

China Lake Mountain Rescue Group 60th Anniversary History Segment

I'm thankful for the opportunity I have, to be able to give a little history of the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group. I've been around the group since 1989 when I was introduced to the group through the summer class. I continued to hang around the group because of a cute little short guy; going to the meetings, going on trips, climbing, etc. and at some point Bob Rockwell approached me and asked me to join CLMRG. I was a little reluctant at first because it was "his" thing, but ultimately I joined the group. My official date is November 1991. Debbie Breitenstein and I share the same month and year and we are both still around! It has truly been a great experience.

First, I need to give a shout out to Bob Rockwell. Bob was tasked with giving the history of the group for the 50th Anniversary. I also read through the Talus Piles. Wow, thanks to all the folks that scanned and uploaded all those documents. What a big task. I did watch the DVD several times that was created as a result of the 50th Anniversary and have gleaned information from there as well as other areas.

The China Lake Mountain Rescue Groups official anniversary is October 25, 1958, however, the process started about 1 ½ years before that date. There are very few people left in the group who knew our founder, Carl Heller. How many here today knew Carl? Please raise your hands. I've only heard stories however, it sounds like Carl was a great leader and motivator and was an inspiration to many. Carl passed away in 1984. To learn more of Carl, you can read a tribute in a special edition of the scanned Talus Piles on the web, #55 January 1984.

Our story starts in the 1950's with the Occasional Peaks Gang. The Occasional Peaks Gang had about 8-10 people in it, of which Carl Heller was the Leader. During this time there were no organized Search and Rescue Teams in the Southern Sierra. Also during the 1950's it became more popular to head out into the mountains. With more people heading into the mountains, there was more opportunity for something to go wrong and potentially need to be rescued. As is the case now, it was also true then, the Sheriff is responsible for Search and Rescue in their county.

The Inyo County Sheriff contacted Carl and asked him if he would form a Search and Rescue Team to assist them when they needed SAR in their county. The process actually started in 1956. There were lots of steps that had to be taken. They had to learn search and rescue skills, first aid, how to handle stressful situations, organizational skills, and working together as a team.

Once they felt they had all their ducks in a row, there were nine willing technical mountaineers. Carl Heller, Kermith Ross, Ray Van Aken, Jim Bray, Russell Huse, Virgil Lewis, Richard Breitenstein, John Ohl, and Richard Slates.

Oh, and when they told the Sheriff they were ready, they went forward with some conditions.

- They would perform search and rescue in the mountains north of China Lake.
- The victims were expected to be primarily Boy Scouts and fishermen.

- They would not assist in the apprehension of law violators.
- They would not go in solely for bringing out dead bodies
- And, they would prefer not to carry dead bodies a substantial distance.

The Inyo Sherriff accepted all the conditions, however, their first operation was a recovery in 1959 on Boundary Peak.

I wonder how many of our members have read the Philosophy of the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group? It's in our Training Manual. From the Training manual:

PHILOSOPHY

The CLMRG formed because of two perceived needs. It seemed reasonable to us that experienced mountaineers should offer their services to those in trouble in the mountains. In addition, we wanted a formalized rescue capability to exist for our own aid in case of an accident.

We need to be well prepared. This requires a good training program. At the same time, we need to keep members interested and active and not frighten off prospective members with too rigid a qualification structure. A lot of work is involved, but we don't want members swept away by overdoing things. Somehow at China Lake, we seem to have struck a good balance between an all-fun mountaineering club and an all-work-and-rules rescue team.

On any actual operation, we must direct our main effort to aiding the person called the victim here we are trying to find or rescue. Not so obvious, but equally important, are the safety and public relations aspects.

We have found that safety tends to be overlooked when we are trying to save a life. This tendency is sometimes necessary, but it means that our rules must be clear and more rigidly enforced on operations than on recreational activities.

One aim of a rescue group must be to enjoy a good reputation with the public and with the agencies that control Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. Without this, the group is not called and its capabilities are not used to perform rescues not even for its own members. Thus, we must operate so as to inspire confidence in the victim, the victim's family, the legal authorities, and the general public. One consequence of this is that we must respond to virtually any SAR operation for which the authorities request our aid.

I'm not sure if this reflects the original words of the Philosophy or if there have been changes through the years because there have been a few revisions of the Training Manual. Having said that, from all the stories that I have heard, to me, it sounds like Carl had a large hand in it.

In 1961 the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group became a member of the National Mountain Rescue Association.

In 1963, the California Region of the MRA was formed, largely due to Carl's leadership. The first meeting of the CRMRA was held in Ridgecrest.

As a note, in 1991 CLMRG hosted the National MRA meeting here in Ridgecrest. Mitch was the MRA Rep and I remember it being a consuming task. There were approximately 90 MRA team members from all over the United States in attendance. In addition to the business meeting, there were options of doing a climb of the Mountaineers Route on Mt. Whitney, technical climbing at Owen's Ridge, sightseeing in Death Valley and at the Petroglyphs. I went on the Petroglyph trip. Susie Huber was one of the guides and I got to see the cutest little sidewinder as I stepped down. That weekend was the first time I got to know a lot of the members of other teams and through the years, I continued those relationships as I attended Cal Region MRA meetings as well as a couple of National meetings, one in Palm Springs and one in Colorado.

In the beginning, CLMRG started out with a stretcher and a couple of ropes. That was it for group equipment. Members used their own technical gear to assist with rescues. I've been told that transportation was Carl's old green Rambler, they'd load it up and off they would go.

The China Lake Mountain Rescue Group was a pioneer for women in SAR. Liz Anderson joined the group in 1960. As a member of CLMRG, she was the first woman in Search and Rescue in the California Region of the MRA. I loved the story Liz told in the 50th Anniversary event about how the male members of CLMRG supported her. Liz didn't give a year, but in the early days of the group, the Kern County Sheriff held a seminar. There was Liz, at the Kern County Sheriff SAR Seminar with 120 guys... and Liz, the only woman. This apparently put a little damper on the activities as well as presented challenges because of bathrooms, etc. According to Liz, the next year when the Kern County Sheriff held the SAR Seminar, there was a notation on the bottom, "No Women". Liz decided that she wouldn't go, but her CLMRG team members, recognizing her contribution to the group, as well as the fact that she was part of the group said that she was going. Liz did go, and her team supported her by camping in a different area than where the seminar was being held. Liz had broken into the "men's club".

Carl continued his recruitment of women in the group. Between Carl's recruitment and Liz's encouragement, the group was lucky enough to get Carol.

Through the years there have been many changes in CLMRG with regard to how we have received funds.

- In the beginning, CLMRG assess each member, giving students a price break on the assessment amount. It was about half.
- If funds were short, members passed around a hat to add funds to the kitty.

- CLMRG also reached out to local organizations like Rotary, VFW, etc., asking for donations, as well as giving slide-show presentations to help solicit funds.
- In the 1970's the group registered with the United Way as part of the Combined Federal Campaign and that continues today.
- CLMRG receives donations from private individuals and through the years we have had many different benefactors, Janet Hammond was one of our biggest benefactors.
- For those of you who like to shop online, CLMRG is registered with SmileAmazon. If you use the SmileAmazon link, and have selected CLMRG as the charity, a portion of your qualifying purchase will be donated to the Rescue Group.

As Search and Rescue has evolved through the years, there have been many changes in how CLMRG responded.

- In the beginning, CLMRG received a call and they went. Sometimes they were called directly by individuals and sometimes through the Sheriff.

As SAR evolved, so did the process.

- Since our major area was in Inyo County, the Sheriff would call us directly and we would go.

And then there was OES:

- There is a really cute skit memorialized in the 50th Anniversary DVD with Dan Bishop taking a call from someone who wants CLMRG's help. The caller wants to know how long it will be before CLMRG gets there.
- Dan starts to explain that the caller needs to contact the Kern County Sheriff, who will in turn contact CLMRG, who will then initiate a call-out and gather the team to respond, etc.
- A wrench is thrown in the works when the caller says that the subject is in Inyo County, so Dan starts again, telling the caller to call Inyo County Sheriff, who will call OES to request CLMRG to respond, OES will call Kern County Sheriff, the Sheriff will call CLMRG, etc.

Now don't get me wrong, I completely understand why there are specific processes and procedures, I'm just highlighting how getting the call and responding to a SAR OP has changed through the years.

So that brings us to the call-out.

- Again, drawing on information that Liz relayed, in the early days, there was only land-lines, no voicemail. I guess they would call everyone's phone and for those where they didn't get an answer, someone would go around with a note and thumb tacks and tack a note on their door. If it was a Friday or Saturday night, they would go to the movie theater and the movie theater would put a note on the screen. I remember as a kid seeing notes put on screens to notify doctors, etc. so I'm assuming it was something like that.
- Since there were only land-lines, coordinators were tied to the length of the phone cord when coordinating an operation.
- In the 90's, Leaders and Coordinators carried pagers and the Sheriff would call the pager system and that would start the process.

- Fast-forward to now where we as Coordinators and Telephoners have 2-3 telephone numbers to call, leaving voicemails at each one.
- We do have the Calling Post, which help some, but not after 8pm or before 8am.
 - This presented some challenges on one operation where I was the coordinator and we had a quick turn-around time. I tried to use the calling post, I didn't realize the time limitations. Of course it was just after 8pm and the hut meet time was 9pm. Sure enough, just after 8am the next day my calling post message came through confusing folks, thinking that we had another Op where we needed to meet at the hut by 9am. In fact, one member called me while in transit to the hut.

CLMRG main area for operations is of course the southern Sierra. Having said that, a review of the Talus Pile also shows that CLMRG has not only been on operations in California but outside California as well:

- In 1969 the Rescue Group responded to a search for a missing climber in Baja California
- In 1971 the Rescue Group responded to a search for a lost child in Adirondacks, New York
- In 1975, we had a transit to Alamo Lake, Arizona
- In 1976, we had a recovery in Baja California
- In 1985, we had an alert in Bolivia, South America, this one involved a downed commercial airplane
- In 1988, we had an alert in Baja California
- In 1988, we had a search in Silver Plume, Colorado

Public Education has changed through the years and has had various levels of involvement. It sounded like from reading the Talus Piles that Public Ed was used as a way to get our name out in the community and to solicit funds.

As I've already said, in the early days, CLMRG approached local organizations to help fund the group to purchase group equipment. Slide shows were put together by the members of various trips and expeditions, including one from Afghanistan that Carol Burge helped put together. Also, from reading the Talus Pile, it sounds like Janet Westbrook put together a slide show called "Camping Around the World". There were also numerous safety presentations given.

As some of you know I served as Public Education Committee Chair for a while and I also used to coordinate and give the Hug-A-Tree Presentations. It looks like the "first" child safety presentation given by CLMRG was a 10 minute slide show called "Lost Child" and I just heard recently this was put together by Liz. Through the years the child safety presentation has continued, from "Lost Child", to Hug-A-Tree, to Lost but Found, Safe and Sound.

CLMRG has supported many Boy Scout, Girl Scout, and other organizations through the years with safety presentations and activities. The Rescue Group continues to support the Mojave Primitive Encampment where we set up the tyrolean traverse and get to throw girl scouts off the rocks. It's been several years since I helped with this event but I know it is a treat for the girls and leaders every year. And of course we have the Summer Class which has been a constant I believe through the entire history of the Rescue Group. With a show of hands, how many people here tonight have taken the Summer

Class? Many of us joined the group because we were introduced to CLMRG through the summer class. How many fall into that category? Please raise your hand.

In 1977 the category Honorary Life Member of CLMRG was voted on and approved. There are currently 25 Honorary Life Members of the Rescue Group.

Seventeen are prior CLMRG members and eight were not members. The last elected member was Andrew Mitchell, Mitch, in 2003 and the last elected non-member was John Diederich in 2004.

Of the nonmembers elected, three were China Lake helo pilots; one was an ops officer at the air field; one helped procure group equipment in the early years; one was instrumental in getting our rescue hut and brought us into Civil Defense; one was our Kern County Sheriff, that would be Carl Sparks; and one was our SAR Sheriff. For details of Honorary Members voted on and approved prior to 2002, see Talus Pile #123.

I'm going to read the names of our Honorary Life Members, and if they happens to be in attendance, please stand.

George Barnes
Tom Chapman
Russ Huse
Jim Nichols
George O'Grady
John Ohl
Jack Pipa
Bernie Sword
Ray VanAken
Bryson Van Gundy
Nick Bottka
Roland Robbins
Bill Strong
E J (Chip) Lancaster
Liz Anderson
Barb Slates
Ron Atkins
Steve Walker
Bart Hine
Tom Stogsdill
Lee Lucas
Frank Buffum
Andrew Mitchell
Carl Sparks
John Diederich

When I first was associated with the group, CLMRG held a summer party in August that took the place of the business meeting. Families were invited and the entertainment was the members. I still remember my first experience running a race in snowshoes down Ron Atkins dirt driveway. It was my first and only time wearing show shoes. By the way, I won that year!

Mitch and I held the party at our house for several years and our pool got a lot of good use. The competition there was who could tie themselves in with a bowline on a coil where one end was secured. The member only had a set time to tie, then they had to let go and lean back. Some knots held in the allotted time, others didn't and they got wet. We always invited the Base Commander and the Executive or Technical Director and at least on two occasions, we had the distinguished visitors. Karen Higgins came while she was Technical Director. Another year, the base Commander, Captain Charles Stevenson, came. I always called him Chuck because later on we were up close and personal on a rock.

The year Chuck came, we invited him and his family to join the Rescue Group for the family trip to Yosemite Valley over Columbus Day Weekend. Our younger kids were about the same age as his kids. The family trip to Yosemite Valley used to be an annual trip. Mitch and I coordinated the trip for several years.

For whatever reason, at least during the years I was helping organize the trip as well as climbing... Yes, you might find it hard to believe, but I used to climb... Bart Hine and I paired up with these "special guests" and took them over to the Apron. We would climb three-on-a-rope. Bart would lead, our guest would follow, and I would clean the route. Rappelling off the route, I would go first, then our guest, with me as bottom belay, and Bart would be last. We did this with both Chuck and John Diederich. I think the demise of the Yosemite Valley trip was when it became way too hard to get reservations. Which is too bad because it was a great time for the members and their families to get together. Climbing, hiking, and playing during the day. Sitting around the campfire in the evening.

One time there was entertainment by some other campers taking a spit bath in their tent after dark with a light on in the tent. I know there are some of you out there that will remember that experience. I will have to say though that Werner probably has the most memorable experience, at least during the time when Mitch and I were organizing the trip. This was when the bear took a swipe at him, and he has the scar to prove it. As a note, it was someone NOT in our group that left the food out that attracted the bear. We had 13 of the 16 sites on the loop that year.

Some of the newer members of the Rescue Group may not know, but Bob Rockwell was the statistician of the group. He had spreadsheets where he tracked all kinds of data points. In 2006, he sent out one of his spreadsheets where he tracked the names of CLMRG members, when they joined, when they resigned, number of years, etc. It's pretty impressive. Sadly, that is not one of my loves, however, I did take his spreadsheet and I updated it with all the names that have appeared on our CLMRG Roster since that date, and with Virgie's help, obtained the join and off dates. If anyone wants to keep it up, I'll be more than happy to share. There are 316 names on this spreadsheet, and if I didn't screw up the format, which I don't think I did, it shows a combined total of 2,176 years. Wow, can you believe it!

Can I have everyone, who has ever been a member of CLMRG please stand?
Thank you for your contribution to the Rescue Group.

Will anyone who is still a member and on the CLMRG Roster please remain standing, all others may be seated. According to the Seniority list I got from the Sheriff and our Roster, there are a total of 44 names. I like that they match.

Now for the next exercise, don't try to do the math on number of years. I have the Seniority listing from the Sheriff and broke out the length of service of the members in groups, using the appointment date, therefore, the year I say may not be exact multiples.

CLMRG members with 10 years or more, please remain standing. That means you became a member in 2008 or earlier. We have 29 members with 10 or more years.

Members with 15 years or more, please remain standing. This means you became a member in 2002 or earlier. We have 23 members with 15 or more years.

Members with 20 years or more, please remain standing. This means you became a member in 1998 or earlier. We have 20 members with 20 or more years.

Members with 25 years or more, please remain standing. This means you became a member in 1992 or earlier. We have 16 members with 25 or more years.

CLMRG members with 30 years or more, please remain standing. You'll have to imagine that I've now sat down. This means you became a member in 1988 or earlier. We have 13 members with 30 or more years.

Members with 35 years or more, please remain standing. This means you became a member in 1982 or earlier. We have 11 members with 35 or more years.

Members with 40 years or more, please remain standing. This means you became a member in 1977 or earlier. We have 7 members with 40 or more years.

CLMRG members with 45 years or more, please remain standing. This means you became a member in 1971 or earlier. We have 6 members with 45 or more years.

Sheila Rockwell – 47 years

Bob Rockwell – 48 years

Janet Westbrook – 51 years

Carol Burge – 55 years

Dennis Burge – 55 years

Al Green – 56 years

I decided that I wanted to something a little different so I asked our most seasoned members a few questions. I'm planning on incorporating their responses, in other words, I'm not going to call anyone out.

I asked about their inspiration to join CLMRG. As expected, all initial responses involved Carl Heller with other various responses, like, hiking and climbing with Carl; chance meeting with Carl on Shasta and later coming to China Lake; Junior Professional (JP) Activity hiking Mt. Whitney and meeting Liz; being a part of something bigger; helping people; contributing to CLMRG; and it was just plain FUN!

I asked how they thought being a member of the Rescue Group affected their lives. Responses included: feeling like they were part of a group; making friends; making a difference; being physically fit; quitting smoking; fostering a love and attachment to the mountains; being with great people; family trips and teaching children the lesson on volunteering and service.

The last question I asked was what advice or sharing of wisdom would they give less-seasoned members. Responses included: get involved; do as much as you can whether it be training, mountains, or administrative; it is a huge commitment, but it is worth it; listen more than you talk; go on lots of group trips, the people you climb with and do mountains with, are the ones that you need foster those relationships of trust, your life may depend on it.

As members of the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group, you all know there are many sacrifices.

- There are personal sacrifices of family, time, and money.
- The families of active members have to exercise patience and understanding. I remember that first year Mitch and I were married. I think he was gone almost the entire month of July on either operations or training. I always thought of the rescue group as my husband's mistress. I was just his wife.
- Money, well that is self-explanatory. Each member purchases their own personal gear.

And then there is the ultimate sacrifice. The Kern County Sheriff Office Headquarters in Bakersfield has a monument on the property. I recently had occasion to be over there and noticed it. I know I sent out the picture but it is hard to read the inscription. The inscription on The Monument reads:

The Monument

I never dreamed it would be me,
My name for all eternity
Recorded here at this hallowed place
Alas, my name, no more my face.

"In the line of duty" I hear them say,
My family now, this price will pay
My folded flag stained with their tears
We've only had those few short years.

The badge no longer on my chest,
I sleep now in eternal rest
My sword I pass to those behind,
And pray they keep this thought in mind.

I never dreamed it would be me,
And with heavy heart and bended knee,
I ask for all here from the past,
Dear God let my name be the last.

The Rescue Group has two names on the Volunteer Monument.

Search and Rescue Volunteer Fred Scheberies, fell to his death January 11, 1964 while participating with the China Lake Mountain Search and Rescue Group in the Mt. Whitney area.

Search and Rescue Volunteer Richard O. Slates, fell to his death December 21, 1966 while engaged in a search with the China Lake Mountain Search and Rescue Group. The group was assisting Park Rangers at the Death Valley National Monument near the summit of Telescope Peak.

I have been privileged to be a member of this group for 27 years. There have been many changes through the years, however the mission is still the same; we are the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group. We are an all-volunteer non-profit organization, under the auspices of the Kern County Sheriff and we respond whenever and wherever we are needed to assist in search and rescue operations. In addition, we provide training through community programs, our summer class, and upon request, teach general mountaineering, mountaineering safety, and what to do if you get lost.

I believe that Carl Heller's vision of CLMRG is alive and well, and I hope to be around in 10 years at the 70th Anniversary.