

TESTIMONY OF JOHN V. DAVIS

Taken at the Scene of the Tragedy,

HAUSER CREEK FIRE

October 8, 1943

Q. What is your full name and address?

A. John V. Davis, Descanso Ranger Station, Descanso.

Q. What is your occupation?

A. Fire Control Assistant, Descanso.

Q. How long have you been in the Forest Service?

A. Since June 1, 1936.

Q. In what capacity were you acting on October 2 when you came to the fire?

A. Well, as Mr. Ewing previously told you, he sent me in to telephone for more additional troops from Lockett and Pine Valley, and I came back into the fire when Mr. Ewing gave me orders to take the men down and get them lined out with Ranger Munhall and return up on top to Stokes Valley where he was going. As I came by I met Mr. Hunt and his marines. They were right in here. I pulled some boys off the tankers for crew leaders and replaced them on the tankers with C.I.M. men and came back up to this point on my way up to Stokes Valley above.

Q. When you went down to the West line of the fire you talked to Munhall and he was taking an attack on that end.

A. Yes.

Q. Did you come up on this fire line at all?

A. I stopped on the way and talked to two tankers that were working on the bottom, and as I was talking to one of them I saw a distinct change.

Q. Who did you say that to.

A. Walter Birch.

Q. Did you see Gunner Wright?

A. Gunner Wright was the first man I saw when I reached the mouth of the canyon. The tanker was down where you see the road. Wright was here where the cars are parked now.

Q. Go on from there.

A. I came on up and Birch followed with the tanker, and he was knocking

Testimony of John V. Davis (Continued)

the fire down along the road. It made a distinct change and swept up the canyon. Gunner Wright said he was worried about the men. We walked up just above the tree on this side of those rocks. The fire was right at our backs. There were eight or ten men working this trail down below. They had been working along the road. They were widening the trail up the canyon. He said "hadn't we better get those men out?" I said "yes."

The tank truck was setting where the pickup is. He was trying to knock the fire out. The men started coming out where we were. The tanker kept the fire back from them. We called to these men.

Q. How many men got out?

A. Eight or ten.

Q. When did you observe fire on this side?

A. Immediately after those men got out the whole thing went up like a flash. I should judge the flames were 30 feet in height coming over the slope, and the front of the flame 25 or 35 feet ahead of the base of the flame just licking out. While we were there the Gunner remarked about the safety of the men in here. I said that probably they planned to take care of that by backfire. At that time a fire started in here. And that is when the Gunner and I left, going down to the road.

We met the men with the tanker there. Those men were working about this first big rock on the left hand side of the trail going down.

Q. Then after the fire had gone through here what did you next learn about the men?

A. We had taken care of those men who had run through the brush that were out of breath. The next thing we did, I told that tanker to wet things down so we could get in. The men started coming out. I saw the way they were burned so I left to call for the ambulances.

Q. Davis, where were you then when the fire swept over this little draw?

A. I was right on that rocky draw while the tanker was holding the fire back. I was on the West side there.

Q. You were on the West side then?

A. Yes, Sir, I was on the West side.

Q. What did you do after the fire had swept over?

A. We pulled the tanker and wet it down with the hose. It was so hot we couldn't go through. I came up and helped lead the men out who were

Testimony of John V. Davis (Continued)

slightly burned. After about 50 came out I called for ambulances. At that time neither Hunt nor Herndon had come out.

Q. They were still in there?

A. Yes, the boys were still surrounded. We met those coming out and lay them down in the road. After I called for the ambulances I came back and Hunt and Herndon came out with their men.

Then I walked up the canyon with one of our C.I.M. men and found the bodies. We walked down the ridge in case any of them had tried to come down the ridge.

Q. Where did you find the bodies - on this map?

A. I can show you where we found the bodies. The first body was found in between two large boulders in the creek.

Q. At the head?

A. Right at the head and was in a sitting position, but Gunner Wright had moved the body as he went through.

Q. Above or below the rocks?

A. On the upper side of the rocks. I would say either just below or just above the boulders there on the extreme right, just below the trail on the South side of the canyon.

Q. Were they together?

A. Yes.

Q. Just below the trail?

A. Yes, Sir, where there was a slight area on the South side of the canyon.

Q. There were two there?

A. Yes. We only found three altogether. I never found the 4th. I continued on up the canyon beyond where there was any fire.

Q. You found none up above?

A. No, Sir.

Q. Then what did you do?

A. I followed up the ridge and watched both sides of the ridge in case anyone had tried to go over the ridge and continued down the canyon over the point of the ridge here.

Testimony of John V. Davis (Continued)

We found none other than three bodies.

Q. Do you know if those were the only three men who died before they left here?

A. I stayed here until the bodies were moved out and that is all they found. After the bodies were removed I went down to the lower line where Ranger Munhall was working.

Q. Were all the marines inside the burning area or some on the road?

A. Prior to the fire? They were a few on the road when we came up the road.

Q. They were safe?

A. Yes.

Q. Eight or so?

A. There wouldn't be that many because there were only 12 or 14 including 8 or 10 we had taken out. There were about 6. I assumed they were truck drivers. They had parked their trucks where the camp was later made.

Q. 6 outside - 8 to 10 escaped, and 50 came out ahead of the 2 men?

A. I'd say approximately 50 at the time I left.

Q. When you made this search up here who was with you?

A. One of the men off our Descanso tanker. One of our own men.

Q. Were there about 70 in the detail?

A. That I couldn't say. They had already lined out when I got here. The figure I got was 85 and 6 and one died later. I've gotten several different figures on that. When I met Gunner Wright on my way out he said 110 all told including drivers, corpsman and observation officer

Q. That includes your part in this particular part?

A. Yes.

Q. The fire changed from the South to the West slope?

A. Across the drainage rather than up the drainage.

Q. Have we definitely established the hour of the worst crisis of the fi

A. It was 1:35 when I left Ranger Munhall.

Q. You were with Munhall at 1:35?

Testimony of John V. Davis (Continued)

A. Yes, it probably took five minutes.

Q. Did you immediately go in and pull the men off the flat point?

A. Yes, Sir. I don't think it was two minutes. Probably about 1:42 or 1:43. But I did see a spot fire or backfire take off in here. There was a little delay in getting tools and all.