout conditions on the mountain.”

To many of you the preceding paragraph will sound overly dramatic. To others, the writing is full of suspense. To me, the words on my pager were full of mixed emotions: Curiosity... What lies ahead? Fright... What is this person going through right now? Wonder... How are we going to get this person down in the middle of a blizzard? Excitement... How many friends will be joining me in the backcountry? And Challenge... knowing any rescue under these circumstances is going to require an extreme effort on everyone’s part.

Accessing more information I learned that a Boy Scout troop had spent the weekend backpacking in the San Jacinto high country. Saturday night the troop camped in a valley between Jean Peak and Marion Mountain near the mouth of Deer Springs. Sunday morning, with signs of an impending storm, the troop began the descent back to the trailhead. After hiking for almost an hour, Gary, one of the leaders, slipped on some wet ferns while negotiating a large snowfield and broke his leg. Realizing the weather was turning for the worst, the troop split up. Leaving one other adult with Gary, the remainder of the troop hiked down for help. After reaching the trailhead and notifying State Park rangers of the situation, RMRU was called to respond.

Driving toward the Deer Springs Trail I received a second page stating that weather conditions had deteriorated on the Deer Springs side of the mountain and the main road

had become impassable. The entire team rerouted base operations to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. I arrived at the lower tram with my dad (Pete). Two teams from the State Park had begun assignments in the field as well as two teams from RMRU. The first team of two rangers from the State Park was nearing the summit of San Jacinto and reported near blizzard conditions. The second State Park team, a team of four volunteers, was arriving at Wellman Divide with a stretcher in tow. The first team from RMRU, consisting of Lee and Les, made good time hiking just behind the State Park team at Wellman Divide. RMRU Team Two consisted of Ralph and Chuck. Team Two was close to the Round Valley Ranger Station. Pete, Paul, and I assembled gear for a winter overnight search as well as extra medical equipment for our injured subject.

The snow falling softly on my face was surprising considering the wind rushing through the treetops. The footprints of team members ahead of us were nearly buried. We had hiked this trail hundreds of times, but in the winter your surroundings always looks different. We made good time and quickly reached Ralph and Chuck at the Round Valley Ranger Station. The State Park team of four volunteers also met us at this location. One of their members had injured his knee and they were taking him back to the tramway.

The five of us from RMRU made good time towards Lee and Les. We slowly closed the distance separating our teams, only due to the fact that Lee and Les were taking turns hauling the 45-pound stretcher across the snowy, unbroken trail. Then the unexpected happened. I watched as the toboggan caught on a bush, causing Les to stumble. As we all regrouped we became aware that that little stumble had caused a hand and shoulder injury. We had some serious decisions to make. Knowing that the subject was still out in the storm we wanted to continue on. However, we had an injured member with us. As we stood amidst what seemed to be an endless mountain and continued snow flurries, we all thought about past rescues. Realizing how cold it was and that our options were limited, we dug deep and decided that Lee and I would continue to the summit hut and reassess the situation. Ralph, Pete, Paul, and Les would return to the Tramway and again relocate to West side of the mountain at the Deer Springs Trailhead.

As we turned and parted ways I was left with an uncomfortable feeling. We would be spending the night for sure. It was cold, very cold. Breaking trail through the fresh snow with a 40-pound pack, taking turns pulling the 45-pound toboggan, Lee and I made our way toward the summit. It felt like a dream! Working our way up through the fog and snow flurries we hoped to eventually break free of the clouds and into the moonlight. We could tell the storm was letting up. Progress was slow. Suddenly, as we reached the trail junction just below the emergency hut at San Jacinto Peak, the clouds dropped away beneath us. We were on a snowy island with a sea of fog crashing against the shoreline. The moon and stars were as clear as I had ever seen them. Snow crystals gently tossed by the wind were sparkling like fireflies in the night sky. This was a true

Search and Rescue moment where, as a rescuer, all you want to do is smile and talk about how awesome it is to be in a place few have been. However, you end up with nothing more than a tired stare and a grunt indicating we'd best keep moving.

The emergency hut came at the perfect time. With energy reserves running low we made our way inside. Finally talking again, we decided the best course of action would be to eat, rehydrate, and catch a few hours of sleep before pushing on. With the clouds lifting, temperatures dropped rapidly. We enjoyed hot drinks and warm food while reminiscing of similar rescues over the years. With the stove burners off and our lights out, we crawled into cold sleeping bags for a few hours of rest. The radio crackled one last time letting us know that communications and all personnel were moving to the Deer Springs side of the mountain.

The night dragged on forever. Neither of us really slept. In this situation it can be difficult to shut down your brain and harness your thoughts. Just as I dozed off my water bottle spilled in my sleeping bag. A few hours later, tired and restless, stove burners roared to life. Soon the aroma of coffee filled the air. We snacked on red vines and energy bars as our packs were once again stuffed full. We stepped out into the brisk pre-dawn morning with headlamps on. Everything was white. I took note of how far our headlamps reflected on the snow. We made our way back to the trail junction, overjoyed to be pulling the toboggan downhill rather than up.

Conditions could not have been better as we traversed the ridgeline west below Jean Peak. Never before have I had a more beautiful pre-dawn stroll. As the sun began its ascent the snow-covered mountain radiated with light. Our route was obvious and pulling the toboggan was nothing like the night prior. Soon we came across the tracks of the State Park rangers from the night before. Over the course of 16 hours a simple rescue had molded itself into a potentially life-threatening search. We had received mixed reports on where the two were located and both were searched with no result. Dragging the toboggan along (contemplating using it as a sled for fun) Lee and I searched drainage after drainage. Clearing two of the three most likely areas Gary would be, we dropped the toboggan and fully converted to search mode.

We learned that just before dawn four members of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Rim of the World Search and Rescue team had begun hiking up the Deer Springs Trail to assist RMRU with the search for the injured hiker.

A quick break for food and water also gave us time to really look at our map and create a game plan. We narrowed down our search area to four main drainages. Teams hiking in from the bottom would search three outlying drainages. Frustration began to set in as yell after yell was left with no response. Standing on a brush-and-rock covered ridgeline, I gave a holler up canyon. "Did you hear that Lee?" "No." "Let's go over to

that rock and yell again. I know I heard something.” “One, Two, Three... HELLO!” “HELP! Over here!” “This has got to be them!”

After running a few hundred feet across a snow-covered meadow, we reached our subject. The two scout leaders had spent the night in a tent, safe from the storm and the elements. As we began our assessment of Gary’s injuries we asked other members to check into the availability of a helicopter for extrication. Our Riverside County Sheriff’s helicopter was available. Upon examination we found Gary’s leg to be badly broken. As we splinted the leg and waited for the helicopter we listened to the series of events leading to the broken leg. Listening to this story was a rare pleasure. From the moment the injury occurred, Gary and his troop made every correct decision possible.

After boiling up hot drinks and packing up equipment, we finally heard the familiar popping sound of rotor blades. Using the radio and a signal mirror we guided the helicopter to our location. With fresh snow blowing everywhere a stretcher was lowered to our location. We carried the equipment over to the tent and packaged Gary in the stretcher for the hoist. Spindrift snow continued to blow everywhere as the cable was lowered right to the door of the tent. Lee gave the signal to bring the stretcher up and within a few minutes Gary was on board and headed to an awaiting ambulance at Keenwild Helibase. Three of us were left in an absolutely beautiful place; a place that would be forever special to the four of us. Five minutes later, if someone had hiked up the trail, they would have had no clue as to what just happened.



**Ambulance Transfer at Keenwild Helibase**

The RSO helicopter returned and picked up the other scout leader and Lee. I was alone on the mountain. Sitting in the warm morning sun I never would have guessed what our team and subjects went through the night before. As quickly as the storm had come, it left. Spring was in the air. I heard the rotor blades pop and took one last look around. Sitting on my pack inside the helicopter watching the trees fly by, I couldn't help but think of a quote by John Muir. "It wasn't until I was headed out that I realized, I was really headed in."



**Debriefing Back at Base**

Photos by: Tom Mahood

Members Present: Lee Arnson, Paul Caraher, Pete Carlson, William Carlson, Ralph Hoetger, Lew Kingman, Tom Mahood, Dana Potts, Chuck Springer, Les Walker. RMRU wishes to acknowledge the efforts of the **San Jacinto State Park** rangers and volunteers, and the **San Bernardino County Sheriff's Rim of the World Search and Rescue** team for their assistance with this mission.

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.