

## **01-20-1969 Ojai, CA – Robert L Sears – Military SeeBee – Flood Rescue Attempt**

### **Robert L. Sears**

<http://www.sespewild.org/Sespe1969.html>

Robert L. Sears, age 41/42 (Sears died within an hour or so of his birthday) - Equipment Operator Chief (EOC), United States Navy Construction Battalion Force (Seabees). Sears was an expert on heavy equipment operation and training, and at the time of his death, was Project Chief of the Rose Valley Training Camp. Right before Christmas in 1967, he had suffered severe injuries, including broken arms and shoulders, from a hostile explosive device detonated at Qui Nhon in Vietnam. Nearly killed, Sears had made remarkable progress in recuperating, until his untimely death in the Sespe.



### **California Tragedy - All Lost in Hiking Party**

<https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/162723388/>

JANUARY 23, 1969 THE ROCKLAND COUNTY JOURNAL-NEWS

OJAI, Calif. (AP) - Along the debris-choked banks of Sespe Creek, the clearing sky disclosed a young boy's body ... then the bodies of two more ... then the lifeless forms of a sheriff's deputy and a forest ranger.

It was feared five more would be found dead today.

These were the lost part of six young hikers, their adult leader and three men who tried tragically to rescue them from the rain-flooded area. A survivor of the group, Scott Eckcrsley, 28, told authorities a bulldozer stalled as they had attempted to cross the swift stream late Monday.

Elsewhere, as skies dried over California, heavy property and crop damage was counted. Southern California's storm damage was estimated at \$3 million. There were 47 storm-related deaths. The storm turbulence was blamed for light plane crash in which three Texans died on a mountainside near Banning. At least 29 traffic deaths in southern California were caused by the storm, authorities said. In the foothills of Angeles National Forest, northeast of Los Angeles, 15 homes were destroyed by floods and rockslides in the Azusa-Glendora area. More than 90 other homes were damaged as overnight floodwaters from mountains denuded by a 19,000-acre brush fire last year sent muck and boulders crashing through a housing tract. Several were filled with mud six feet deep. Fifteen homes were evacuated. A mud flow wrecked the Azusa-Pacific College gymnasium, causing \$100,000 damage, and hundreds of cars were partly buried at times. The damage in Glendora-Azusa was expected to exceed \$1 million. In San Luis Obispo County, officials said flood waters caused \$2 million damage.

A 70-year-old Guadalupe cypress tree which stood on grounds of Pomona's Post Office was felled by winds.

In Tulare County, a sheriff's deputy found Ronald E. Balster, 23, his wife Ellen and their two young sons near the Kern River where they had been trapped since their car became stuck in heavy snow Saturday. All were in good condition.

Marine helicopters and Ventura County sheriff's ground searchers hunted victims of flood-swollen Sospe Creek.

The bodies found Wednesday were identified as those of Deputy Sheriff Chester Larson, 34, a veteran outdoorsman and father of two sons; U.S. Forest Ranger James A. Greenhill, 37, who was married only last month; John Rauh, 14, Daniel Salisbury, 12, and Edward Salisbury, 10, the latter three of Canoga Park.

Still missing were Robert Cassol, 14; his brother Ronald, 13; Frank Donato, 13; and Navy Chief Petty Officer Robert Sears, a wounded Vietnam veteran who was driving the rescue bulldozer when it stalled in the rampaging stream.

### **Eyewitness Gives Detailed Account**

Near OJAI, Calif. (AP) - We all knew it was more or less the end. The boys were absolutely beautiful. No screaming. No hysteria. Only calm acceptance of the fact of what was to follow.

We all prayed, even the youngsters.

One by one, someone would rail out he couldn't hang on any longer. The water in a cloudburst rose so fast it stalled the bulldozer in the middle of the river. It was quickly up to our necks.

There was no time to talk about how to get to the bank.

We all began to get numb and slip away.

The Navy petty officer was the first to go. He went quickly.

"We talked about death and dying as the water kept rising.

He said the Lord had it all planned. Maybe five minutes later he slipped off, and I held him another five minutes.

Then the kids went one by one and their leader.

Soon only two of us were left, a deputy sheriff and I.

He was washed by a heavy swell on top of me. I held on to him but lost hold and we both went in. I went under several times and I don't remember much after that.

When I came to, I was lying in a pool. I crawled up the bank into some thick brush, dug a hole in the mud, squeezed inside and covered myself to keep warm. In the morning I walked up stream about four miles and came across a stalled vehicle which had provisions and blankets in it.

I made myself comfortable for the rest of the day.

darkness I saw a helicopter overhead.

I flagged it down and it landed and hauled me in.