



Searching Stuck Cars

December 31, 2014
Ortega Highway
2014-052

Written by Patrick McCurdy

On December 30th, an unusually heavy early winter storm slammed Southern California with massive winds, freezing temperatures, and snowfall. By 3 a.m. on the 31st, the I-15 freeway in Temecula/Murrieta was closed due to about 4" of snow. At 7:30 a.m. RMRU was called out to assist with rescuing 22 stranded people, including small children, on the Ortega Highway which runs west to east from Lake Elsinore to Orange County over the Santa Ana Mountains.

We arrived at the command post to find a multi-agency operation with CHP running Incident Command, but RMRU under control of Riverside Sheriff's Office. They were dealing with multiple calls from stranded motorists, trying to locate each on maps, and attempted to triage the calls for the most urgent. Most callers had been stuck on the road all night. Cal-Trans dozers were working the highway from both sides, attempting to clear the road, but were hampered by large numbers of fallen trees and branches. Shortly after arrival our spirits were lifted by the sound of rotors announcing the arrival of RSO's Star 94 helicopter, which surprised us due to the lingering heavy winds.



**TFO Ryan Burk getting ready for RMRU to come on board
Photo by Patrick McCurdy.**

Numerous agencies were involved and CHP did a fine job of coordinating the effort. After an initial brief, Frank Snider and I were selected to go up in Star 94 to try to locate a family that was out of their vehicle as it was said to be sliding toward a precipitous drop. Small children were reported to be among them. Meanwhile Dana Potts went up in a CHP helicopter to try to locate other stranded motorists, while the rest of the team stood by for further assignments and coordinated with the incident command staff.

Frank, I, and the Star 94 crew were unable to locate the stranded family at the location given, but flight crew Mike Calhoun and Ryan Burk flew us back and forth over the Ortega Highway for a couple of hours looking for other stranded motorists. While we worked hard to try to locate people needing rescue, we couldn't fail to appreciate the beauty of the mountains that almost never see this amount of snowfall. It was simply gorgeous.



View from Helicopter
Photo by Patrick McCurdy.

By this time the Cal-Trans dozer crews, working from both the east and west, had cleared all but about 2 miles of roadway. We landed twice so Frank and I could check out stuck vehicles, but both were abandoned. We spoke to people who live near the Candy Store, but they were fine, if without power.



**Frank Marks Car with X
Photo by Patrick McCurdy.**

We finally made it back to the command post and stood by with the rest of the team while authorities tried to account for the occupants of all abandoned vehicles. They were taking no chance that someone had walked away from their car and got lost in the mountains. Frank, Dana, and I got the sweet assignments but every member present was geared up and ready to spend whatever time required in the field to rescue those in need. At about 4 p.m., we were told to stand down as all were accounted for.



Helicopter Leaving Base
Photo by Patrick McCurdy.

This was truly a multi-agency effort. CHP took lead with Riverside Sheriff's Office (including Sheriff's Emergency Response Team, RMRU, Elsinore PD, and Aviation), Orange County Sheriff's Office, Cal Trans, Cal Fire, and CHP Aviation. The American Red Cross set up a shelter in case it was needed and also provided food and refreshments to personnel at the command post. While no one ended up needing rescue, a multi-agency task force was in place in case they did.

RMRU Members Involved: Cameron Dickinson, Glenn Henderson, Kevin Kerns, Patrick McCurdy, Dana Potts, Frank Snider, Ray Weden, and Gwenda Yates.

Sheriff's Aviation: (Pilot - Mike Calhoun) (TFO - Ryan Burk)

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.