



Skyline Trail Rescue

January 24, 2012

Skyline Trail below Upper Tramway Station

2012-003

Written by Donny Goetz

The call went out Tuesday night at 6:12 p.m., "We have a search at the tram". I had been at work all day and frankly was pretty tired and looking forward to winding down the evening with some friends. But I knew that despite the mild winter we'd been having, there was still good snow coverage up high on San Jacinto and that overnight temps would likely be below freezing. I checked the forecast for the evening and noticed that the predicted low was 26 degrees AND there was a high wind advisory for the area. I knew it would be a long, miserable night for all involved, especially the two lost hikers. I called in and said I would head out right away.

While on the road, I notified my boss that I would likely miss work the following day and he was able to help arrange for someone to cover for me. I then called my friends to let them know I would have to postpone our evening's plans. I expected traffic to be a nightmare driving out to the Tramway from Orange County but it turned out to be reasonable and I was able to make decent time. I arrived at the lower Tram parking lot at approximately 8:30 pm. Pete Carlson pulled into the lot just after I and we both began stuffing our packs and suiting up. I found I was missing one fairly important bit of gear, wool socks. Thankfully, Pete had an extra pair to loan me. We headed up to the Lower Tram station to join our other teammates.

Inside I was greeted by Les Walker, Patrick McCurdy, Lee Arnson, Matt Jordan, and Alan Lovegreen. Gwenda Yates had left a few minutes earlier to move the team vehicle over to the hospital to set up the radio relay which is necessary for missions on this side of the mountain. I learned then that our two subjects were lost on the dreaded Skyline trail. I had heard many horror stories about this trail. It has the dubious reputation of being the steepest trail in the country as well as one of the most deadly. I had never been on it and now I was about to head out on it at night, with high winds, snow and ice conditions and below freezing temps. Nothing else can really get you pumped up like that!!

We rode up the tram with our personal and extra team gear, established a secondary

base in the Upper Tram Station, and finished prepping our packs. Alan and Patrick were to man the base which meant they would be up all night in shifts monitoring our radio channel. Les had stayed down below to assist with a possible helicopter evacuation of the subjects. Lee, Pete, Matt and I were to be Team 1. Within a few minutes Team 1 was out the door heading toward the small notch where the Skyline tops out. This spot is affectionately named the Launch Pad due to the potential for the unprepared hiker to catch some ice and launch off a thousand feet down the steep gullies below. As we approached the Launch Pad, we stopped to put our crampons onto our boots and swap out our trekking poles for ice axes. The wind was howling and it bit at any exposed skin. I pulled my zippers closed, snugged up my jacket, and pulled my fleece balaclava up over my face to fight the wind which was so determined to make us miserable. Just as we began our descent over the ridge, we got news that the helicopter was going in to attempt to pick the subjects up! We were advised by base to head back up and find some shelter from the wind while the pilots sorted out their options.



Rescuers Lee, Donnie, and Pete at top of Skyline Trail

Photo by Matt Jordan

After a short time and some confident reports from the RSO pilots, Andy and Chad, we decided it might be best to return to the tram. Jokingly, I told Lee that "if we head back now, the pilots will call off their attempt due to the wind and we'll just have to start over again. And if we stay out here in the cold, the pilots will swoop in and pick them up no problem!" We had a laugh, took off our crampons, and headed back to the tram. We made short work of the hike back, motivated by the warmth awaiting us. Yet, not more than 15 minutes after we had arrived back, we got the word which we all knew was coming.... It was simply too windy for the pilots to safely approach the treacherous hillside this evening. So, we suited back up and headed out.

Again, we donned our crampons and ice axes to begin the descent. The wind hit us hard as we came over the ridge but we were fortunate in that there didn't seem to be much ice to contend with. There was ample snow, however, and the steep terrain still required acute attention to travel over safely. After descending approximately 600 vertical feet, we felt that we could remove our crampons without sacrificing any margin of safety. We continued on as quickly as we could since the helicopter had reported the location of our subjects. The trail was steep and littered with fresh debris courtesy of the wind (three days prior the mountain had seen winds gusting to over 105 mph) that hampered progress slightly and obscured the path in some spots. Nonetheless, we made good time down to the 6,200 foot level that our subjects were reported to be at. We stopped to call out for them, but received no reply. We continued down another 200 yards and called again. This time we heard a call back! We were actually a few hundred feet below them. Matt and Lee bolted back up the trail and continued calling out to hone in on their exact position. Pete and I followed behind and stopped where Matt and Lee had left the trail into the thick brush. I pulled out some extra clothes and sleeping bag for our subjects, Pete brewed up some hot cocoa and Lee called into base to let them know we had found them. We then discussed options for extraction. The subjects, Mario and Ana, felt they could continue hiking with us. Lee and Pete encouraged us to head back up the hill but the thought of climbing the steep 2,200 feet back to the tram didn't sit well with me. I was already beginning to feel the effects of our journey thus far as well as my climbing antics at work earlier in the day. Matt also felt that heading down would be easier. Mario told us it had taken them 5 hours to reach their high point and that they had come down a bit from that by the time we met up with them. I felt that if they could hike up this trail to this elevation in 5 hours, then we could surely make it down in 3.5 hours or even less! We agreed and set out downhill. This was a mistake.



**Mario and Ana warm up with hot cocoa
Photo by Pete Carlson**

The trail continues steeply down the hill for another 7+ miles from this point. It is rocky, unmaintained, and riddled with misleading shortcut trails. Additionally, we were all carrying heavy packs loaded with full winter gear and were all short on water. Had we gone back up we would have had our fill of water by melting snow with our stoves. We also probably would have made it up in about 3.5 hours or so.

As we pushed on into the wee hours of the morning, the unrelentingly steep terrain took its toll on us. I was feeling quite dehydrated and my thighs cramped tightly with every step. I got to the point where I was thinking ahead as to which direction would be best to roll when I fell because surely my legs couldn't continue to support me and my pack on this miserable path. We talked less, all of us focused on simply getting out, one grueling step at a time. Finally, at 5:30 a.m. we had had all we could take as a team. We stopped and decided to get into our sleeping bags and rest for a bit. My quadriceps were convulsing as I sat on the ground and Pete was bothered by a pain in his knee. Everyone else was thoroughly exhausted (except Matt who was full of life and is living proof that alien life exists AND is better than us!). Lee called into base and requested a helicopter to extract us from this point. We still had two miles left to go and, at least for me, it might as well have been 2000. We all got a little sleep which felt great!

Les and Lew were now running base. Les gave two first-light day hikers, Ellen and Sally, who also must be from the same distant planet that Matt is from, some extra water to bring up to us. Team members Paul Caraher (another fellow Orange County dweller) and Helene Lohr, who both had shown up around 5 a.m., were ready to come up and

help us however they could. They grabbed some more water and set off up the trail to meet us at our little impromptu campsite. Les was hard at work making calls to get a helicopter for us and shortly after sunrise was on the radio with the good news that we were going to get flown out. Ellen and Sally arrived with the first bit of water for us, which really picked up our spirits and so we set about the task of picking a landing zone for the helicopter. Within another hour, Paul and Helene came cruising up the trail with more water for us. They helped us prep the landing zone and then happily waited with us.

At approximately 10:30 a.m. the helicopter came ripping up over the ridge right towards us, guided by the GPS coordinates Paul had given them. Matt was the first on board followed by Ana. The chopper took off and was back for the next load within 10 minutes. Pete, Mario, and Helene went off on round two, and again, the chopper hurried back for Lee, Paul and me. The RSO pilots, Andy and Juvien, were amazing! We are very lucky to get to work with dedicated professionals like them.



Paul escorts Ana to helicopter
Photo by Pete Carlson

With that, mission number three for 2012 was in the bag. We all hopped in our cars and headed off to Carrow's Restaurant for a nice meal which the Sheriff's department so graciously provides us with. As I write this, two days afterward, I am still feeling the toll of the ordeal. That feeling will pass. But my gratitude for all the efforts of everyone on our team, at the Sheriff's department, the Palm Springs Tram, our friends and families who support us and the other non-affiliated folks who often lend a hand to us

will never fade from my sight.

WHAT WENT WRONG: The subjects did not start hiking until noon, way too late for first time hikers on this trail. They did not have any headlamps, any extra food or water, or any extra clothing (only what they were wearing). They did not have a turnaround time; it was 5 p.m., getting dark, and they were in snow at around 7,000 feet elevation. They called on their cell phone for help and went down out of the snow, losing the trail, and tried to keep warm behind rocks and bushes.

RMRU team members present: Lee Arnson, Roger Barry, Paul Caraher, Pete Carlson, Donny Goetz, Glenn Henderson, Matt Jordon, Lew Kingman, Helene Lohr, Alan Lovegreen, Patrick McCurdy, Rob May, Les Walker, and Gwenda Yates.

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.