



Stranded Climbers On Tahquitz Rock

**November 7-8, 2010
Tahquitz Rock
2010-033**

Written by Donny Goetz

After having spent the weekend in Idyllwild for our monthly team training, a 13+ mile hike from Humber Park out to the Desert Divide, Les Walker and I had finally decided that by 8 p.m. on Sunday it was safe to say that we “probably wouldn’t be called out for a mission”. I hopped in my truck and began the two hour drive back home to Orange County.

I had just passed Mountain Center when the first text came out; “Heads up, we have stuck climbers on Tahquitz rock, one pitch from the top. Not called out yet but get ready.”

I was still sore and tired from the hike the day before but I knew that this wasn’t the time to wimp out! Only part-way down the mountain, the forecasted storm was just rolling in. I knew our window of opportunity was narrow. I had just turned around when Les called me to make sure I was on my way back. We decided to meet back at his house and rally from there. I met up with Les, and we drove back down toward the Village Market where Sheriff’s Deputy Garvin was parked. We spoke with Deputy Garvin and informed him of the incoming weather. At this point, we were still not officially called out. Les and I made it known that the weather was going to escalate the situation and that we needed to get the green light ASAP. Deputy Garvin radioed our concerns back to dispatch; we waited.

At 8:39 p.m. the second text came over: “We are called out, respond to Humber park. Call the rescue line.”

Les, Deputy Garvin, and I headed up to Humber Park. RMRU team member Lee Arnson was also en route from his home and arrived at Humber Park within one minute of our arrival. We immediately began sorting out the technical gear that we felt we would need for the mission. Deputy Garvin filled us in with all the info he had about the stranded climbers. Having spoken with them via cell phone, Deputy Garvin knew that the two 23-year-old Santa Cruz climbers were on the White Maiden’s Walkway approximately one pitch (rope length) from the top of the rock, that they weren’t

injured, and that they did have insulated jackets. We packed an assortment of cams, hexes, webbing, and ropes. Lee packed more than his share of the gear!



Rescue Point on White Maiden Route

The hasty team of Les Walker, Lee Arnsen, and myself (Team 1) began to hike shortly after 9 p.m. We made good time up the trail, taking approximately 40 minutes to reach Lunch Rock (the base of the cliff). We continued up the south side of the cliff towards the Friction descent route. Route finding was difficult with the absence of moonlight but we eventually found our way to the base of the rock. At this point, I would estimate our hiking time at 1 hour 20 minutes. We were pushing hard knowing that the storm was on its way.

It took us roughly 25 minutes to ascend the Friction route. The climbing is not strenuous here under normal circumstances but the weight of our packs and the darkness slowed progress somewhat. We arrived on top of Tahquitz Rock at approximately 11:10 p.m. We carefully navigated higher up the rock toward the top of the White Maiden's Walkway route. Les and I had both climbed the route several times and were familiar

with the rock at the top. We were still unsure of exactly where the climbers were and were attempting to make voice contact. The wind made this particularly difficult.

Meanwhile, RMRU team members Paul Caraher and Carlos Carter had arrived at Humber Park and had established base communications with our team. Paul and Carlos helped to guide us into position by sighting the position of our headlamps relative to those of the stranded climbers. This sped things up and in a matter of minutes, Les had positioned himself directly above the climbers and established verbal with them. Lee and I shuttled the gear up to the new staging point and I set about building anchors for our ropes. Again, being familiar with this particular route proved invaluable as we knew that we would need to set ropes in two different locations due to the traversing nature of the end of the route. Les clipped his rope to the first anchor, had me double check his set-up, and proceeded over the edge into the darkness toward our subjects. I finished building the anchor for the second rope.

Les reached the subjects and radioed their status. They were cold but in good enough shape to climb if we could get them on ropes. I followed over the side down to a higher ledge. The plan was to have the subjects climb under their own power from their current location to the higher ledge where I was established. Les ascended his rope to my position, trailing the subjects' rope for use as a belay line. The subjects' rope was quite tangled and it took Les several minutes to sort out. Meanwhile, I cleaned up the anchor at the upper ledge. After "flaking out" the subject's rope, Les rappelled back to the subjects' position some 50 feet below mine and got them tied in. As soon as I called out "belay on", Hannah was on her way up to me, assisted by Les. She reached me, very cold, wet, and ready to be off the rock! Les returned to Steven, got him tied to the line, and sent him up to me. Les cleaned the subjects' anchor and climbed up to join us on the higher ledge. He continued up to the top while I remained with the subjects. We were very exposed to the wind and rain but were only 50 vertical feet from the top so we knew the final push should go quickly. Again, Hannah went up first, belayed this time by Les. She made short work of the climb and soon it was Steven's turn. The weather was building and at this point visibility was about 25 feet. Steven also made short work of the climb and I was then free to make my way back to the top. I cleaned the gear from the anchor and ascended the fixed line to the summit, stopping briefly to deal with a rope that, thanks to the wind, was tangled in a tree.

Lee had been helping to keep everything organized on the summit and had also brewed up some delicious hot cocoa. The subjects had their fill and Les and I finished the rest. It was a great morale boost! We radioed back to base that the subjects and Team 1 were all safely on top of the formation and that we would soon begin our descent. We packed up the gear and headed out. The Friction route we had come up was now too wet to safely descend without rigging ropes for rappel. We deemed this less desirable in the sake of time and instead headed up towards the summit of the rock where we could drop

over the side into the north gully. We also felt that this exposure would be more sheltered from the elements. We carefully picked our ways up the rock and were soon in the gully. At this point, the rain had turned to intermittent snow flurries. But we were moving steadily and the subjects were in good spirits.

We plodded down the gully, led by Lee. Les and I were really feeling the toll of the weekend at this point and were opting for a slightly slower pace. We made our ways steadily down the gully into the talus and eventually to the faint climber's trail that parallels Strawberry Creek. We had maintained radio contact with base throughout the night and, being very close, Paul and Carlos offered to come up from the parking lot to meet us and assist however they could. They met us at the creek crossing and offered to take gear off of anyone. The subjects didn't have much on them so attention turned toward the team. Somehow Lee still seemed to be feeling like a champ and declined their offer, instead offering assistance to Les and me. We gladly accepted and were back on our way to the parking lot.

It was just approaching the 3 a.m. mark, putting the total mission time at roughly six hours. Everyone was back safely! We gave a brief report to the deputy on scene and were soon shaking hands and on our way home. Les ended the mission with the "mission is a 90, all out safe" text. Another successful, and my first, mission for RMRU!



L to R: Donny, subjects Steven and Hannah, Lee, and Les

photo by Carlos Carter

RMRU members present: Lee Arnson, Paul Caraher, Carlos Carter, Donny Goetz, and Les Walker.

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.