



Tramway Hikers Missing

July 3, 2012

Tramway San Jacinto Mountains

2012-024

Written by Pete Carlson (Part 1) and Helene Lohr (Part 2)

Part 1

On Tuesday night at 8pm we got the call that a couple had call 911 that it was getting dark and they were not sure where they were. They had gotten a ride to the Palm Springs Tramway in a taxi and gone for a hike at 2pm in the afternoon. They had mentioned something about Willow Creek Trail, so we decided to have Lee and Helene, from Idyllwild, stay there in case we needed someone to come in from that side of the mountain. The rest of use came to the Tramway and five of us made it to the Tramway by 9:50 and were ready to go up. The last car is normally at 9:45pm, but a big thanks to the Tramway People who ran an extra car at 10pm to get us up so we could start the search.

The Riverside County Sheriff's Deputy had given us more information and as we rode up Tramway we made our plans. We now had the GPS coordinates from the cell phone company of where the couple had made there call. It now appeared that it was closer to Idyllwild on the Angles Glide Trail about one half mile up from Saddle Junction out of Humber Park. We contacted Lee and Helene, Team 3, who would hike up from Humber Park in Idyllwild. Since we can never be 100% sure about cell phone GPS locations from the phone company we decided to have the Tramway teams go out hiking to cover all the trails just in case the subjects moved or the GPS location was incorrect.

Team 1 was Les and Donny; they were going up to Hidden Lake Divide, down to Willow Creek Crossing, and then see what was going on before continuing. Team 2 was Pete and Mark; we would go to Long Valley, up to Wellman Divide, and see what was going on before continuing. Rob ran base and was Ops Leader from the top of the Tramway. While the teams got hiking the late arrivals (Carlos, Lew, and Ralph) stayed at the bottom Tramway station with the Rescue Van. Around Midnight Team 1 and Team 2 had reached out destinations and we could make radio contact with Team 3. They were now up on the Angles Glide Trail and had just made voice contact with the subjects.

We gave base this information and the members at the bottom of the Tramway started driving over to Idyllwild. Within 10 minutes Team 3 was with the subjects and confirmed they were OK, just cold, hungry, and a little tired. Team 1 decided to hike the one and a half miles to Saddle Junction and meet up with Team 3 and the subjects in case they needed any extra help. Team 2 hiked back to the Tramway and we were asleep in the upper station by 2:30am. We met the first Tramway car that came up at 6:30am and our old friend Tramway Operator Craig came walking out and said he would take us down in 10 minutes. We had a nice visit with him as he rode back down and even stopped at tower one to pick up maintenance workers who had been greasing the cables.

Part 2

It's the evening before 4th of July. We're down in Hemet to grab some goodies for the kids to throw in the Idyllwild parade and pick up the team truck. Our energized litter races are always a big hit with the hometown crowd. Lee grabs a big bag of brightly colored candies out of a deep bin and tosses it into the cart. As we start walking down the aisle, both of our phones chime with a new text. It's 7:43 pm. "We have a search. 2 lost hikers. Respond to the tram." Shoot... We don't have our gear with us. I look at Lee and discussion ensues. Should we drop everything and drive to Idyllwild and then grab our gear and beeline to the tram? There'll be no way to make it in time before the tram closes. Double shoot. They'll need the team truck for the rescue. No chance for us to pick it up for the parade, and most of the people responding are those who would be in the parade anyway. They'll be way too beat for anything tomorrow. Lee tosses the giant bag of candy reluctantly back in the bin. There will be more parades, but we always look forward to the Fourth in Idyllwild.

On our way out of the parking lot Lee calls the rescue line for more information. Gwenda relates that the subjects departed from the tram side of the mountain, but they remembered traversing Willow Creek trail. If they are correct (which subjects often aren't- since they are already lost it's generally not wise to trust their sense of direction) that would put them on the Idyllwild side of the mountain. After hearing the description Lee thinks they may have missed the sharp left turn to take them back to the tram and instead headed down Hidden Divide out of the State Park and into the USFS Wilderness. If that's so, we may be able to make it in on the search after all. We call in and say we're currently unavailable, but let Gwenda Yates the call captain know we could be able to hit the search from the Idyllwild side out of Humber Park. We quickly grab a bite to eat and finish off our last errands in town. Winding our way up the mountain we decide to snag our ready packs and meet up at Humber Park. We hear from Gwenda that several other teams have already responded to the tram and are clearing the upper trails of the State Park.

On the way up to Humber a text with GPS coordinates comes through from Les Walker seconds before we go out of cell service. They place the couple far from their last known location. Now they appear to be somewhere along the PCT, a section we refer to as Angels Glide, heading up from Saddle Junction towards Wellman Divide and the State Park. Of course, we have to be careful with this information. Coordinates are sometimes wrong. We've even experienced them one time placing a subject on the other side of the mountain miles away from their actual location. It's been dark for a couple hours by the time we hit Humber. We act efficiently, but don't just rush off down the trail. When you're in a rush you often forget something critical that could bite you later. Lee and I cross check that we have the correct gear for the mission before heading out. Sleeping bags for a potential overnight, extra food for us and the subjects, extra water, extra clothing for us and the subjects, 3 headlamps each, first aid basics, plus all the other small and large essentials. It is 10:40 pm and time to go. I swing on my pack and turn towards the trailhead. Our headlamps create swinging shadows as we steam up the familiar trail. As locals, we hike this trail for fun and training enough to have every switchback engraved in our memory. The full moon above silhouettes Tahquitz rock towering behind us and illuminates the face of Suicide Rock in front. It's relatively warm in the mid 50's (if you're hiking that is), with a slight breeze- a good night for a hike.

We make good time up the mountain with the solid crunch-crunch of Lee's footsteps in front of me is my only timekeeper. A short way after Middle Spring we swing off the trail to an outcropping of rocks to call up into the dark ravines. Deep breath and "1...2...3... HELLO!" I listen to the sound of our voices bouncing through the canyons. The mountains call back their echoes for a long time, but there's no response from the subjects. We call another two times. With no response on the third call, it's time to shoulder our packs again and head up the trail. We come up on the 3/4 point at the "Soil is fragile, please stay on trail" sign and decide to call out again. We catch our breath and try again and again. On the third call I think I hear something, but I can't be certain. Either way we'll have to continue up to the Junction to get access to the high country. Minutes pass as we silently push our way up the trail. Out of nowhere I get an odd feeling and stop mid-step. Lee immediately holds up behind me. "I think I heard something" I say. We listen for a few seconds and I do hear something- a yell from far away, carried by the wind over the ridge line. "If that's the subjects, they are on Angel's Glide Trail and we have got them. "We call out: "1...2...3... HELLO!" I hear a faint but clear response in between the rustles of pine needles in the wind.

I grin broadly at Lee and he also smiles and nods in response. With renewed energy we start up the trail. We hit Saddle Junction around 11:30 and call out again. The response is encouragingly a little louder and a little clearer this time. "That's them, it's got to be. I say again. "No one is that persistent in yelling back this late at night unless they have a

real good reason". We yell again, identifying ourselves as "Search and Rescue!" and giving instructions: "Stay put!" After dealing with a couple of belligerent yells from a camper we have woken, Lee contacts Base and lets them know that we have voice contact with the subjects. Rob May Upper Tramway Base relays our find to the other teams and gives us an update on their progress and location. Carlos, Lew, and Ralph barely missed the tram and are waiting at the Lower Tramway with the rescue truck. Pete and Mark have cleared the upper park trails from Long Valley to Wellman Divide. Donny and Les have been blazing along the trail and have already swept Hidden Divide to Willow Creek Crossing. They now are headed towards Saddle Junction. It's agreed that we will proceed to the subjects, with Donny and Les following as back up. Pete and Mark will stay put at the Divide until we're certain we have a handle on the situation.

As we hike up the Glide we stop and call out every few minutes, partly to confirm their position, but mostly to encourage them as they hear our voices getting closer. Finally, near the top of the Glide we hear a very happy shout: "We see your lights!" We ask, "Chris and Victoria?" (The names given to us by the Sheriff) They answer "Yes! We're SO glad to see you!" We introduce ourselves and all shake hands. I confirm they have no injuries. Their main issue is being cold. We may be toasty from our hike, but they are wearing only shorts and t-shirts at night in the mountains. That can be dangerous in any season. Lee and I quickly break open our packs and pass out extra clothing like candy. My lightweight down jacket is a perfect fit for Victoria and my rain pants, wool buff, gloves and beanie work just as well. Chris is quickly outfitted in Lee's jacket, gloves and pants. Lee passes out headlamps to them both and we hand out food and water. They tear into the snack bars and nuts as if they were Manna sent from heaven. Chris confirms what Lee predicted; they missed the turn off in the State Park for the Long Valley Loop and shunted them down the divide and into the Forest Service wilderness above Idyllwild. Despite being smart and nice people, they weren't prepared with essentials to keep them on track and safe for an unplanned extra-long hike. Despite this they are in good spirits and are unfailingly polite and caring with each other. We learn they're engaged to be married. Lee jokes that this is a good relationship stress test for them that they've obviously passed with flying colors.

Chris and Victoria are understandably eager to get going, so we start hiking back. We run into Donny and Les back near the Saddle Junction. After a warm greeting for our teammates, we make some quick introductions and head back down the trail to Humber Park. It's a long, dusty hike that always seems longer on the way down. Still aglow from the buzz of a successful rescue, the team reaches a consensus, the parade is still on! We agree we'll be good to go for the litter races up and down North Circle Dr. This is one dedicated group!

Finally, around 2:40 am, I see the lights of the sheriff's car shining in the distance through the dust of the trail and silhouettes of trees. Beat, but happy, it's time to head

home. Donny and Les pile in with us for a drop off at their homes. They'll pick up their cars at the tramway tomorrow afternoon. My eyes droop a bit now that the adrenaline has worn off. If I hurry to bed, I might be able to snag a couple of hours sleep before the parade.



**Lee, Helene, Subjects(Victoria and Chris), Les, and Donny at Humber Park
Photo by Riverside Sheriffs Deputy**

RMRU team members present: Lee Arnson, Pete Carlson, Carlos Carter, Donny Goetz, Rob May, Ralph Hoetger, Mark Houston, Lew Kingman, Helene Lohr, 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.