



Rescue above Tin Mine Canyon Trail

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Written by Alan Lovegreen

Helicopter hoists are one of the more exciting parts of mountain rescue. For many people on our team they are the unicorns of callouts - rare creatures that one may wait decades to glimpse, so when Gwenda sends the callout text for a helicopter hoist, mid-evening in mid-January, I jump to phone in to the rescue line. Ten minutes later I am en route to the Sheriff's Aviation Hanger at Ryan-Hemet Airfield.

I learn additional details about the mission while I am driving. RMRU has been asked to assist in the hoist rescue of five people stuck in the shrubbery in the hills above Tin Mine Canyon Trail. Their story, as I later learn, is that of many of our rescues in this area: people find out about an informal series of plastic rope-lined game trails and mountain bike trails above Tin Mine Canyon Road, follow one of many rabbit holes, and end up in a macabre wonderland of impassible brush and impossible terrain. This is perhaps the fifth such callout to Tin Mine that I've been on in the last twelve months, but usually we just have to hack our way through the bushes and walk the subjects out to safety.

I arrive at the airport. The helicopter is resting on its wheeled trailer, and the familiar mug of RMRU member Les Walker is there to greet me. Even though we had received helicopter training as a team a month ago, Les expertly reviews the application of the screamer suit with me.

Les has seen his share of unicorns.

We're soon airborne, cutting across the city lights between Hemet and Corona. As we near the Cleveland National Forest we can see the lights of the subject's cell phones dotting the dim contours of the hill. The pilot makes a landing zone, or LZ, out of a graded subplot adjacent to the trailhead, and dust billows out from the rotor wash as we descend. Les jumps out. He will unpack each subject upon the aircraft's return. Our technical flight officer, or TFO, moves the hoist system into place and hooks himself to the outside of the aircraft.

We lift back off and hover over the hillside that is less than a mile from the LZ. I hook

my climbing harness to the cable and step out onto the landing skid. The TFO and I nod, and down I go. I lose sight of the group as I am lowered into the brush. It takes me a minute to get my orientation back and begin fighting my way through the Chinquapin. I'm not surprised to find out that the huddling group of five is, like most we rescue above Tin Mine Canyon, dressed in casual clothing ill-suited to the conditions. They are cold but unhurt, and I talk them through what will happen next. We will use screamer suits to extract them. A screamer suit is worn like an oversize vest with steel connecting rings. Two will go up with each run, and I will go out with the last subject on the third and last pass.

I package up the first two subjects into their suits, hook the screamer suit bag to the first subject, and then motion to the TFO and pilot that we're prepared to hoist. The Star-9 Helicopter moves to hover over us, lowers the hook to me, and waits for my sign. I hook in the screamer suit, triple check all of the connections, and tap my helmet with exaggerated movements, the sign that the subject is safe to hoist. And up he goes. The hook returns, and I repeat the process. Two down, three to go.

The helicopter heads back over to the LZ, and touches down long enough for Les to extract both subjects. I know that Les is removing their screamer suits and checking the subject's condition. While we wait, I pass out water and snack food to the remaining three, and we chat about what had gone wrong with their excursion. In a few minutes the helicopter returns, drops me and the duffle bag with the two screamer suits, and in minutes I am sending two more into the inky ether.

Now we wait again. The subject I've saved for last is the one that talked her friends and family members into their adventure in pursuit of plastic ropes. She is embarrassed, and I think back to all of the times I've been disoriented in a mountainous area: too many to count. When the helicopter returns I send her up and follow with one of the subject's backpacks slung across my chest. Les helps her out of the helicopter back at the LZ and the pilot shuts down the engine. Mission accomplished.

We still have the return flight, our informal debriefing with the pilot and TFO, and a greasy post-mission meal at the local sports restaurant, where Les and I will chat about the operation. Not a bad way to spend a Friday night.

RMRU team members present: Alan Lovegreen 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.

