



THE TRACKER

Monthly Newsletter of the Inland Empire Search and Rescue Council

January 2004

Volume 13 Number 1



Navigating the mud and checking for survivors

Waterman Canyon Mudslide

Russ Meure, Lt. Commander, Apple Valley Posse

Having watched the news Christmas evening, it was no surprise to my wife Bonnie,

or I, that the phone would soon be ringing. Rescue personnel were shown on all the major news channels trying to rescue a large family gathering in a place called Waterman canyon. Watching crews attempt to cross a creek with some of the victims in what looked like sheets of frozen rain huddled in the bucket of a large loader it looked unreal for a moment. Then the reality of it struck. The phone was going to ring!

The call came about 10:00 p.m.. We were being called out to help with the search for folks that could not be found the night before. Having already gone to my computer and printed out a map of the Waterman canyon area I knew were I had to go. They wanted us at Waterman and 40th at 6 a.m. Checking my mental list of already gathered items I was as prepared as I thought I could be.

Its amazing that at times like these you don't need an alarm clock as something inside tells you its time to go even in the deepest of sleep. Beating the clock, I was awake at 3:00 a.m.

On the road by 3:45, cold and overcast, the weather did not seem too

promising. Logging on with dispatch with the truck's radio has always given me the assurance that someone else is there. Listening to dispatchers, deputies who had to work the night shift, and hearing other rescue units logging on, further seated that feeling.

Pulling up into the parking lot where the Incident Command Post (ICP) was set up, I found the area aglow with flood lights from TV crews, Sheriff dept. Rescue personnel and deputies with their vehicles were waiting for their assignments. Reporters were checking their notes, preparing for the early morning broadcast, and the way they were bundled with noticeable steam from their breathing told me it was going to be a cold one.

At the briefing 50 to 75 SAR personnel, deputies, highway patrol and support people were crowded into a large semicircle, maps were handed out to team leaders and we were advised of the different sections that individual teams were to be assigned. We were advised that the cold, wet and possibly icy, leg-sucking mud was expected to be thick and hazardous. Your safety and your teammates' safety was stressed. This was not going to be your normal search. 14 people from 8 months of age and up were missing from a camp upstream while celebrating Christmas. Chances for surviving the night were slim but still possible. It

See "Mudslide" on p. 4

In This Issue

Mudslides	1
Subscribing to <i>The Tracker</i>	2
ITRS 2003	3
Calendar	7
Classifieds	8



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Editor

To facilitate distribution of *The Tracker* a mailing list is now available. *The Tracker* will be distributed via this email list as well as in hard-copy at the IESARC meetings. In order to receive your copy of *The Tracker* you must send an email to **tracker-subscribers-subscribe@sbsar.org**. Remember, there is a hyphen between each word in this address. After sending this email you will get a response confirming your subscription.

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you must send the subscription email from each address that you would like to subscribe. If you get into trouble you can check the web page, **www.thetracker.info** for past issues and further instructions.

Feel free to contact me at any time at editor@thetracker.info. I am always looking for articles, so please send them to the same address. If there is something that you think may be of interest to folks please pass that along too.

International Technical Rescue Symposium

Jeff Lehman, Cave Rescue Team

The end of last October, Bob Gattas (West Valley SAR), Frank Hester (Wrightwood SAR), Steve Netley (Cave Rescue Team & Morongo SAR), and I made the trip to Salt Lake City to attend the International Technical Rescue Symposium (ITRS 2003). For those interested in technical rescue, ITRS is a must-attend meeting. The conference is a symposium so each speaker addresses the entire assembly. It is not like most professional conferences where there are a number of simultaneous talks, and the attendee must choose which one he or she will attend. This makes

“How would you like to grid search an area 240 miles long and 10 miles wide?”

choosing much easier! Since I was presenting, it also made it a bit more nerve-wracking since I knew I would be addressing all that at-

tended.

The interesting thing about ITRS is that it is research driven. That is, the presenters are offering results from testing that they have completed, or review studies of data collected by others. The schedule was full and ran from 8am–6pm each day. Some additional workshops did not get out until after 10pm. A few titles of talks are given below:

- “Appropriate Medical Technology”
- “Point Loading Carabiners in the Field”
- “Bottom Belay Testing”
- “Columbia Shuttle Recovery”
- “CAUTION: Aramid Fiber”
- “Escape Line Bake Off”

In addition to the speakers there were also two sessions dealing with standards-setting. These were the ASTM and NFPA

workshops. More about the standards for search and rescue will appear in *The Tracker* in coming months.

Bottom Belay

Prior to the beginning of the proceedings a survey was passed around asking the audience how many bars they would use on a rappel of 800 feet. The presenter, Jim Kovach, showed a short video of testing that he and a group completed from a bridge that they use for training.

A 175 lb. weight was attached to a rack with varying numbers of bars engaged and a bottom belayer attempted to stop the load after it was released. To protect the belayer, the rappel rope was redirected 90 degrees at the bottom with a pulley. This change of direction moved the belayer out of the fall zone.

In sum, a bottom belay on a long rappel is not very effective. The bottom belayer (a burley firefighter) was unable to stop the load with 4 bars on the rack engaged. With 5 bars, the belayer was able to stop the load. This inability to stop the load may have to do with the fact that the belayer is pulling horizontally rather than vertically, as it has been shown that folks can pull vertically more effectively. Also, the longer the rope, the more stretch that must be taken out prior to any tensioning. In the video it was clear that the belayer was busy taking in many feet of rope-stretch prior to any effective tensioning. An interesting finding was that it is difficult for those standing at the bottom to realize

See “ITRS” on p. 6

Mudslide

Continued from page 1

was assumed that the missing people were washed into a canyon approximately 4 miles long and in an area that had been flooded with a wall of mud. We had our information and it wasn't good.

Since I had a department vehicle with 4 wheel drive and a camper shell on the back, I was assigned to work with and supply transport for the Sheriff's Department Search Dog Team. I thought this would be a great assignment being part of Apple Valley Posse, and familiar with working with animals. I looked forward to learning how the dogs and handlers operate.

"... damage was beyond my expectations."

We were assigned to go to the top of section A at the top of the flood area, above the campground where the folks had been washed away, and work our way down stream

searching for survivors or remains hoping for the best. After loading the equipment into the truck and familiarizing myself with the dogs and their handlers, we headed out up highway 30 to get as close as possible to the incident site.

As we turned off the highway onto Old Waterman Canyon Road it was apparent that the damage was beyond my expectations. As we drove down the can-

yon, sunrise was drifting through the trees, and a steady stream of natural gas from a broken line next to the road shot into the air. The mist of fumes settled into some of the low lying

depressions on the canyon floor. Water was still flowing, and pools created by debris from the flood blocked our access from where the campground entrance had once been. Large rounded boulders ripped from the mountain along with uprooted trees and the accompanying brush lay directly ahead of us.

We parked the truck 200 ft. from the ruptured gas line, saddled up the dogs, and headed carefully to the site where the road had been washed over by a flood of mud and debris. It didn't take long to realize that the dogs' most important asset, their noses, were not going to work in the natural gas that was settling into the canyon floor. After a brief general search of the surrounding area it was decided to contact the ICP for a reassignment to another area until the gas lines could be repaired and the fumes had dissipated.

Our next assignment was to proceed down the mountain to the bottom of section B and start to work our way up through the creek and surrounding area with the same mission, to look for survivors or remains. The truck was quiet on the 2.5 mile trip back down to the bottom of section B as everyone was thinking about what was to come. We pulled off the road onto what was the bottom of Old Waterman Canyon Rd.. Teams that had been assigned to the area directly below were already at work. We stopped the truck just short of a section of road that led to what was once a bridge over Waterman Canyon Creek. Two and three foot tall round boulders and large logs made the bridge impassible at that time.

After unloading the equipment and dogs we mucked our way over the bridge and reviewed our search area. It lay directly ahead and above us into the canyon an eighth of a mile wide with tangled, twisted trees and brush that had been ripped from the ground.

It was decided to spread the dogs evenly in a grid pattern and start at the bridge overpass and work our way like an



inverted funnel to where the creek started to narrow. The search was conducted in a slow and methodical manner, visually checking each mass of twisted debris with the dogs,



Working SAR Dog

on command, crawling into, on top of, and under each pile with handlers carefully monitoring their dogs for any sign of alert. Each dog alerts in a different way and is certified in its own area of expertise. Watching them work was pure pleasure, all working toward one goal, to do the job they were trained to do and more. All the handlers worked in a precise and professional manner, covering each debris pile in a thorough manner, and helping the dogs go deeper into a pile by moving debris if the dog showed the slightest interest.

“... leg-sucking mud was expected to be thick and hazardous...”

Within a few hundred feet the dogs alerted to some of the debris piles and we found what proved to be an omen of what we were there for; a small baby's jumpsuit completely covered with mud that had washed almost 3 miles from it's origin. His find made you stop and think! It made me go back and review any section of ground or debris pile already covered. Christmas presents, clothes, and

personal items that just the day before had been used by someone you were looking for became a constant unsettling reminder of the grave nature of the task at hand. It made you look harder and slow down in order to be more thorough. It challenged the way that I thought about search and rescue and the commitment that I had made. Unknowingly it has and will continue to change the way I will react on future searches.

All through the day we continued in this manner slowly inching our way up the canyon. Remains that had been found the day before were clearly marked with large sectioned off areas of orange and yellow marking tape. With the broad scope of destruction, it is amazing that anything was even recovered.

We worked a good 2 miles up the canyon to the top of what was section B to another bridge, and another gas leak hissing loudly into the afternoon air. The debris field expanded and contracted with the canyon walls. Bridges 10 to 15 feet above the creek bed were buried to their full height and overrun with mud, rocks, and the remains of what were beautiful canyon bottom trees. Vehicles caught in the turmoil were crushed and twisted beyond recognition. After a long, draining day, that included a session of counseling and debriefing, we were released to go home.

The following day working with another Posse Member and with another team from outside the county, we covered all of section B again making sure that all that could be found was.

At about 3:00 we were contacted by the ICP, telling us that we were needed back at the top of section A to confirm what another dog team had alerted on. They needed us to check out the area before they moved in heavy equipment to clear away part of the rubble that had overrun the camp building. A small young

Continued on p. 6

Mudslide

Continued from page 5

lady was found on the road edge just below the building that had been swept away, offering cause for the dogs' alert. The forestry crews that were assigned to assist in moving debris in areas of high probability had the hardest of all jobs and they did it well.

In all we spent the better part of 10 hours Friday and 10 hours Saturday day looking for people that needed our help. I can't express the appreciation for having had the opportunity to work with such a group of professional rescue personnel than the volunteer dog teams.

The Sheriffs Department has got a good group of people that should be proud of the way they reacted during this tragedy. I count myself lucky!

ITRS

Continued from page 3

that a person on rappel is out of control. Since a quick reaction time is important, this fact alone makes a bottom belay on a long drop of dubious use. Of course, this is still work in progress, and more will be presented next year.

Columbia Shuttle Recovery

How would you like to grid search an area 240 miles long and 10 miles wide? That was the size of the search area for the Space Shuttle Columbia after it did not survive re-entry. NASA spent several months looking for parts of the shuttle that survived the fall to the earth.

Four interagency command posts and base camps were established in Corsicana, Hemphill, Nacogdoches and Palestine, Texas, to direct ground searches. Inter-agency management teams were deployed to the camps to conduct searches. Up to 3,500 searchers, made up of personnel from a variety of federal and state land management agencies, and fire departments, operated out of the camps under a management structure typically used in support of wildfires (ICS). Teams of approximately 20 trained wilderness firefighters operated out of the camps, and each team conducted grid searches.

You may wonder why they didn't use search and rescue volunteers. The reason is that there is no FEMA typing standard for wilderness SAR teams. Resources in ICS are "typed" according to their capabilities and size, so that a manager knows what he is receiving when the resource is ordered. Since there are no "types" for wilderness SAR, these resources were not ordered. Technical Specialists are typed, and one SAR specialist was used at each camp to help train the firefighters in search techniques. Currently FEMA is in the draft stages of typing search and rescue teams.

Continued on p. 8

Calendar

For information or to submit an event, contact the editor at editor@thetracker.info. Appearance of items in this section does not necessarily imply endorsement by the SAR Council or the County of San Bernardino. Call if you have any questions about a particular listing. To save space, persons to contact and numbers for multiple listings of *Department-approved training providers* are consolidated in one place at the bottom of this page.

February

Feb. 1–6—Winter Skills Management Class
Mammoth, CA, Contact VFU for more information.

Feb. 7—West Valley SAR Snow Training
Contact Bob Gattas at rgattas@earthlink.net.

Feb. 21—West Valley SAR Snow Training
Contact Bob Gattas at rgattas@earthlink.net.

March

1st and 3rd Weekends in March—BSAR
Contact VFU for more information.

Mar 17—Inland Empire SAR Council
19:00 in the Main Conference Room at SBSB HQ

April

TBA—Technical Rescue Basics Course (TRBC)
Contact Don Welch (760-244-7340) for more information.

May

May 15–16—National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC) Basic Cave Rescue Orientation Course
Contact Mark Kinsey (mkinsey@caverescue.net) for details.

May 15–16—West Valley SAR Rope Training
At Hole-in-the-Wall. Contact Bob Gattas at rgattas@earthlink.net for more information.

May 19—Inland Empire SAR Council
19:00 in the Main Conference Room at SBSB HQ

June

June TBD—Y.E.S. Camp
Camp Laurel Pines, Contact VFU for more information.

June 2–5—NASAR '04 Conference & Expo
“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Lost People”, Lansdowne, VA. Visit www.nasar.org for more information.

June 5—West Valley SAR ELT Training
Night operation. Contact Bob Gattas (rgattas@earthlink.net) for more information.

June 19—West Valley SAR Rope Training
Contact Bob Gattas (rgattas@earthlink.net) for more information.

July

July 21—Inland Empire SAR Council
19:00 in the Main Conference Room at SBSB HQ

August

Aug. 21—Rope Training
Contact Bob Gattas (rgattas@earthlink.net) for more information.

September

Sep. 15—Inland Empire SAR Council
19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

Sep. 18—West Valley SAR Search Scenario
Contact Bob Gattas (rgattas@earthlink.net) for more information.

October

Oct. 16–23—National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC) Level I and Level II Cave Rescue Seminar
Week-long NCRC seminar at California Caverns, CA. Contact Mark Kinsey (mkinsey@caverescue.net) for more information.

Oct. 16–17—West Valley SAR Map & Compass Training
Contact Bob Gattas (rgattas@earthlink.net) for more information.

November

Nov. 17—Inland Empire SAR Council
19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

Nov. 20—West Valley SAR Night Scenario
Contact Bob Gattas (rgattas@earthlink.net) for more information.

*Course / Provider

BSAR / Vol Forces
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NASA

Continued from p. 6

Watch future editions of *The Tracker* for more information on this topic.

The vegetation greatly complicated the searching, and made the process extremely laborious. All of NASA was involved in the search. Engineers and receptionists were out on the line helping to search and providing motivation to the searchers. In all, over 40% of the orbiter was recovered, and the remains of each astronaut.

New Items

In addition to the scheduled speakers, short time spots were also given for vendors and others that wanted to present information of interest. Some of these were short presentations on preliminary testing results or new products. Did you know that there is a new head available for the Arizona Vortex artificial high-directional device? The new head is lighter and provides some additional functionality.

In all, ITRS 2003 was an information-packed event. I highly recommend attending to keep your finger on the pulse of technical rescue. While you won't get the large halls filled with vendors selling all of the latest gear, you will come away with many hours of thought-provoking presentations, and take part in interesting discussions with colleagues from all over the world.

Classified Section

Contact the Editor at to place or remove any item.

SBSD Commuter cups with star and motto. \$16. Features generous 16 oz. capacity, stainless steel construction, double-walled insulation and fits virtually all auto cup or mug holders.



SAR Tech patches. NASAR-approved, straight version of the standard SAR Tech I/II/III patches. Send check made out to IESARC for \$3 each and a SASE to: IESARC, PO Box 108, Barstow, CA 92311.

SBSD Search and Rescue decals. \$5. The decals are 3.5" X 3.5" and can be stuck on the outside of just about anything or on the inside of a window. The price is \$5.00 each and can be purchased by contacting SarDesertRun@aol.com or calling 760-369-9999.



Earrings (1/2") \$10 and **Lapel Pin/Tie Tacks (5/8")** \$8.

Fund-raiser for Morongo Mounted SAR Team. For ordering info contact Kim Miller at millerkm@29palms.usmc.mil or call Kim at (760) 367-1148 or (760) 367-1148 evenings.

SBSD Coffee cups \$5. High-gloss ivory coffee cups with gold-colored SBSD star on the side is microwavable. Available at Volunteer Forces.



SBSD SAR Pens \$10. High-quality, refillable ink pens with SBSD star and "Search & Rescue" on side. Great gift idea! Available at Volunteer Forces.

Custom SAR/Expedition Topo maps. \$14.95. See the web site for full details!

Granite Gear Nimbus Ozone Backpack. Size regular. Highly adjustable, and brand new. Comes with large shoulder straps, but Granite Gear will swap them for one your size is they don't fit. \$105. Contact Jeff Lehman at jlehman@caverescue.net.

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