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Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit

Riverside, CA

RMRU Member Injured on Tahquitz Rock

November 27, 2010
Tahquitz Rock
2010-036

Written by Pete Carlson

A yellow button with rounded corners and a slight shadow, containing the word "Donate" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

Seven RMRU team members met at Humber Park at 9 a.m. Saturday for an unofficial training to hike around Tahquitz Rock, learn the starting points of some of the main routes, and determine the best approaches to them. We started up the North Gully in beautiful sunny weather, enjoying the hike and talking as we ascended. By 10 a.m. we were near the base of the Rock, pointing out routes and telling stories about past missions. The ground was covered in fresh snow on top of a layer of hard packed snow and ice. We were nearing the top of the North Gully where it tops out at the notch and opens to the south side when we got to the first problem of the day.

Just below the notch there is a short section of third class scrambling that was covered with patches of snow and ice. Lee took off his pack and climbed up 10 feet to assess our approach. He reported that we could tie a rope to a tree above, and then everyone could attach an ascender to the rope and climb up safely, carrying his pack. Les stated that he had a rope in his pack and started to climb, his pack on his back, to give the rope to Lee. Les was eight feet up when he reached with his left hand to grab a hold that turned out to be covered with ice. He immediately came off and landed perfectly on his feet, facing the 35 degree slope that we were on. Unfortunately Les' right leg punched through the snow and sank another two feet and we heard a snap. The rest of us thought that he had landed on a bush beneath the snow, but that was not the case. The first thing Les said was, "I broke my leg; help me."



Paul Assists Les

It was 11 a.m. and two of us started making cell phone calls at once. Lee called Gwenda, our RMRU call-out captain, and Donny called 911. Within 60 seconds of the fall Gwenda was calling out the Team and Donny had notified the Riverside Sheriff (standard procedure is to contact the Sheriff who then gets an official Office of Emergency Services - OES - number and then we can get help from other agencies, if needed). Paul, Nick, and Tom, who were 50 feet below us, climbed up to Les to start first aid and to help get him as comfortable as possible. Since we were all on a 35 degree slope we had to move carefully and quickly get some ropes in place to prevent Les from sliding further down the slope. I climbed down to Les and put a down sweater and Gortex™ parka on him to keep him warm. **Then I got a SAM Splint and Ace bandage from my first aid kit** and carried it down to the three first aiders. I then climbed back up and got a rope from Lee's pack and threw it up to him, following with a sling and some technical gear. Lee planned to set up rope on the tree above him and rappel back down to us rather than down climb to where Les had fallen. Donny began creating a platform in the snow 50 feet below Les so we would have a level place to care for him.



First Aiders Splint Les' Leg

In talking with Les and upon examination, Paul determined that Les had a compound tib-fib fracture above his right ankle (this was later confirmed by hospital personnel). Paul and Nick put on the SAM Splint, then added two trekking poles wrapped with an Ace bandage to further stabilize the broken bones. By then Donny was ready below. Meanwhile, I set up an anchor 20 feet above using another rope, which we then tied into Les' climbing harness. While I belayed, the three first aiders helped Les slide on his left side down 50 feet to the platform that Donny had made. Lee rappelled down a rope that was doubled around a tree so that once he was safely down he could pull the rope back out.



Keeping warm while awaiting helicopter

Now came the waiting game. All of the involved coordinating agencies were doing their parts. The Riverside Sheriff and Idyllwild Fire tried to procure a helicopter for the evacuation. The Riverside Sheriff's helicopter was not flying on this particular day, but the RSO made attempts to call in a pilot on his or her day off. The Idyllwild Fire Department always sends an ambulance comes to Humber Park whenever there is an injury on Tahquitz Rock and they did so on this day as well. Idyllwild Fire also worked with CAL FIRE to try to get a helicopter for us. In the mean time we began planning a route down the North Gully in case we had to carry Les out. By then other team members were arriving at Humber Park and Team 1, Chad and Will, started up with two 200 foot ropes. Team 2, comprised of Glenn, Rob, Roger, Mike, and Matt, would carry in a litter if needed. It was now 12 o'clock noon and we got word that CAL FIRE 901 would be in the air in 10 minutes with two medics and a litter.

The plan was for the helicopter to fly Les to a big field at Astro Camp in Idyllwild. This is the closest area in which CAL FIRE can land. An ambulance would then take him to Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs for medical evaluation and treatment. CAL FIRE 901 flew over and checked out the area first, then started to lower one of the medics down on the hoist cable. Once on the ground, the medic sent the cable back up and the litter came down next. With the litter on the ground the cable was on its way back up when wind knocked it into the rocks. This meant that the helicopter had to return to Astro Camp to check out the cable for safety. This is standard practice with helicopters; whenever anything unusual happens they always land and re-inspect equipment.



Ready for airlift



Half Way Up

We got Les into the litter, securing him for the hoist out, just as the helicopter returned. Les went up first, followed by the medic, and the helicopter flew off. Then all was quiet. It was now 1:15 p.m., 2 hours and 15 minutes from fall to evacuation. We took a break to eat and drink, then packed up ropes and gear for the hike out. As we started down the North Gully we met Chad and Will only 400 feet below us. They took Les' equipment from us to lighten our loads and Chad had cold pizza and Gator Aid as a treat for us. As we continued down we met up with members of Team 2 who had also come up about ½ mile to meet us. At 2:45 p.m. we reached Humber Park where Gwenda was running base camp.



Heading Out

Les was to have surgery the next day (Sunday) and as I write this post I have not heard how it went or what the long term outcome will be. We all wish Les a speedy recovery and hope to see him back in action with the Team soon. We will post an update on Les' status to this web site in the future. As the appointed Team Leader for the rescue, I am proud of every member of our Team. When the fall happened everyone just did what needed to be done as quickly as possible in a safe and effective manner.

RMRU would like to thank the pilot and crew of CAL FIRE 901. They did an excellent job of evacuating Les from the mountain and it was a pleasure to work with such competent, professional people.

RMRU members present (training): Lee Arnson, Paul Caraher, Pete Carlson, Donny Goetz, Tom Myers, Nick Nixon, and Les Walker.

RMRU members present (mission): Will Carlson, Glenn Henderson, Mike Herman, Matt Jordon, Chad Marler, Rob May, Roger May, and Gwenda Yates.

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