

Hikers Stuck

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Cleveland National Forest
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Written by Donny Goetz

Saturday night around 9 pm. It was my birthday weekend and I was supposed to be camping/climbing in Joshua Tree with my wife and a friend. But plans had changed as I had gone out on an overnight search on San Jacinto for a missing Snow Creek climber the night before.

I had just crawled into bed, a little tired from the previous night's mission, when my phone rang again! We had another search in Corona. Two hikers stranded on a 50' tall cliff. I knew I had to go. Most of our team was out of town for the annual California MRA team recertification up in Mammoth. Being tired was no excuse. We had a skeleton crew and this sounded like it was going to require some rope work - my specialty!

I got the trailhead location from Gwenda and knew I had been there before. In the hills above Corona lies a hillside with 5 or 6 very steep drainages where some locals have decided to make their own "trails". Known online as the Skyline Rope Trails, these ill-conceived routes follow the steep, overgrown drainages up from Tin Mine Canyon to the skyline ridge trail. The steepest, often vertical, rocky sections of the drainages have been made accessible to the untrained adventure seeker by these local folks hanging yellow, 1/4" polypropylene rope to hold onto and help pull yourself up the route. This all seems like an ok idea and if you look at the numerous videos on YouTube, it sure looks like fun! Who wouldn't want to go up there?! The problem is, these ropes are woefully inadequate to support human life, especially after they have baked under the often harsh California sun for a month. These ropes break. And they don't break on their own. They break when some unsuspecting soul grabs hold and leans back, trusting the bulk of their body weight to them. When this happens, you will fall, and depending on where you fall, it could be a very long way down. I have been on several rescues in these drainages before and it is always a result of these ropes breaking and leaving people, who are otherwise unfit to climb these routes, stranded and possibly badly injured.

I arrive at the trailhead around 11 pm and meet up with Lee Arnson and Judy Spowart. Both had been on the previous night's mission. We were all a bit fatigued and ready to get

in and get out with our subjects as quickly as we could. To add to our troubles, there was a storm brewing.

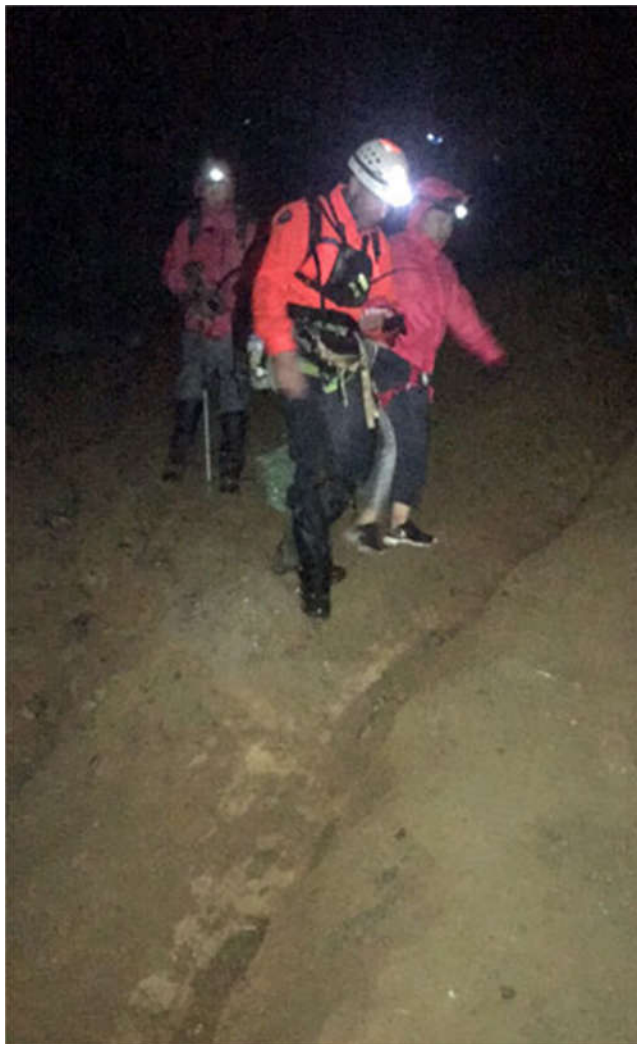
We started up the ridge line trail which is quite steep and has lots of fun loose rock to keep you engaged. "At least the temps are manageable tonight" I thought. We kept a good pace up the ridge. We had been in contact with one of our subjects via cell phone and he said he had made it up to the main trail but his friend was still stuck in the drainage below. Lee asked him to wait on the main trail and that we would be there soon. We hiked as quickly as we could, gaining a significant elevation. After a time, we began to wonder if, somehow, we had missed our guy!! He said he was on the main trail. How could that happen?! Lee phoned our subject again and asked him to listen to our shouts. The subject said it sounded as if we were still below him. We asked him to shout back and we could barely hear him. The wind also made it difficult to discern where his voice was coming from. It sounded like he was below us but also much further west. I looked at Google Earth on my phone and noticed that there were still a few more of these drainages that met the ridge up higher and to the west. Maybe they were in one of those. We pushed on. Now it was raining and the wind had picked up. The trail, which was a thick clay soil, became dangerously slippery. Clay clung to our shoes like peanut butter on a spoon; no amount of shaking would set it free. We were struggling to stay upright, but pressed on into the night.

Nearly two hours into the hike, I checked Google Earth once more. Our trail was now turning away from the ridge. We had come to the top of the last of the drainages. Our subject was not there. We HAD passed them! We discussed options and decided we had to head back down and check every little side trail we could find. Heading down the slick, mucky trail was much worse than heading up. I fell several times, covering myself in mud.

As we descended, we called out for our subjects. About 20 minutes back down the trail, we all hear a shout back to Lee's call. Great! Now we have them! Lee kept shouting while I headed down over the ridge and finally got a visual contact with one of our intrepid wanderers. He was uninjured; just a little cold and wet. We all descended the upper part of this awful drainage to a perch about 70' above his stranded companion. She was clinging to a broken strand of yellow rope. Go figure.

Lee and I quickly set up a rope system by equalizing rope to several small shrubs while Judy took our other subject, Henry, back up to the ridge. I built a basic hauling system, anchored the rope, grabbed Judy's harness from Lee, and rappelled down to Gabby, our second subject. She was very cold and tired and ready to be out of there! She had fallen over 50' in each of three attempts to extract herself from this precarious position. It was a miracle she wasn't more seriously injured! Just scrapes and bruises it seemed. Hanging from the haul line, I got Judy's harness onto the girl and tied her into the rope. Lee was up

top, ready to haul. This section of the drainage was very steep and slippery. I helped our subject to climb as Lee hauled the rope with both of us on it. We slipped and fell constantly as we worked our way up. There was a short section of vertical rock which we negotiated carefully and soon were up with Lee! There was still another 80 vertical feet to go but it was less steep and Lee had anchored a REAL rope up this section which we all used to get back up.



**Judy in back, Lee, and Subject Hiking Down
Photo by Donny Goetz.**

Finally, out of the nasty drainage and up on the ridge we were certain of our success, yet knew we still had a long, miserable hike out down the steep ridge which, in spots, was now more "water slide" than trail. We descended slowly, taking great care to negotiate the steepest sections with our fatigued "clients" (a new term we coined which we all liked better than "subjects"!). Gabby was having a very difficult time and required Lee's support for nearly the entire descent of the ridge. Occasionally, both of us had to support

her from each side to keep her from falling.



**Subject, Lee, Donny, Subject, and Judy at Base
Photo by RSO Deputy.**

RMRU Members Involved: Lee Arnson, Donny Goetz, and Judy Spowart.

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.