

# San Diego Mountain Rescue Team: 50 years of life and death on the edge

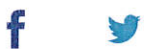


The San Diego Mountain Rescue Team is taken by helicopter to a November 2015 search operation on Mount Whitney. (Mark Kenny)



By **Peter Rowe**

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Get yourself lost in the wilderness and these volunteers will come to the rescue.

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**I**n its 50-year history, the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team has completed hundreds of training missions, each with a dramatic medical scenario.

The March 10 training exercise on Mount Baldy had the classic elements:

- A steep, snow-covered slope.
- An unexpected hazard.
- Serious injuries.

Yet something about this scene felt off, recalled Tony Rolfe, a former president of the team.

“Is this for real?” Rolfe’s companions yelled as two men collapsed into snowdrifts. “Or is this our medical scenario?”

It was for real. Falling downhill at about 30 mph, a brick-sized chunk of granite headed for Adam Little, climbing 500 feet below the 10,064-foot peak. Striking Little’s ice ax, the rock ricocheted off his thigh, then slammed into Dr. Richard Yocum.

Yocum, the team’s president, dropped as if he’d been shot. Lying in the snow, the physician watched what happened next.

Team members hurried to a ski hut, using Wi-Fi coverage there to signal a helicopter.

A team medic assessed Yocum’s injuries: right leg broken in two spots.

Others strapped Yocum into a litter and wrapped him in a thermal blanket. Several scouted out a landing zone, then lowered Yocum and Little to that spot.

Finally, the injured men waited for the sound of a distant helicopter, coming to airlift them to a hospital.

“After three hours of lying in a litter in the snow,” Yocum said, “hearing that *whup whup whup* was tremendously comforting.”

The incident gave Yocum a fresh appreciation for the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team. Since 1967, these trained volunteers have plucked the lost from mountain crevasses and led the bewildered out of desert labyrinths.

They’ve retrieved wandering children and [dementia](#) patients. They operate in every kind of weather and all types of terrain, including one of the county’s most consistently confusing areas, the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

“People get lost there all the time,” said John Wehbring, one of the team’s founders.

While team members are thrilled to reunite loved ones, they sometimes respond to grim scenes. In 1978, when a small plane collided with a PSA jetliner, the team scoured the North Park crash site for human limbs and other remains.

This high-stakes undertaking is often a life-and-death race against time. That's been true since February 1967, when a tense incident inspired the team's creation.

"There was a college couple that went down to Baja California to climb Picacho del Diablo," Yocum said. "When they didn't come back, there was a big search."

## Devil's Peak

Wehbring, 81, remembers this as "the incident."

Eleanor Dart and her fiancé, Ogden Kellogg, left Claremont's Pitzer College for the 1967 spring break. The undergraduates headed south to San Felipe on the Gulf of California, then hitched a ride inland.

On Feb. 5, they began walking toward Picacho del Diablo, the Devil's Peak. The couple had anticipated a 20-mile hike to the 10,157-foot summit, but the trail twisted through canyons, around waterfalls, up rocky slopes and across icy ridges.

They had planned to be back in Claremont by Feb. 13. That day, they reached the summit.

Exhausted, low on food, unfamiliar with the route, the couple split up Feb. 16. Dart stayed behind to recover her strength. Kellogg pressed on, looking for help.

By then, family members had alerted authorities, which contacted mountain rescue teams from Los Angeles and Riverside. They reached out to the Sierra Club's San Diego chapter, whose rock climbers included Wehbring, an East Coast transplant.

Recently hired as Imperial Beach's planning director, he could devote only a few days to the search. He wasn't there when Dart was found on March 1, or for Kellogg's rescue on March 2.

Both had survived the ordeal, yet Wehbring wondered: What if this happened again?

"We needed to have a team in San Diego," he decided, "rather than rely on the people in the Los Angeles area."

Days after Dart and Kellogg's rescue, about 15 rock climbers met in Balboa Park. Led by Wehbring and two friends, Wes Reynolds and Will Tapp, the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team was born.

## ‘Baptism of fire’

The rescuers spent months acquiring equipment. Everything from ropes to CB radios were begged, borrowed or bought at discount.

Certified by the non-profit Mountain Rescue Association, the new team agreed to work under the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department’s direction. (This arrangement was codified in 1993.)

By June 1968, Wehbring, Tapp and John Butler raced to the rescue in the desert southeast of Ensenada. Hiking 12 miles across the parched land, they found George Hoey, a motorcyclist who had been injured in an accident.

Through 105-degree heat, they brought Hoey back to civilization.

A month later, the team was enlisted in the hunt for 10-year-old Bobby Sitz. Attending a church camp, the San Diego boy became lost while on a hike outside Idyllwild.

Despite two nights and three days in the wild, the boy was rescued unharmed on Tahquitz Peak.

On this mission, the San Diegans were far from alone. Bloodhounds and numerous Southern California search teams scoured the mountains.

But the rookies came away from these initial multi-day campaigns with confidence.

“We got our baptism of fire in a series of intense, tough operations,” Wehbring wrote in a training manual, “and consistently turned out more people than many other teams.”

## ‘Hug-A-Tree’

Not every mission has a happy ending. In February 1981, a five-day search of Palomar Mountain for 9-year-old Jimmy Beveridge concluded with the discovery of the boy’s body. The lost hiker was found in a ravine, curled up near a tree.

Ab Taylor, a San Diego Mountain Rescue Team member, was devastated.

“I simply couldn’t believe that the largest search team in county history — more than 200 rescuers plus helicopters and a contingent of Marines — could have failed so badly,” he told The San Diego Union.

“I felt guilty. I felt responsible.”

A legendary tracker, Taylor's biography informed the 1980 Charles Bronson movie, "Borderline." During 31 years with the Border Patrol, Taylor had never before failed to find a missing child. The Jimmy Beveridge tragedy gnawed at him.

With other searchers, Taylor created "Hug-A-Tree," a wilderness survival program for children. Once a slide show, it is now a video sold by the National Association for Search and Rescue.

The basic lessons — stay put; make yourself visible; if frightened, hug a tree — still reach young audiences.

"We've sold literally a couple thousand of these DVDs," said Chris Boyer, the Virginia-based association's president. "It's all over the place."

## Harsh conditions

Every fall, the team enlists fresh members and elects a new board. The process rattles Wehbring, the last surviving founder.

"Every year I think to myself, are we going to have the same kind of team we had before?" he said.

He even had reservations about Yocum, a physician and biopharmaceutical consultant. The doctor was fit and experienced but quiet. Too quiet?

So Wehbring watched — and was relieved by what he saw.

"He is so smart, so good," Wehbring said of Yocum. "I am just amazed. This guy does the right things."

His admiration extends beyond Yocum. "The team now," he said, "is as strong as it ever has been."

There are now 60 some members. About a third are female. Members must attend regular meetings and weekend training expeditions, plus supply their own gear, from tents to snowshoes — about \$1,500 worth of equipment.

"It's a huge commitment of time and resources," Yocum said.

It's also a test of endurance and character. Recruits have to mesh with other team members, often working together under harsh conditions.

Mid-summer training weekends are in the Anza-Borrego Desert; mid-winter expeditions at frosty elevations.

One year, a pair of outings exposed team members to temperatures ranging from 8 to 122 degrees. Veterans of both missions received a new decoration: The Mercury Award.

Practicing in such extremes may seem masochistic, but Yocum said its good preparation.

“More often than not, we’re called out in the middle of the night and in the worst weather,” he said. “That’s when people get in trouble.”

And when people are in distress, they want rescuers who are calm and proficient, regardless of time or temperature. That’s what Yocum wanted, lying in the snow with a shattered leg.

“The team,” he said, a note of pride in his voice, “immediately went from training mode to rescue mode.”

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