



Fallen Climber Recovery

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Tahquitz Rock
2013-016

Written by - Helene Lohr

It's Friday afternoon. I hear the helicopter circling over my house in Fern Valley. As I reflexively check my phone for a Rescue Call out text, it dings and vibrates with 2 back to back texts from Lee and Les. The text reads "Heads up" from both of them. I sigh, "Probably another climbing accident" I say to my empty kitchen. With the warm weather Tahquitz rock is tempting a lot more people up into cool crisp air and stunning views. Lee swings by to pick me up on his way to Humber Park. The news when we get there is not good. CDF has already lowered in an EMT who has confirmed it's a fatality. It takes a while before we can get any more information. When we do, the day suddenly takes a turn for the worse.

Lucas Dunn. My face falls when I hear the name. A sharp breath in, of recognition. Oh no, an uncomfortable silence as we all take a moment to absorb the news. It's one of our own, an experienced climber, and a young Idyllwild local we all know. After a long, drawn out wait for the coroner, we finally get the go ahead for a helicopter recovery hoist. It's decided that Craig and I will be sent in with a litter to package Lucas and bring him back. Les Walker, one of the best climbers on our team and a good buddy of Lucas takes me to the side and adds to my technical gear a few "just in case items" to help smooth the recovery of his friend.

As we make the short drive down to Keenwild Helitac Lee casts a serious look my way. "Are you good to go on this?" Lee's sure of my technical skills, what he's asking is if I want to emotionally take on the packaging of someone I know. I've been on several recoveries of strangers. This one is different. I sit and think for a second gazing into the distance. Dark clouds are gathering on the horizon, weather is coming in. Someone needs to do this, and soon. I have the skills and Lucas needs to come home. "Yes. Yes, I'm good."

I'll be hoisting first in order to assess the situation and set up anchors for Craig if needed. I take the camera from coroner. After a quick briefing on the shots they will need me to document, I cross the helipad toward Star-9. Our Pilot Kevin Boss and TFO (Technical

Flight Officer) Manny greet us with a handshake and nod. A short and sweet briefing follows, than I climb into the helicopter behind Craig. He takes the seat at the far end and immediately clips into the seatbelt. I swing around so I'm seated next to Manny, legs hanging out the edge of the helicopter. With a quick nod and a smile he clips me in to the hoist for safety. We check each other's' carabiners to make sure they are properly secured and locked.

Within moments the bird lifts into the air and swings smoothly around to face North. Sitting on the edge of the deck, I have a perfect view of our mountain town gliding by below me. As we draw closer a calm focus washes over me. It's go time. Kevin pulls the helicopter into a hover near the face of the rock. Manny makes eye contact with me and points downward. Hundreds of feet below I can make out the forms of four CDF crewmen bunched on a ledge. I check my harness again, rise to a stand with my feet pressed firmly on the skid. Manny takes my hand and places it on the Carabineer handle on his chest. I pivot around to face him and give him a nod. He nods back and starts carefully lowering me. Within a moment I'm over the edge into the open air. Slowly spinning I can see the ledge spread out far below me.

It's surreal how beautiful the surroundings are. The sheer granite face of Tahquitz Rock is stained in dark streaks with thousands of years of rain flow. The rock is so massive it dwarfs you into insignificance. I glance at Suicide Rock looming across the valley, the gulf filled with deep green pine from wall to wall. Wind gusts swell in waves, and then subside, bringing the dark clouds closer with every minute. I glance back down at the approaching ledge, readying myself to land upright and secure an anchor as quickly as possible.

Suddenly I'm jerked to a stop. The ledge pulls away as I pendulum, swinging backwards as Kevin expertly peels the bird away from the face of Tahquitz. A sudden change in the wind has put the helicopter at risk of crashing into the rock. As Manny pulls me back into the helicopter I give him thumbs up: I'm good to go for another round. He swings his microphone up from his face to yell in my ear. "The wind's too rough right now to get so close. We're going to have to lower you in below the ledge. You'll have to climb up." I give him another thumbs up.



Helene being lowered
Photo by Jenny Kirchner (Idyllwild Photographer) jennykphoto.com

Kevin edges the bird in again. I head out the door and Manny lowers me into the cold buffeting of the rotor wash. The trip down is short. Before I know it my hand snags onto an outcropping about 40 ft. below the ledge. I take time to secure a grip on the rough surface before I unclip from the hoist. Star-9 pulls away from the rock and circles the valley once before pulling into a closer hover. Kevin has managed to compensate for the roughening wind and maintain a stable position directly over the target ledge. Mountain flying is one of the most unpredictable and dangerous things our pilots do and Kevin is one of the best. Craig's form appears at the door and swings down into the open air. As he lowers, I begin to climb.

Once we are both on the ledge we briefly greet the CDF crew. With darker clouds gathering in the valley just below us, Star-9 wastes no time in lowering the litter. As it pendulums its way to us I manage to snag an edge and bring it in to the widest part of the

ledge before unclipping it. Manny's voice over the radio, "Those clouds are moving in. We'll be back in got 20 minutes". Star-9 heads back to Keenwild to conserve fuel.

I climb alone up to site of the accident to take pictures of the subject for the coroner. Once I finish, Craig and the CDF crew make their way up with our packs. We work to quickly, yet carefully package our subject into the waiting litter. I'm focused on what needs to be done. We make sure that we get all of his gear in the litter, getting his broken sunglasses, and packaging them as well. The helicopter is already hovering as we finish the last details of packaging. Craig radios in to the bird "Ready to hoist". Manny's on it right away. The hoist swings precariously at the edge of our reach, than it swings right in the sweet spot. Craig grabs it, the CDF crew holds up the spider and I clip it in. An exaggerated hand signal and the litter swings up and away with our subject. As it reaches the bird I pull the tag line and the helicopter swings to the South. I breathe out a heavy sigh of relief, Lucas is going home.

Within minutes Star-9 is back for us. A quick set of hoists and we're safe back in the arms of the Aviation Unit. As we fly away I look out into the darkening pine covered valleys and say a quiet prayer in memory of Lucas.

RMRU team members present: Lee Arnson, Pete Carlson, Helene, Les Walker, and Craig Wills.

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.