



Ortega Search

January 2-3, 2011
Ortega Hwy (SR 74)
2011-001

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Written by Roger May

Just sat down to dinner at 5:30 p.m. when the "heads up search" text came in for the Ortega Highway area. This is in my area so I was going to respond if it became a mission. So when the next text came at 6 p.m. to call the rescue line, I called and the recorded message still had old mission information. I called Gwenda (callout captain) and was told to respond to the Ortega Country Cottage Candy Store on Highway 74 for a search for two missing hikers.

Almost to the road head I received a text to respond to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway for a rescue. Desert Search and Rescue (DSAR) was going to do the Ortega mission while RMRU did the (concurrent) [Tramway mission](#). Since I was almost at the road head I continued to the Ortega base and met with the Sheriff's deputy on scene. At 6:30 p.m. I called Gwenda, who asked me to stay and assist DSAR. Around 9:30 p.m. DSAR arrived with four team members, of whom Kevin was the Operations Leader. Kevin decided to send all four DSAR members and me to search and left a radio with the deputy.

One problem was that we were without a map so we copied the trail head map that was on a sign post to use as our map. Another problem was the small amount of information we had on the subjects. We all had GPS devices and decided to split into two teams and meet at a trail called Four Corners. We thought that we were in the right area and were hopeful. As we continued our cold, rain-soaked search we realized that covering the area was going to be a much bigger effort than we had originally anticipated. Actually our plan to meet up never came to be (map malfunction). We made radio contact with each other and headed back to the trailhead. Radio reception was very poor and many times nonexistent. By 3 a.m. we met back at the trailhead map to discuss the area that we had covered and what was left to search. We decided to wait until morning for more search teams to come in and help with the search.

The morning of course was still raining and cold. At 8:30 a.m. D. Douglas with the

Sheriff's Emergency Response Team (SERT) arrived and we realized we were going to need a dry command post. He commandeered a small club house next to the candy store and we started to put in place a plan of deployments. We now had another SAR team (Sierra Madre Search and Rescue) with us to help and San Diego Search and Rescue was on the way. At this time other searches were going on and ours was a lower priority so D. Douglas was asked to divert San Diego to the Palm Springs Tramway. That left us with five people to search a rapidly widening area. We decided to send out two teams of two and I would stay at base to work the radio and be Operations Leader. After new teams arrived later we could expand the search area. Teams 1 and 2 started off on the trail that we had searched last night, intending to continue on to other trails not yet searched. One mile from the trailhead and before the teams split up they made voice contact with the subjects, Heather and Devon, both 28 years old. The two subjects were in good condition after having spent the night out in the cold and rain.

RMRU members present: Roger May

Assisting teams: Desert Search and Rescue (DSAR), Sierra Madre Search and Rescue, and Riverside Sheriff's Emergency Response Team (SERT)

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.