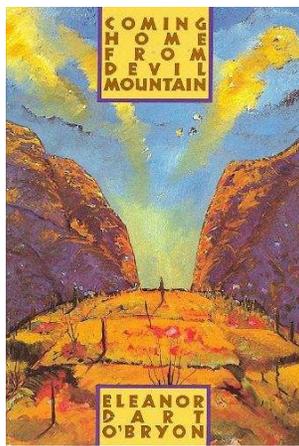


## **The History of the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team: Its Origins to its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

March of 2017 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the San Diego Mountain Rescue Team (“SDMRT”). As a professional, all-volunteer, not-for-profit organization dedicated to saving lives through search, rescue, and mountain safety education, SDMRT responds to search and rescue operations throughout California. SDMRT works with various Sheriff’s departments, which are responsible for search and rescue activities in their individual counties, including the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department. This is the history of the dedicated, self-sacrificing, and highly trained men and women of SDMRT.

### **A Fateful Trip to Mexico**

In February 1967, two Claremont College students, Ogden Kellogg and Eleanor Dart, set out to climb El Picacho del Diablo (roughly translated as “The Devil’s Peak”), which at 10,154’ elevation is the highest mountain in the Mexican state of Baja California. They did not return to school and were reported missing. After a lengthy search by the San Diego Sheriff Patrol and Navy aircraft, Sierra Madre Mountain Rescue team, San Diego and Montrose Sierra Clubs, and others, the couple was found severely debilitated and near death, but were rescued from the remote upper canyons of the mountain in what has become a classic of its time. An account of the adventure is chronicled in the book “Coming Home from Devil Mountain,” by Eleanor Dart O’Byron, one of the missing persons (Harbinger House, 1989).



Several members of the San Diego chapter of the Sierra Club’s Rock Climbing Section (“RCS”) who had participated in the Kellogg-Dart search on El Picacho del Diablo recognized the need for a mountain search and rescue team in San Diego. They returned to San Diego determined to form a group that would be able to respond to climbing emergencies in the San Diego area and nearby Baja. They were experienced mountaineers but we had no training or knowledge of search and rescue techniques. One night in early March 1967, about 15 RCS members gathered at a small room on the second floor of the Balboa Park Conference Building, talking into the wee hours about how to organize themselves into an effective unit. If they had known the group would survive and flourish, someone surely would have remembered the exact date, but talk was entirely focused on what they could do to help. It soon became clear that the nascent team represented a major commitment of time and money, cutting into their recreational climbing and requiring group discipline and personal sacrifices. They had to wait only two months for their first search and rescue operation in April 1967.

## Getting Started

The name “San Diego Mountain Rescue Team” (“SDMRT”) was agreed upon early, as that name appears on the first team roster even though most of the members at that time still considered themselves a branch of the RCS. By June, however, they realized they would have to break away from the Sierra Club and incorporate. Articles of Incorporation were filed with the California Secretary of State in early 1968 and a 501(c)(3) tax exemption was received that same year. The three members who signed the Articles of Incorporation were John Wehbring (still an active member of SDMRT), Wes Reynolds, and Will Tapp. To this day, the members of SDMRT wear the image of El Picacho del Diablo proudly on their uniform patch.



The team’s first order of business was training in search and rescue. Tom Hornbein, who later went on to climb Mount Everest, had taken some RCS members up to Stonewall Peak in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park in the early 1960s for primitive training with patient litter, and the group built on his pioneering efforts with lengthy practices at Stonewall Peak and Mission Gorge. Miner Harkness of the Sierra Madre Search and Rescue Team and Walt Walker of the Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit were particularly helpful in guiding the fledgling team.



The first local search and rescue (“SAR”) contact the team’s officers made was the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, which had first formalized a search and rescue team in March of 1963. Over a series of meetings, SDMRT agreed to work under the direction of the Sheriff’s Department, but with SDMRT maintaining its own unit identity. This began a good relationship with the Sheriff’s Department that culminated with a formal Memorandum of Understanding signed in June 1993 and that continues to this day.

Equipment was the next priority. The team started buying citizens band (CB) radios to connect with the Sheriff’s units and provide internal communications, but then switched to FM radios for their clarity, range, and the need to work with other Mountain Rescue Association (“MRA”) teams. Two Dodge crew-cab trucks were procured from the Defense Department surplus yards, and a few members began to make them into one vehicle, using a panel body from a donated Pacific Telephone truck. Patient litters were “salvaged” from old Navy vessels and, in one case, from a dusty corner of the Ford Building, now the Aerospace Museum. Ropes were donated by some local mountaineering stores, medical gear was scrounged from the UCSD Medical School, and the Red Cross donated a room to store all the team equipment. The team was equipped and ready to go.

### **50 Years of Search and Rescue Operations**

The first edition of the team newsletter, The Litter Letter, was published on March 6, 1968 and referenced 27 members on the call list. The team’s first rescue evacuated a Sierra Club Basic Mountaineering Course student from Mt. Baldy after he suffered a crampon laceration. On May 5, 1968, the team passed the MRA qualification exam and on March 30, 1969 passed the snow and ice test and was admitted into MRA. Since then, the team has maintained its MRA status by passing annual reaccreditation field examinations.



The early years from 1968 to 1970 were extremely busy for SDRMT, and included the El Rodeo rescue of a motorcyclist who had broken his leg trying to go over the Sierra Juarez, the Bobby Sitz search in Tahquitz Canyon near Idyllwild, the long drive to Bridgeport for a search for a lost child, the airplane search near Tule Mountain in Arizona, the extended search for Susie Kenny who was found wandering in the La Grulla Meadow on El Picacho del Diablo, and the puzzling Sam Spry search when a pilot crash-landed his plane in Baja and tried to walk out. The team received its baptism by fire in a series of intense, tough operations and consistently turned out more people than many other search teams. These search

operations fused the group into a close-knit team. Probably the high point of those early years was in July 1971 when 8 members of the team flew to New York State to participate in a search for a lost boy.

Other notable events included a desert survival training that turned into the real thing, resulting in some team members being rescued by helicopter, and the search for survivors of the wrecked ship “Goodwill” far down in Baja. The team has recovered bodies from plane crashes, led 14 students up Pauma Creek on Mt. Palomar, and spent hundreds of hours tramping the woods in places like Yosemite, Mendocino Canyon, and San Diego’s own backcountry. In 1981, the team searched for 9-year-old Jimmy Beveridge on Mt. Palomar, who was, sadly, found deceased after five days. This search resulted in the founding of the Hug-a-Tree and Survive program for teaching school age children how to survive in the woods, started by Jimmy’s mother and a member of SDMRT. In 1986, 8 team members were flown by C-130 cargo plane to Colorado to search for a lost reporter. The team was also extensively active in both of the tragic searches in 2009 and 2010 for local San Diego teenagers Amber Dubois and Chelsea King.

### **Who is SDMRT?**

The San Diego County Sheriff’s Department maintains a volunteer SAR team of approximately 200 members divided into various operational units. Supplementing the Sheriff’s SAR team, SDMRT is an MRA-accredited and independent SAR team in which all members are trained in all search and rescue disciplines. SDMRT provides Type 1 alpine mountain rescue personnel not only to supplement the San Diego Sheriff’s team, but also to respond to out-of-county mutual aid operations coordinated by the California Office of Emergency Services (“Cal OES”). Type 1 searchers are capable of field operations of 72 hours or more duration during day or night in any weather, including blizzard and sub-zero temperatures, at any altitude and in mountainous terrain, and must be experienced, good to excellent backcountry skiers or snowshoers while carrying a 30- to 40-pound pack in all snow conditions. They must demonstrate good general mountaineering skills including ice axe self-arrest and self-belay, climbing with crampons, roped travel, and crevasse rescue knowledge of proper use of snow and ice anchors.



Ongoing training is essential to maintaining the skill level on the team. Every month of the year the team has one business meeting, one classroom training, and one weekend field training in a different topic each month, including rock climbing skills, technical rope rescue at any angle, desert survival, operations in

both soft and hard snow conditions, land navigation, human tracking, mountain climbing, search management techniques, and helicopter tactics. All members must maintain a certification in wilderness medicine, most commonly a Wilderness First Responder (“WFR”) training, although many members also have a higher level medical training, including emergency medical technician (EMT), registered nurse (RN), physician’s assistant (PA), and physician (MD) degrees.



SDMRT is a professional, all-volunteer, not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization of 60 to 70 members that is self-funded by team dues and supplemented by occasional donations, but exists without any public funding or stipends. Members must purchase all their own equipment, bear the expense of travel to and from trainings and search operations, as well as the expenses of medical certification courses. The time commitment is considerable, and requires 700 to 900 hours during the first year of membership. The team is on call 24 hours a day every day of the year, and can expect most operations to commence at night in the worst weather conditions. SDMRT currently responds to 20 to 30 operations per year under the direction of the San Diego County Sheriff or out-of-county under the direction of Cal-OES. These operations include urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness searches. The team has also assisted in wildfire evacuations, cave rescues, and law enforcement evidence searches. This service to community is accomplished without any expenditure of tax dollars. Public recognition of SDMRT’s service to the community has been rare. The San Diego County Sheriff’s SAR team typically receives name recognition, while SDMRT has been content to work quietly behind the scenes.

## 50 Years of Service from 1967 to 2017

As of the team's 50th anniversary, it is estimated that SDMRT has logged more than 1,500 search and rescue operations. The names of the people rescued, the many members of SMDRT who volunteered and provided their services to the community over the years, and the places searched all fade together as the years recede, but the vivid memories, the friendships forged, and the impact on the community remain. It is the common bond of this proud and distinguished history that has helped meld SDMRT into an enduring and self-sacrificing professional team of men and women who stand ready to assist others in need – any time, day or night, in any weather, and in any terrain.

