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VANPORT FIRE DEPARTMENT

Robert O. English, Captain

My Observations of the Vanport Tragedy - the Flood

I went to work for the Vanport Fire Department January 14, 1943.

On the morning of the 28th, I reported for work as per usual, at the Central Fire Station at Vanport. There we were informed that the river was rising fast and coming up on the dykes. We were to be put on four-hour patrols and I was given the job of making up the patrol list. Two men to go together, that is two firemen in each car. The patrol was staggered so that there was always an old man with a new man on the patrol to show him any new developments or weak spots. These patrols functioned smoothly and efficiently 24 hours a day. Chief Engineer, C. I. Haviland, conducted me on a tour of all the dykes surrounding Vanport, pointing out the important spots and possible weak spots. He ordered me to instruct all patrols on the extreme importance and necessity of keeping on the alert and reporting any and all things that were out of the ordinary and might pertain to a weakening of the dyke.

At 4:00 p.m., I went on the first patrol, accompanied by Capt. Ralph Slaughter and Captain I. Rohrs. Captain Slaughter pointed out necessary things to be extremely watchful of; namely, blisters, heavy seepage, muddy water, boils, unauthorized persons around dykes after dark. At 8:00 p.m., Captain Rohrs was relieved by W. A. Garrett, Driver of Engine 5, who then accompanied me on patrol and was instructed on all things that I had been instructed on myself. We covered all the dykes on the first round. On the second - about 9:00 o'clock, we found a boil on the road at the foot of the south dyke - half way between Denver Avenue and Island Street. We reported same to the Administration Bldg, and were accompanied back to the spot by Mr. McGill, Mr. Haviland and Inspector Trammell. This place was then covered by straw and sand bags. On inspecting the road farther west, we discovered more soft spots. I left Garrett to look for more spots on foot and I reported these also. These were sand-bagged immediately. I picked up Garrett and continued the patrol. At 9:45, we discovered a leak coming under the concrete sea wall in front of and east of Swift and Company which was also reported and sandbagged immediately. The reading taken on a measuring stick at 10:00 p.m., found water had raised three inches from approximately 6:30 p.m. I was relieved from Patrol by M. E. Morse who continued the patrol with Mr. Garrett. I was relieved from duty at 8:00 a.m. next morning by B shift and was instructed to stay close to a telephone at all times.

May 30th reported for duty at 7:30 a.m., at which time I made up the daily patrol as on the preceeding day but using two patrols and two cars. I was cautioned to instruct the men to be extremely cautious as the river was rising rapidly. At about 9:15 a.m., Melvin A. Hall, who was on the first patrol, accompanied by C. W. Hughes, called from No. 3 Fire Station and reported muddy water leaking under dyke at the northwest corner of the project at the corner of Meadows and Broadacres Streets. I went there immediately and picked him up and accompanied him to the spot. Upon investigation of the new leak, I met Mr. Suttle, Engineer from Swift and Company and three railroad officials, names unknown. Upon Mr Suttles' suggestion that we sandbag it on the Vanport side of the dyke, I immediately reported it to Assistant Chief Bergholt who then ordered sandbags and workmen on the spot immediately. I returned to Central Fire Station.

At 9:45 a.m., Alarm Board operator, Bert Young, notified me of a call coming from Denver Avenue and Cottonwood that water was bubbling out of the ground by the Dyke road. Upon investigating, found water had raised the sod two feet. When I broke the boil, water rushed out and I assured the people, in the immediate area, of little danger. I then reported back to Central station. At about 10:15, I was ordered, by Assistant Chief Bergholt, to gather up workmen to sack sand for the break discovered at 9:15 by

the railroad dyke as this was growing worse. I got Mr. Ted Monamaker and four neighbors that lived on N. Force and reported back to the Fire Station accompanied by these men. Chief Bergholt then took these men, accompanied by five others, to the scene of the leak on the Railroad dyke. Between then and noon, I went to several places on the dykes checking the conditions and the men. About 1:30, Chief Bergholt came back and got more men to work on the railroad dyke as it was still leaking pretty badly. We were still being assured of, at intervals, that there was no immediate danger and I was passing the same information to worried residents as they were calling in continuously to get the latest reports.

At about 3:00 p.m., Mr. Haviland came to the station and ordered me to call all fire department personnel back to the Station immediately. I carried out the order. At 4:20, I heard a shout outside the fire station that the dyke had broken at the railroad dyke where the cros had been working sandbagging all day. Upon going outside, I saw water flooding the upper end of the Project and heard the sirens from the Sheriff's and the Chief's rig. I ordered the air raid horn turned on and alerted all the firemen. However, the current had been shorted out and the air raid alarm horn would not blow. I ran back outside and saw Fire Station No. 3 floating down the street, the water pouring in, people running and screaming. I immediately ordered W. E. Kennedy, Edd St. Hilare and J. A. Deters to the corner of Lake and Victory to direct traffic and people out of the Project - away from the raging waters. I then looked up the street and saw the second wall of water coming down and whole units, buildings floating toward me. The remaining firemen were then ordered to pick up all women and children and put them in the cars going by the station in a slow steady stream. A few minutes later, P.E.P. Company busses started coming into the project. As the water had reached Lake Street by that time, the busses were turned around and held at the Fire Station until we could get them loaded and out of the Project. Other busses were turned around at the Hospital and loaded with people fleeing the water. The hospital was vacant.

When the water reached the Fire Station, I ordered Engine 3 and the Ladder Truck to leave the Project immediately and pick up people on the way out. I ordered Engine No. 5 to stand by at the station. There were three busses left in front of the hospital partly loaded with stragglers. I ordered these to pull across the slough bridge and to wait for further orders before pulling on out. I then ordered Engine 5 to pull out of the station and load on the remaining people and ordered it off the Project to safe ground. I then went back into the station and called the Alarm Board operator, Vern Emerson, to leave the switch board. By that time, the water was up about three feet deep and very swift, flowing through the station. The alarm board went dead, shorted out by the water.

As we crossed the slough bridge, I saw Inspectors Travel and Hagland each carrying an elderly woman and child through the waist deep water to the remaining busses which I had ordered to wait on the east side of the slough. The ground was dry on the east side of the slough as the slough was carrying off the first rush of the water. We, Travel, Hagland, Emerson, Deters and I, then ran across the lawn to help evacuate the people in the remaining apartments and there we found a lot of children and got them on the busses. I then told the bus drivers to pull down to the corner of Victory and Force and wait there for more. The busses were filled there and ordered to safety. I then went back to the sheriff's office where Captain Tillman and one other Deputy Sheriff were trying to start a car which we failed to do. We then went around back to the police garage and got out the police emergency boat. By that time the water was about three feet deep. We floated the boat out to the street and climbed in. The motor failed and we floated with the current down the street. By that time, the logs and debris was so thick that it tore the motor from the back of the boat and we floated helplessly down to the Administration Building yard and rammed the fence and stalled. At this point, the slough was carrying most of the water coming from this direction and water was shallow. Captain Tillman and I tore down the west side of the fence and drove some of the

cars into the street where we called some of the men that were nearby to come and drive the cars on down the street picking up stray stragglers as they went along. We then took the last truck available that we could start on down the street picking up two or three other men. At this point, I saw Vern Emerson trying to start an electrician's truck that was stalled by the side of the road. One of the buildings floating down the slough, hit the bridge and the impact broke off two of the power poles, the heavy cable hitting the door of the truck bruising Emerson's arm, as I learned later. At this time, we also met a young fellow under the influence of alcohol sauntering leisurely up the street toward the raging water. Captain Tillman and I, Joe Deters and Vern Emerson had to use force to get him into the truck. Going down the street a few feet farther, we contacted one of the busses still waiting. We met an elderly couple also coming up the street toward the water. They insisted they had to get up to their apartment on Force to get their money. We also had to use force with these people to enter the bus. All this time, Inspectors Tramel, Herland and Deters, Emerson and I were carrying people out of the apartments through the deep water and loading them onto the bus which was slowly coming down the street. The bus loaded, I sent it on ahead. Herland, Tramel, Deters, Emerson and I then went through the back units but could find no more people. We then came back and got on the truck road down Victory Street to a point about 160 feet west of the circle road where the truck stalled in the deep water. Three P.E.P. busses were also stalled here but all of the people had been taken off. Sitting in the middle of the street, by the stalled busses, was a sedan with a man and woman in it - also stalled. We got them out and started carrying the woman to the dyke. She remarked, "Better not drop me, boys. I'll get wet." We gave her to some other men that were standing forming a line across the swift current in the street and passed her on to safety. But I'm thinking she not only got wet but VERY wet. At this point, I saw Inspector Herland back of me about 100 feet dragging a woman and helping some other people through the deep water. I tried to get back to help him but couldn't. I was knocked down by a refrigerator that was floating by in the swift current. Incidentally, this is the first time that I ever knew one of those things would float. As I came up, I saw Inspector Herland had the people onto the stair of one of the units where they climbed to the roof. I then swam over to the dyke and Tillman helped me out of the water. I climbed onto the top of the dyke and helped to load people onto the busses there and get the traffic moving on to safety. I then contacted Deputy Sheriff Al Freeman and had him broadcast over the police radio for all the boats available immediately.

While standing in the middle of the street, I happened to look over on the bank and saw a lady standing there holding a little baby. As I watched, a man ran up to her and slapped her then drew back his fist and struck her in the face. Al Garrett must have seen it at the same time for he was also standing in the street helping direct traffic and people and we both ran for him. Garrett jumped between the couple and I hit him and we rolled down the bank together. Vern Emerson came up and we subdued the guy and put him into the car while Garrett put the lady and the baby into the bus. The guy was nuts; I should have left him drown. By now the water was over halfway up on the dyke and houses were floating by like ferry boats. I saw Inspector Herland and his four people riding the roof of one of the units which was in a back current and heading for Swift and Company packing house. They were later rescued.

I then contacted Mr. Havland and he ordered me to clear the dyke of all traffic and get the people on foot in cars or busses and off the dyke. By that time, the boats started arriving and we unloaded them at the northeast exit of Vanport. Engine 15 had been stranded by on the dyke and so I ordered it off the dyke and to report to Engine 30 of Portland, in Kenton, and to wait for further orders. The other trucks had already been ordered out and were on their way to report to Engine 30. I then met Captain Klock of Truck 4 of Portland and asked him if he would have his men work with our men in the boats placing two firemen in each boat with axes to enable them to open up the floating buildings and to look for people trapped in the upper floors and also to rescue people on roofs of the houses. I then went in a boat with Joe of Joe's Market in Vanport, accompanied by Bill Cohen, Vanport fireman, to look for survivors. By this time, there

were between 30 and 40 boats out among the buildings with Deputy Sheriffs and firemen who were trying to control the looting and searching for people who might still be alive. This must have been around 9:00 o'clock as it was dark. We found no survivors but found several bodies floating, face down, in one of the units from the colored district. We reported this to the Deputy Sheriff and were told that nothing could be done until they got flood lights. After that, I took some of the firemen up to Kenton to get hot doffee since we were all cold and very wet. We then came back to the dyke to stand by for further orders. I stood on the dyke gazing at what once had been Vanport, just a few short hours before. It was one of the most congenial communities that I had ever worked in. I had met lots of these people through civic affairs which I had taken part in, feeling proud that I had worked and seen this city grow up from a mudhole to a beautiful and happy city - the second largest in the State of Oregon.

I sincerely hope that these people, with whom I feel a real kinship, may someday, in the very near future, find a community in which they can live in peace and try to forget their recent sorrow and recuperate their losses and to be sincerely happy once more. I would like to have the opportunity to work with them once again.

Captain Robert O. English
Vanport Fire Department