



Missing Hiker on Mt. Baldy

December 7, 2010
Mt. Baldy
2010-038

Written by Carlos Carter

How strange, my phone is sounding the RMRU alarm mid morning on a Monday. Even though we are on call 24/7, most of our callouts seem to happen on weekends. The message was, “Standby for a search for a missing hiker on Mt. Baldy”. Sure enough, we were told to report at the command post at 0600 Tuesday morning.

The missing hiker, 49 year old Michelle Yu of Venice, had gone on a day hike on Saturday, December 4, and had not returned. The local search team had been searching all day Sunday and even into Sunday night. On Monday they brought in several more teams to help. Today was day three of the search with even more teams being brought in to help search.

It was an early Tuesday morning for Paul, Donny, and me as we met our RSO Liaison Deputy Zek Escobedo. We met in Upland at 5:30 am to car pool up to the Mt. Baldy Fire Station. The three of us each piled a couple bags full of winter climbing gear into the back of the Sheriff’s SUV and we were at the command post by 6 am. We checked in with West Valley SAR and were told to standby for an assignment. We were to join fourteen other SAR teams to search for a hiker missing since Saturday. Since our team is “mountain certified”, we were given the task of searching the summit and part of Devil’s Backbone before heading down the steep south facing bowl. It was to be a clear day, but knowing we would be above 10,000 feet, we dressed for the cold on top.

We received our mission – insertion by helicopter – to the summit. Within minutes we were whisked away and transported to the pickup area. As we exited the vehicle we could hear and see the helicopter making its approach to land. The safety officer barked out the commands as we rushed to waiting area. We barely had enough time to prepare ourselves as we frantically searched our packs for eye protection and helmets since we knew the dirt landing area would kick up dust and debris. We were now in a helicopter for the second day out of the past four. The past Saturday we had just had our yearly Helitac training with the Riverside Sheriff’s helicopters (the best

part was being hoisted up and down via cable).

On this mission we landed on the summit and just stepped out. Paul, our team leader for the day, lives at sea level and we just got dropped off at 10,000 feet on ice covered rock and scree. Our hearts were pounding while we strapped on our crampons and gripped our ice axes. Although the three of us were relatively new to RMRU we had enough experience and training for this alpine mission.

The mission was to head east on the Devil's Backbone trail then, at a specific GPS coordinate, head south down the bowl towards the Sierra Club Ski Hut on the Baldy Bowl trail. We were to check the drainages, ditches and any place a person could be. By the time we reached the coordinates it was sunny and getting warm so we removed our outer layers and since there was no snow or ice in the area we were to down-climb. We also removed our crampons and put the ice axes away.

Other nearby SAR teams were doing the same thing and every few minutes we could hear someone calling out the subject's name and echoing back. Our search area was steep, rugged and full of scree. There were many times when a simple push of the toes pointing downhill would start a two-foot slide down the hill. We spread out and did a zigzag pattern downwards. We eventually cleared our area and were at the Ski Hut, as were other SAR teams. Paul was in communication with the command post providing coordinates and status on the way down. We were asked to take lunch and wait for the next assignment.

As the different teams arrived and broke for lunch it turned out that we were all the same, volunteers eager to help a people in need. It lifted everyone's spirits to spend a few minutes together discussing SAR topics and of course checking out each other's gear as all of us had come up empty handed for signs or clues about our missing hiker. After lunch we had another assignment to continue looking as we descended the Baldy Bowl trail. Although we went off trail many times to look at possible fall areas we again came up empty handed and eventually made it off the trail and onto the dirt road. We were then transported back to the command post at approximately 1630 hours. RMRU was one of fourteen teams searching that day and no one found any sign of the subject.

Late the next day our subject was found deceased in an ice chute on the north side of Mt. Baldy 2100 feet below the summit. Our condolences go out to the family and friends of the subject.

RMRU members present: Paul Caraher, Carlos Carter, Donny Goetz.

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.