

July 1995  
#96

CHINA LAKE MOUNTAIN RESCUE GROUP  
P.O. BOX 2037  
RIDGECREST, CA 93556

**Robert Leroy Dow Jr.**  
**October 2, 1964 April 16, 1995**

When the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group lost Robby Dow, we lost not only a valuable member of the team, but a true friend a wonderful mountaineer and fine companion - always good humored and considerate even under the most trying conditions. Robby was fatally injured by a reckless driver while riding his bicycle on March 31. Against all odds, he clung to life until April 16.

At the time of his death, Robby was - serving his second term as Treasurer of CLMRG and was doing an outstanding job. His first involvement with the rescue group was in the summer of 1990 when he took the Basic Mountaineering class. He joined the group shortly thereafter. His enthusiasm, determination and ability assisted him in moving quickly up the roster into categories that demanded more dedication and ability. During his five years in the group he participated in 23 search and rescue operations. In addition, he helped teach the Basic Mountaineering Class every summer. He was very patient and supportive of the students. During the class trips, Robby clearly could have been the first to the summit because he was such a strong mountaineer. Yet he chose to be the last person, offering encouragement to the other hikers.

We will all miss Robby - each in our own way - depending on our particular relationship to him. His Cheshire Cat smile and enthusiasm for life gave even his most casual acquaintances a lift.

Linda Finco knew him well - as a co-worker and friend as well as a fellow member of CLMRG. She shares her memories of Robby in the following:

Robby played many roles in my life: friend, Confidant, teacher, co-worker, climbing partner, and team member in mountain rescue. So, when Carol asked me to write something for the Talus Pile. I thought this would be a good way for me to share some of my memories about Robby with others.

Robby first popped (almost literally) into my life at work. We worked in the same office and he knew I was involved with mountain rescue. On a regular basis Robby would drop into my office and we would spend time (sometimes too much time) talking about trips in the Sierra, and recent searches and rescues. After a while there was not enough time to talk at work so Robby started to stop by my house to talk. During these early years, Robby lived in a small two room apartment (one room being the bathroom), so I think he enjoyed spreading out in my house. I would supply the popcorn and beer, and Robby would supply the movies and conversation.



Robby eventually joined the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group. I was the operations leader on his very first rescue. Robby was a strong mountaineer, but he did not have a lot of experience on steep snow. However, I was confident of his abilities and encouraged him to go on the rescue on Clyde Minaret. Robby had many firsts on this operation and he enjoyed telling the story of his first helicopter ride, and being told to "jump" onto a small rock outcropping high on the glacier, and then the bivy on the mountainside where we all had to find a bush or rock to sleep against, so that we would not roll down the mountain. On this rescue, (but none thereafter), the glacier did become too steep for Robby, so he went back down to our camp to get our gear put together. After the rescue, Robby observed all of us being plucked by the helicopter's hoist high on the mountain while he sat below with our gear. He had little doubt that we would send the helicopter back for him, but he wasn't absolutely sure. Still, Robby wasted no time in getting all our packs to an area where the helicopter could make a landing and pick up him and the gear.

Robby loved the mountains and he loved a challenge. One of Robby's proudest accomplishments was climbing Mt. Goddard from South Lake and completing the trip in under 24 hours (a goal which many group members had tried to do over the years). Robby scoped out and tried various routes until he finally found the route he thought he could succeed on. Robby always had a smile, but the evening he told me the news, his smile nearly exploded on his face. He never bragged about the climb, but just nonchalantly reported it as a trip. Robby never really competed against anyone except himself in the mountains. Robby enjoyed pushing himself when he hiked, but this resulted in very few people going along on his "day hikes". Robby also enjoyed easier trips, but if the pace was not fast enough, Robby would keep you informed on how many steps per minute you hiked compared to him in the last mile, or other trivial tidbits to pass the time.

During our end of week debriefings at the Santa Fe Grill, I knew I could always count on Robby to talk mountains or mountain rescue when the other conversations became too work oriented. This held true for almost any get together where Robby and I both showed up. It was a common bond that made our friendship stronger. Robby was a perfectionist when it came to the English language. Robby would always correct my grammar (which I know it needed). After a while his corrections became annoying, and I said so, so Robby being the understanding person would just cringe whenever I murdered the English language. If I wanted an explanation to his cringe he was more than happy to oblige, otherwise he would remain quiet. However, sometimes he just could not hold back. But, that was O.K. because I know I was just as annoying when it came to my vehicle. Robby (from past experience) knew I did not like dirty items just randomly tossed into the back of my vehicle, so he started bringing his own trash bags to put his boots and other dirty items into at the end of trips.

Finally, I guess the best testimony to Robby's character is that Togo allowed Robby into my house. Togo always kept a close eye on Robby, but he never growled or bared his teeth. However, Robby showed how smart he was by never trying to pet Togo.

These are only a few memories of Robby. There were many more hikes, rescues, barbecues, and poker games (Robby, you are late and three shots behind...!). Robby accomplished a lot, but I know he still had many trips and goals planned. We talked for about an hour on the afternoon before his accident. Topics included mountain rescue business (Linda, I know I owe you a check, but I do not want to write it till April 1st, because that is the start of the new quarter...), discussing a couple future climbs, our weekend plans, and conditioning (...was working out on the gym's stairclimber as effective as climbing "B" Mountain?). I am going to miss these phone calls at all hours from Robby when he just wanted to ask a question or talk. I will especially miss his excitement after a trip or a rescue and wanting to discuss all the details. I will also miss his laugh and smile, being able to joke about his different food habits (Mt. Goddard on two quarts of water and 3 Starbursts...), his willingness to help when asked and his never ending determination to always do better.

His death for all of us was unexpected and too soon. I am looking forward to the upcoming trips in the Sierra, but I am also a little reluctant. Routes we climbed and summits we shared will bring back good memories. But knowing there was so much more we could have done together will make some trips a little harder. Still, I am thankful for the time we did have together.

Robby, you may be out of our sights, but we will continue to have the memories, and you may be out of our touch, but you will always be a part of our hearts.

Good-bye for now... Linda

And some notes from those who spoke at the memorial service for Robby:

From Craig Porter: I knew Robby, or as we affectionately call him, DOWR, very well. He was a good friend of my entire family and extended family. I want to recall a few tidbits that reflect Robby's characteristics- or as you mathematically oriented people might say - DOWR's Eigenvalues:

- \* Coke - no ice
- \* Plain Hamburger - no lettuce, no mayonnaise, no onion, no tomato- just a bun and meat
- \*Member of the Santa Fe Grill Beers of the World Club -complete with a check-off list to keep track of which unusual beers he had sampled
- \*Great sports fan - especially liked to watch East Coast basketball, Final Four Olympic Waterpolo - and to occasionally go to a Mighty Ducks hockey game
- \*In spite of his thrifty nature, he was an avid poker player (pennies, nickels & dimes)
- \*He was the only person that I know who succeeded in the Moonlight Madness hike - South Lake to Mt. Goddard and return in less than 24 hours
- \*Ran the Las Vegas Marathon
- \*Was noted for his original Halloween costumes - winning a prize for masquerading as a shark
- \*Could instantly tell each person what they owed - down to the penny - for lunch when the server provided only one check for the group

From Chuck Creusare: Robby was born in Washington DC to Dr. and Mrs. Robert Dow. His father is an orthopedic surgeon. His sister Lucia is currently studying for her doctorate in philosophy at the University of Toronto.

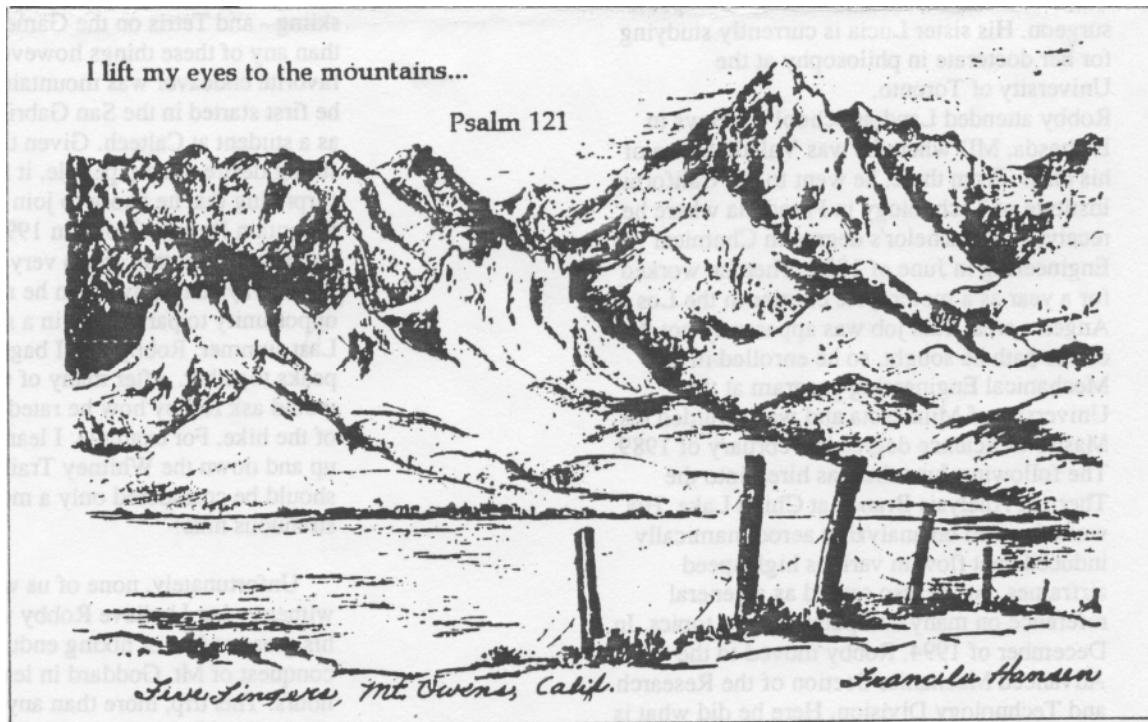
Robby attended Landon School for Boys in Bethesda, MD where he was Valedictorian of his class. From there, he went to the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena where he received his bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering in June of 1986. Then he worked for a year as a motorcycle courier in the Los Angeles area. This job was apparently not the career path he sought, so he enrolled in the Mechanical Engineering program at the University of Minnesota and was awarded his Master of Science degree in February of 1989. The following June, he was hired into the Thermal Analysis Branch at China Lake. His work focused on analyzing aerodynamically induced heat flow in various high speed airframes, but he also served as a general reference on many computer-related topics. In December of 1994, Robby moved to the Advanced Mechanics Section of the Research and Technology Division. Here he did what is called cookoff analysis, using computer models to predict the detonation of propellants when they are overheated. Robby was always very athletically oriented. He was involved in cross-country and track both in high school and college. At Caltech, he was on their intercollegiate waterpolo team. He also enjoyed volleyball, backpacking, skiing - and Tetris on the Game Boy. More than any of these things however, Robby's favorite endeavor was mountaineering, which he first started in the San Gabriel mountains as a student at Caltech. Given this and his strong desire to help people, it is not surprising that he chose to join the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group in 1991. He took his commitment to this group very seriously and was always unhappy when he missed an opportunity to participate in a rescue. Last summer, Robby and I bagged a number of peaks together. After many of these trips, I would ask Robby how he rated the difficulty of the hike. For example, I learned that going up and down the Whitney Trail in 6.5 hours should be considered only a moderately strenuous hike!

Unfortunately, none of us were along to witness what I believe Robby would consider his greatest feat of hiking endurance: his conquest of Mt. Goddard in less than 24 hours. This trip, more than anything else, symbolized Robby's approach to everything in his life, be it school, work, or play. No matter how enormous or intimidating the undertaking seemed to be, Robby's philosophy was to face it head on, taking the obvious path first, but always willing to adjust his course as he went along if events warranted it.

I will always remember this tenacity along with Robby's general goodness of character, and his great desire to help his friends whenever possible. He was a great friend to me and to many others, and I will miss him sorely. I can only hope with all of my heart that he is now in someplace far better than this, as he deserves to be. The sadness and loss that we all feel should and in fact must, pass with time. We all have our own lives to live and these lives must go on. The important thing is that we cherish the memory of the role that Robby played in our lives. If we do this, a part of him will always be alive in each of us.

\* \* \*

It is impossible to see a positive side to this tragedy. However those of us who were privileged to spend some time with Robby's family - his parents Dr. and Mrs. Dow and his sister Lucia - were deeply touched and inspired by their unfailing graciousness in terrible circumstances. – cgb



## Operation Reports

### 95-5 3/25-26/95 Rescue Shirley Meadows Finco

Sgt. Garry Davis called me at home at 1940 to ask if CLMRG could assist the Shirley Meadows Ski Patrol and Forest Service in a search and rescue. It was reported that two 10-year-olds - twin brothers (later found to be 15- year-olds) had been snowboarding at Shirley Meadows. The father reported the boys - Scott and Shawn Frank - missing shortly after the ski lifts shut down at 1600. The ski patrol located the boys' snowboard tracks around 1700. One patroller, Rod Kane, followed the tracks and about an hour later caught up with Scott and Shawn. However, the ski patrol at base no longer had communications with Rod. A Forest Service ranger and another ski patroller attempted to reach the group from the bottom of the drainage, but had to stop due to the snow and terrain. The Kern County Sheriff was contacted to assist in getting the boys and the ski patroller out of the drainage.

I called the pager to give people a heads up, and then contacted Terry Mitchell to coordinate the callout. Six CLMRG members met at the hut around 2015. We decided the easiest way to get the boys out of the drainage would be to hike them out. Because the Forest Service ranger reported deep, soft snow conditions, we took extra snowshoes for the boys and the ski patroller along with the usual ropes and slings.

CLMRG left the hut at 2040 and we arrived at Shirley Meadows around 2200. The boys' father and a

family friend were the only people at "base camp". Shortly after we arrived, Marty Williamson (Kern County Sheriff Deputy) and Brian Adams (Forest Service) arrived at basecamp. Brian told Marty the operation was "ours".

As the rest of the CLMRG team got our gear together, I met with Marty, Brian, the boys' father, and Scott Forbes (Shirley Meadows Ski Area) to try to determine what had happened and what we needed to do.

Scott and Shawn had never used snowboards before, but both are good skiers. The father said they were having a hard time all day with the boards. Scott and Shawn had seen people going down the West Woods Trail, and towards the end of the day, they decided to try it. When they started off, a cloud was covering the hill and visibility was very low. They followed some other people onto the trail, but lost sight of them because they were going faster. It appears the twins then got confused about directions and ended up leaving the ski area and heading down the Alder Creek drainage.

This drainage is very difficult to travel down. The storm earlier in the week left several feet of light powder snow. There were many bushes, rocks, small trees, fallen trees, frequent steep descents (50 deg or steeper), and frequent open stream crossings to negotiate. But, with the energy and persistence of two healthy 15-year-olds, they went down and up, around or through, over or under all obstacles in their path. At times, the boys removed their snowboards to continue down through the obstacles. Rod followed them on his skis, frequently having to remove his skis to get around obstacles. After a descent of over a thousand feet, and a mile or so from the ski area, Rod caught up with the energetic twins. He reported that they were in good shape and that they were going to ascend the drainage. Since the snow was powder and deep, the boys carried their snowboards and Rod carried his skis as they attempted to ascend. However, they kept punching through the snow and found the going very difficult. Rod then decided that they would go down the drainage, thinking they could get out to a road about a mile further down. But the same sort of obstacles as encountered earlier slowed their progress. The last radio communication with Rod was that the three had stopped for the night and had a fire going. Shortly thereafter, base lost communications with Rod. Based on Rod's description, base estimated their location to be around the 5200 ft level in the Alder Creek drainage. (Shirley Meadows is at 6600 ft)

Scott Forbes volunteered to take CLMRG by snowmobile to a drop-off point for the Alder Creek drainage. We programmed our radios to the ski patrol and Forest Service frequencies. Scott started ferrying people at 2300, and by 2335 CLMRG found the tracks and was heading down the drainage. Once CLMRG started down, the Forest Service ranger and the ski patroller decided to turn around. They had come to a 60 - 80 ft wall that they felt uncomfortable negotiating in the dark.

CLMRG arrived at Scott, Shawn and Rod's location at 0130. They were at about the 4800 ft level. The boys were asleep by the fire. Rod had scraped away the snow and made a bed from green fir boughs covered with plastic garbage bags with a space blanket for cover. Rod had had the boys take off their wet boots, socks and mittens and place them near the fire to dry. He was sitting up, tending the fire, but had dozed off. He was very tired and cold. He was only wearing light snow gear. CLMRG gave Rod some extra clothing and everyone some food and water, then radioed that everyone was in good shape.

Sakai wanted to scout some alternative routes back to base. since the terrain they had just descended was very difficult. Sakai and Myers scouted possible ascent routes, but ran into thick scrub oak. They then scouted further down the canyon, but found one of the steep headwalls that the other rescuers had encountered on their way up. After spending about two hours scouting, it was decided to ascend the same way they had descended. At 0330, the group started up the drainage on snowshoes. Rod and the boys were spaced between CLMRG members with headlamps. The snowboards and skis were carried for only about 500 vertical feet. The equipment was awkward to carry and kept getting caught on obstacles, so it was stashed, and the group continued on up. At one point Scott's feet became numb from the cold. His socks had been dried by the fire, but the hoot liners were still damp. The boys only had cotton socks. Moneypenny gave Scott his extra dry polypropylene liners and wool socks. The group stopped about every hour for a rest and snack break. At 0700, they all topped out in the Shirley Meadows parking area. A local news station was there to film the last portion of their ascent. Gear was unloaded, and everyone made their way back to the warming hut for hot drinks.

The sheriff treated us to breakfast and we got back to Ridgecrest around 1130. Members participating: Linda Finco, Tom Sakai, Mike Myers, Frank Buffum, Scott Moneypenny, Dave Ganger. Coordinator: Terry Mitchell. Telephoners: Betty Meng, Annette Fournier.

Comments:

When we left the hut, we assumed we would be assisting the ski patrol and/or Forest Service in the search/rescue. Therefore, we did not bring a base radio or antenna. Our hand held radios with the extended antennae worked well on the MRA frequency until the teams dropped down a steep portion of the drainage (around the 5500 ft level). However, we had foreseen this problem and programmed in the ski patrol frequency. For the rest of the operation we used the ski patrol frequency.

**95-6 5/16-17/95 Search**  
**Mt. Baldy Green**

A call from Sgt. Dave Fesler at 2155 alerted us to a request from San Bernardino County to assist in a search. A 35-year-old man (Kevin Duck) had not returned from a day hike of Mt. Baldy on May 14th. The search had been going for a full day and more people were needed.

We were asked to meet at the Mt. Baldy Fire station at 0600 Tuesday, May 16th. The weather on Mt. Baldy was reported to be quite severe with snow, winds, fog and rain. Carol Burge and Betty Meng called the roster and were able to get commitments from Werner Hueber and Arun Jain.

The three of us met at the hut at 0330 and left at 0345. We arrived at the base camp at 0635. We were briefed and given a field assignment at 0745. Our team of three was combined with two from Altadena (Mike Coleman and Wally Stephen) and one from Sierra Madre (Richard Deets) and asked to search the Mt. Baldy Bowl. We were inserted by helicopter at 0905. On scene we divided the search area into two parts. CLMRG took one part while the other three took the other half. The bowl was quite steep near the top and our side was nearly entirely snow-covered. We used ice axe and crampons a lot. By early afternoon we had completed the assigned search area and the weather was deteriorating rapidly. It became clear that we would not have a ride out. We hiked out the Mt. Baldy trail and were picked up by vehicle at the trail head.

At the debrief we were asked and agreed to stay another day. We were put up in a motel and told to return again at 0600. At 2100 a call from base informed us that the victim had walked out. He had come out several canyons away from the prime search area.

**95-7 5/23/95 Search**  
**Angeles National Forest Huey**

Kurt Jones and James Underwood, both 34, from Mission Viejo and LA, checked into the Buckhorn Campground on Friday 5/19 and paid for two nights. They were expected home Sunday noon. When they were not home by 0100 on Monday, their wives called the sheriff and a search was begun after their car was found in the campground at 0315. Their car, tent, stove, ice chests, food, sleeping bags, wallets, etc. were all with the car. It appeared that they had left and expected to return a short time later. (There were a few dirty pans and utensils indicating possibly one meal was cooked on site. There were ashes in the fire ring. Their Coleman stove was in the camp.) No information was available as to their intentions. In fact their wives did not even know what camp site they would be in.

CLMRG received the call at 1600 on Monday 5/22. We left the hut at 0300 on Tuesday and were in the field by 0830. There were 39 searchers on the site from a variety of MRA units. The subjects were seen by a helicopter at about 1200 on Monday, four miles away from the camp, across the highway, in a sector that was not actively searched. The search had centered around trails from the Buckhorn Camp, on the same side of the highway as the camp. Mount Waterman was on the other side of the highway in the opposite direction from the search.

The subjects had decided to hike Mount Waterman on Saturday. Coming back from the top, they got off the trail and were drawn down a drainage into Bear Creek, between Mt. Waterman and Twin Peaks. They thrashed through a lot of brush and wandered up and down the drainage for some time before they were convinced they were lost. They decided to stay put beside a stream where they would have water

and would be found by rescuers. The area was fogged in and it rained during the two days and nights they were out. One wore short pants and a thin pile jacket. The other wore cotton pants and shirt. They built a shelter from limbs and branches and covered themselves with pine needles and dirt. They built a fire and continually worked to keep it going. They were air lifted by helo on Sunday at about 1400.

CLMRG participants included: Huey, Finco, Hueber, Florian. C. Burge and C. Pappas.

## **DONORS**

CLMRG deeply appreciates the generous donations received from the following people in memory of Robby Dow:

Donald F. and Denise Ann Terry  
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