



Rescue Horsethief Creek

October 12, 2012
Palms to Pines Highway 74
2012-038

Written by Helene Lohr

It was supposed to be a simple carryout. But if there's one thing you learn in Search and Rescue, you should never believe everything you hear about a call-out. The "heads-up" text comes in at 12:30 early Friday morning; a warning that a call-out might be on its way. I groan, roll back over and stuff my head under the pillow. The call-out may or may not happen, but I'll catch as much sleep as I can in the meantime. At 1:30 the sharp "ding" of a text announces that we do indeed have another mission.

Everyone but Craig Wills and I are off the hill tonight. With the team so short-handed, there's no going back to sleep on this one. I roll out of bed and shuffle over to pull on my hiking pants and orange shirt. I load the 4Runner up with gear: my standard call out pack plus additional food, water, medical, warmth and overnighting gear. Even though it's reported as a simple carryout, you never really know what's coming when you hit the trailhead. I swing by Craig's house for a quick pickup and we're on the road with our traditional Rammstein blasting out the stereo.

The request is to assist Cal-Fire with a critical carryout. Intermittent cell service contact with the subject tells the highly dramatic story of a man with "two prosthetic legs, injured and covered in blood." Cal-Fire is already on trail to his location. We are to provide backup manpower on the litter. The flashing lights lead us directly to the fire engine at Cactus Spring trailhead. We arrive on scene, ready to spring into action. Not so fast. We're informed that the fire crew is already on their way back out, but without the subject. They hiked in several miles with a heavy litter in their full call-out gear, but were not able to locate the subject at his self-reported location at the crossing with Horsethief Creek.

Apparently the elusive subject has moved and isn't responding to attempted voice or cell contact. With failing headlamps and sagging energy the Cal-Fire guys are simply not set up for a major search. What was once assumed a simple assisted on-trail carryout has now become a full-blown search covering miles of wild canyons. Oh man. I look over at Craig. This is big country out here. There's a lot of ground for just two people to cover. I

guess we'd better get to it! As Craig and I conduct a last cross-check of our gear and sort out our plan of attack, a paramedic brings the welcome news that DSAR has been contacted to join in on the search with an additional 6 people. We decide to hold off heading into the field until we have the additional manpower.

In the meantime, the RSO deputy has established shaky cell contact with our subject once again. Parked at the Tewanet overlook, the deputy pointed his headlights out into the abyss of canyons south of the 74 and was able to roughly ballpark the subject's location on the trail. The deputy repeats cardinal rule of Search and Rescue to the subject: "Stay put. We're coming for you." The united RMRU/DSAR Search team decides we will hike in together with CDF along the trail. Once we can see the police vehicle headlights, we should be directly in the subject's vicinity. He's been told to stay put, so we should be good to go. Great! Sounds simple enough.

As we head out, the final search party consists of RMRU and DSAR, also jointed by 2 CDF and 1 paramedic carrying around 60 lbs. of gear. We take turns trundling the litter and the wheel over the dusty and rocky terrain towards the subject's last reported location. Hiking with a litter can be strenuous, even without a subject strapped in. After several minutes on litter duty the cold night seems suddenly all too warm and we stop to strip down to our bright orange team shirts. After a couple miles we reach the crossing with Horsethief Creek. Staring up in the moonlight we survey the challenge ahead of us. The ridge looms in front of us, a final extended vertical push of steep and rocky switchbacks up to where our subject supposedly awaits us. We stop to deliberate. Should we lug the litter up this extreme grade without confirmation of the subject's whereabouts? He's already moved on us once. "That could just burn us out and if he's not there, well..." notes Sharon from DSAR.

We call out towards the ridgeline "1...2...3... Hello!" ...and wait expectantly for an answer. None comes. Calling again produces the same result. The decision is made to leave the litter at the base of the climb until we've confirmed his location. He should be nearby. How far could a man with 2 prosthetic legs get in this sort of terrain? We wind our way up the ridgeline, towards the slowly brightening horizon to the east. We call out once in a while, just in case our subject has gone to sleep or wandered off trail into a nearby ravine. Reaching the top of the climb, I look to the North. In the far in the distance the red and blue flashers of the deputy's vehicle are visible, its headlights pointed directly towards us.



**RMRU Craig on ridge other Rescuers in distance
Photo by Helene Lohr**

Radio contact with the deputy yields disturbing information: He recently saw the subject's light 400 yards below our current location. Since there's another ridgeline between us and the road, the only way the subject's light could be seen below us is if he's ...(sigh) massively off trail! Oh dagnabit: He's been moving again! I share a look of frustrated understanding with Craig. We both know we're in for a much longer night. Looking again to the north, I can understand why the subject would be tempted to make a go of it. The lights from Highway 74 are so tantalizing. They appear to be so close, almost within reach, especially when the rough terrain and impassable cliffs are concealed under the cover of night. But still- you have to marvel that a man with two prosthetic legs could make it that far off trail in this kind of rough terrain! Something just doesn't seem quite right here.

After a brief conference, the decision is made to head back down to the crossing with Horsethief creek. We'll attempt to access the neighboring canyon by following the scar of the boulder-strewn creek downstream. We once again make the wise decision to leave the litter at the crossing. In brightening light of dawn, we pick our way through the rocks, debris and puddles that clutter the narrow base of the ravine. Just over a mile in we receive encouraging radio contact: "He's on the move! The deputy can see him!" The subject has made his way to a ravine far below the Tewanet lookout. Of course the canyon is far too steep for him to climb out of, but now we at least have a visual. The deputy establishes faint voice contact and finally gets the subject to stop moving.



Rescue Team Members in Canyon Bottom
Photo by Helene Lohr

A few minutes later, even better news crackles its way over the radio. A Cal-Fire Helicopter is available and will be here in a few minutes. The relieved team shares a quick celebration as we take a much-needed break from clambering through the ankle-twisting rocky debris. Snacks are passed round and drinks shared. As the thup-thup-thup of the helicopter approaches our mood starts to lift. Help from the air is always appreciated. The Cal-Fire crewman on radio detail reports, "Ground crew is about 1500 feet from him as the crow flies, but there are some very steep drop-offs between us and him." Getting to the subject on foot would be very difficult and extricating him on foot even worse. Luckily, the weather is calm and clear and the canyon wide enough for the Cal-Fire air-crew to hoist. What a relief. We stand by as the Cal-Fire Helicopter extracts our elusive subject and returns him to trailhead parking lot.



**Cal-Fire Helicopter files subject out
Photo by Helene Lohr**

Now all we have to worry about is ourselves. After hiking around all night carrying a full call-out pack and litter after a moving target, we're not looking forward to the long hike out. Luckily, our generous friends at Cal Fire have a greatly appreciated solution: spend the extra time and effort to extract the search team as well! The helicopter crew drops a man in along the trail behind us to clear a landing zone. The copter extracts us in groups of three, cutting an exhausting hike of several hours down to a matter of minutes. Thank you Cal-Fire!

Back at staging area we get the scoop on our subject (who has refused medical care and already left). The man "covered in blood" with "prosthetic legs" was actually a guy with a couple of bad knees who had gotten a bit scratched up by the brush during his cross-country travels. Craig and I look at each other and can't help but laugh. What a great punch line. Sigh... like I said before... you should never believe everything you hear

about a call-out.



**RMRU Helene at base after mission
Photo by Craig Wills**

RMRU team members present: Helene Lohr and Craig Wills.

Assisting agencies: Desert Search and Rescue (DSAR), Cal-Fire, and California Division of Forestry (CDF).

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.