

Injured Woman Hiker

July 1, 2013

San Jacinto Mountains - Tramway

2013-022

Written by Helene Lohr

At first I can't figure out why I'm awake. Out of reflex I reach over to the bed stand and grab my phone to check the time. Staring through heavy eyes at the glowing face, I realize its ringing. It's my partner, Lee; "They need a team for a rescue hoist. Can you jump in with me as backup?" I flick up on the light switch, blink to adjust my eyes, and stride towards the gear closet. I drag out my Osprey pack and pull open the top to review the contents: Helmet, Harness, extra clothes, food and water for the subject, overnight supplies for me. Check! Even though the hoist will probably go quickly, you never know... as a general rule we "pack for 2 hours or 2 days".

Inside of 15 minutes I'm jumping into the cavernous cab of Lee's Dodge Ram. We bomb our way halfway down the mountain to the Keenwild Helipad. Lee parks, I swing my hefty pack out of the truck bed after him, than we make our way onto the pitch black landing pad. A coyote howls, than fades into silence. Far out in the distance I can see Star-9's lights approaching, intermittently piercing the dark night sky. We crouch down to the side of the Landing Zone and watch the skids cruise above our heads. Even on the smooth pavement the rotor wash from the landing pelts me with enough debris to make me glad I am wearing my safety goggles.

With a quick wave, the Technical Flight Officer (TFO) motions to us to approach the helicopter. We duck down at the waist, carrying our packs down low in our hands, and move forward. Up close I smile to see the familiar faces of pilot Mike Calhoun and TFO Eric Hannum. After a quick but warm exchange of handshakes and nods, we climb up into our seats and buckle up. In what seems like only a few seconds, the ground sways away beneath us, and we are cruising towards the High country. I pull on my headset and swing down the mouthpiece. We cross check communications, "good to go".

The dark desert floor wraps out below us to the north east, cities an oasis of bright lights twinkling in the black of night. We see bright flashes of lightning threateningly far out over the Mojave. "There's something brewing out there" says Eric, "Let's hope it doesn't come our way ". I cast a glance in the same direction and silently echo the same

sentiment in my head. I realize I have been gripping my pack since we took off and let it go, settling back into my seat. It's an unexpectedly warm night. I'm usually colder in the cockpit but tonight I have to peel my jacket off within minutes of getting in.

"What have we got asks Lee?" Eric turns toward us, "Injured hiker, she missed the tram down. The reporting party is her boyfriend, says she hurt her ankle on the way back down to the tram. We have a general idea of her location, but we'll need to pinpoint it first before we can decide how to insert you." Mike circles the helicopter around the high mountain valleys, while we search the slopes for any sign of light, any sign of our subject. The noise of the rotors echoes across the valleys, breaking into the silence of the night and probably waking up a few annoyed backpackers along the way. After about 15 minutes we see it, a faint light shining up from far below. "We see a light ahead at 9 o'clock." From the color and strength it looks like it may be the face of a cell phone. Most people don't know that we can see cell phone light at night from miles away given the right conditions. Lee pulls out a local topographical map and I trace my finger over the area, starting to plan our hiking approach.

Mike and Eric are doing the same for the helicopter. "We can put it down nearby in Long Valley meadow," says Mike. "Sounds good to us" I chime in and Lee gives a quick nod and a thumbs up. It's not too far from the subject. We can hike in quickly as the hasty team to assess her condition. Our air crew can insert further rescuers and equipment as needed afterwards. I lean forward and hook my fingers through the top handle of my pack in anticipation. Now that we have visual, I'm eager to get out on the trail hiking. "Hold up there. We can't land yet." Pilot Mike says.

When dealing with helicopters, there are a lot of factors to consider. The warmth of the night has altered the air density, making it unexpectedly thin for our purposes. Wisely preparing for a potentially longer aerial search, the crew filled the fuel tank. On a colder night this weight would not be a problem, but tonight, adding in the weight of a subject and multiple rescuers if we land, we might not have enough power to take off in the short clearance offered by the mountain meadow. Despite dramatically staged movie portrayals, a straight up-and-down take off is very difficult, potentially dangerous, and consumes huge amounts of power. "We need to fly around and burn more fuel to get the weight down", says Mike. We circle the rim of the mountain valley several more times. It's absolutely stunning and for a moment I gaze down and let myself relax into the view. Off to the North I can still see flashes of lightning illuminating the desert floor. I feel my brow furrow. The storm seems a lot closer. I'm starting to get a little nervous that it might show up before we can finish.

Another 25 minutes and things are looking good. We've burned enough fuel and it's time to land. As we come into the meadow, tall grasses lie down flat in wide waves in front of us. The helicopter draws a circle of light out directly below us fading into the jagged

black silhouettes of pine trees. Eric, our TFO, cracks open the door and leans out for a better view. It's his job to make sure that the helicopter is safe, that we have enough clearance around us and that no major debris are poised to be sucked up into our rotor. Mountain landings are risky business. Within moments we are down. Time to move out, Eric opens the door all the way and motions for us. I unclip my seat belt; I grab my pack and step out into the dark.

After a quick radio check with Eric to make sure we can keep up communications with our air crew, we head out onto the trail. Within minutes, Lee spots the reporting party wandering along the trail. We gather information from him about our subject's whereabouts and condition. He's well off and in decent shape and we request that he return to the relative shelter of the tram station to remain safe until contacted. Lee heads off first down the trail, long strides carrying him along quickly. I crank my own short legs into gear and manage to haul him back in. As we reach the base of the switchbacks I interject between strides; "Hold up, time for a call out!" We pause and I turn my shoulders to face upslope. "One... two...three..." I sucked in a deep breath, spreading my ribs wide, and we bellow out "Hello!" in unison. My ears are met with silence for a few seconds, and then a faint cry echoes in from far upslope. Great! I let my breath out, only then realizing that I was holding it. Lee radios in "Star 9, we have voice contact, proceeding to the subject". A few minutes of intense hiking later, I see a faint light ahead and my heart lifts further.

"Hello, we're from Search and Rescue, we're here to help". Our subject, Teresa, is happy to see us. She is sitting in the middle of a switchback on the trail, obviously exhausted, but smiling a greeting back at us. Despite her smile, it's obvious she has not had a fun night. After a quick scene safety assessment, I settle down by her on the dusty trail. "Are you hurt? What happened?" Careful questioning gives us a good outline of her backstory and method of injury. After a long and exhausting hike attempting to keep up with her friend, (probably excessive for her level of conditioning) she reports having slipped, twisting her ankle and bumping her hip, luckily with no head, neck or back involvement. After her friend left to get help, she did her best to try and self-evacuate, sliding and dragging herself downhill for an extended distance until her strength gave out. She finally found a relatively soft spot on the trail to hunker down and await rescue. She has been sitting alone in the middle of the dark trail for hours.

She's a friendly, tough lady, a nurse, and makes no complaint as we examine her. We gather necessary information. A thorough head to toe reveals some scrapes and bruises, in addition to a painfully sprained, potentially broken ankle. LOC, SAMPLE and quick set of vitals shows her to be in generally good condition, although we will keep track to make sure she maintains a positive trend. As soon as we examine her foot, it's quickly obvious that our subject will not be walking anywhere tonight. Lee keys the radio: "Star-

9, we will need a litter, a wheel and additional rescuers to help with transport."

I pull out my first aid kit. It's time to get our brave lady ready for transport. One SAM splint, an ace bandage, and with some TLC we have a stable injury. I make sure to leave access so that we can continue to check her distal pulse and make sure she is getting circulation. Hopefully we will have her out of here in just a few minutes, after the rest of the team arrives with the litter, but it's always better to prepare for the long term if possible. Now that we've dealt with the most pressing safety issues, it's time to further address patient comfort. Teresa has been sitting still for a long time on the cold ground. Lee pads her sitting area and wraps her up our spare sleeping bags and down jackets. I make sure she has enough to eat and drink. Getting her insulated, rehydrated and fed will fuel her body and help keep her warm.

"Are we good to go?" Lee asks. "Good to go". I reply, giving our subject an encouraging smile. Lee walks off to the side and calls in: "Star-9, Team One. We're ready for transport. Where are we with the litter and additional rescuers?" The radio crackles; "Team One, this is Star-9, bad news. We have the litter, and rescuers are standing by, but the storm is almost here." Oh heck. I almost forgot about the storm. Star-9 isn't exaggerating-the storm has moved in unbelievably quickly. Seconds later, the first burst of lightning streaks across the sky and thunder booms close behind. The sky opens up in a pelting rain. The first raindrops splash cold onto my scalp. "Team One, we can't pull you out! Are you and subject prepared to overnight?" Lee glances at me and I nod. "Star-9, we are good, we repeat, good to overnight, request additional rescuers and resources when available."

With our last radio contact I put in a request that the Sheriff's Department let my school know that I won't be in to teach class in the morning. At least I have a unique excuse: left behind on a mountain helicopter rescue is something they probably haven't heard before! The helicopter peels off. We are alone on the mountaintop. Without the helicopter we have no outside radio contact. We'll just have to wait until the storm breaks or the tram opens up in the morning to allow new resources. We ramp down from our evacuation efforts, and start to prep for a long, wet, and cold night. Lee pulls out a tarp and I wedge several logs up against a deadfall tree to form a lean-to shelter in place above Teresa. Luckily, within a few minutes the torrential downpour has passed. Unfortunately, the cloud cover is still far too thick for a helicopter to penetrate.

We make sure Teresa is warm and as comfortable as possible in the circumstances; check her distal pulse and vitals again, than bed down nearby for an uneasy rest. I set my alarm to repeat every hour, so we can check in regularly on our subject. High winds moan through the trees as we settle down for an uncomfortable night. I meet first light with the reassuring weight of my rescue pack on my back. Lee and I have decided that I will head out to the tram to re-establish contact with the Sheriff's Department and try to wrangle up

some reinforcements. I leave my first aid supplies, spare sleeping bag and clothing behind to help take care of our subject.



**Subject wrapped up and warm on trail
Photo by Helene Lohr**

On the way back I swing by the Ranger Station. Although it is officially closed and unmanned, I notice that there is a CCC crew camped just outside. Perfect! With some aggressive pounding and loud voice I quickly manage to wake them up. A quick explanation of the situation gets them in motion. In a few minutes they have pulled a litter and wheel from the station (which they conveniently have the keys to) and we now have several strong young guys to help us transport our subject. That's what I call using the resources at hand! I radio Lee with the good news: "I've got a gift for you on the way up, a wheeled litter and four eager young guys". Lee is more than happy hear this: "Copy that!" I send the guys back up the trail to Lee and Teresa and continue on my way to the

tram.

The tram employees have just arrived on the first car. Once informed of the situation, they are eager to help. Plus 2 more RMRU members and 2 DSAR members also came up on the first car. Together RMRU and DSSAR escort the subject back down to the tram and to safety. Our brave subject has kept a good attitude through her entire ordeal and soon will be heading home after a quick check out at the hospital! As an extra surprise, the Riverside Sheriff Department has not only informed my School that I would be late, they also provided an officer to drive me back to my side of the mountain. I arrive in class only 5 minutes late, and with a great story to share with my kids.

RMRU team members present: Lee Arnson, Paul Caraher, Pete Carlson, and Helene Lohr.

DSAR team members present: Sharon Ollenburger and Mike Calhoun.

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.