

TESTIMONY OF JOHN H. STEWART

Taken at the Pine Valley Camp

October 8, 1943

- Q. What is your full name and address?
- A. Pfc. John H. Stewart, Marine Corps, Pine Valley.
- Q. Mr. Stewart, on October 2 you were with an assignment of marines from this camp that went to the fire at Hauser Creek.
- A. Yes, Sir, I was. I was driver of one of the trucks and had charge of a detail of men riding on this truck.
- Q. How many men were in that truck?
- A. Nine men and myself, Sir.
- Q. After you arrived at the fire, which forest officers did you report to, or did you report to any?
- A. We did not report personally to anyone but were assigned to a group of men who were in charge of Ranger Hunt, if I'm not mistaken.
- Q. Who was in charge of the entire contingent of this camp?
- A. Marine Gunner Wright.
- Q. Which forest officers were you working with when you started to cut the fire line in the branch of Hauser Creek.
- A. Ranger Hunt and Guard Herndon.
- Q. Will you tell us in narrative form what happened after you arrived at the point where work was started and what instructions you had, if any from forest officers.
- A. We were told to dismount our men and line them up for issuance of fire fighting equipment and directed up the path or particular canyon where the work was done. We were instructed to use the forestry Two-lick system and proceeded up the canyon as fast as possible. I proceeded with the head men in my detail and selected the path by which they were to travel through the canyon. I was supervised in this selection by Guard Herndon who worked along the upper left hand side of the canyon, watching the fire and supervising our work below.

As we proceeded further up the canyon and the fire approached closer we were told that if the fire should jump the canyon or come close enough to be dangerous that we were to all back into the canyon for protection. After the head of our detail had worked some 175 or 200 yards up the canyon, the word was shouted up to us that the fire had jumped the canyon and our break down the road.

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The men started falling back down the canyon in an orderly manner. After moving back down the canyon approximately 75 or 100 yards we met the men who were already at the lower edge coming up the canyon and were told the fire was too hot and to fall back up the canyon. We started back up making all the time possible under the conditions, and apparently in the haste and excitement men were not able to make as much time as they should in the narrow trail and over rough rocks, some of them falling littering up the trail, making passage impossible and causing those at the rear to stack up and become further excited.

Evidently the men started breaking from the trail and attempted to go over the right shoulder of the canyon and reach safety at the road. Several men had already gone up over the hill when I tried it myself. After travelling halfway up the side of the slope I dislocated my right knee and was unable to continue further. I turned and dived back down and rolled down the canyon. One or two men who had followed me up the hill followed me down, and with these two I made my way to the protection of the rock in the canyon.

Q. Was this rock one that had been designated a safety place to go?

A. No, Sir. No definite place had been assigned. We had merely been told to go back into the canyon in case of danger from the fire.

We called to several other men in the vicinity who had been unable to reach shelter, and several of them came to the rock where we were seeking shelter. This protection was not enough for more than ten or eleven men. I'm not sure how many got there, but it was very crowded at this point. By combining the water we had with us in our own canteens and the canteens issued by the forestry we were able to pour water on each other to relieve the heat and smoke to some extent.

Q. Was that before the flames passed over.

A. During the passage and a short time before when smoke became intense. The flames along both edges of the canyon seemed to travel faster than down in the bottom, and extreme heat and smoke from these flames caused us the most damage and suffering. After the greatest part of this burn had passed the fire continued coming up the bottom of the canyon at a slow rate but still caused quite a bit of heat and suffering from smoke and flames. We continued to protect ourselves as best we could and called several other men from nearby shelters which did not appear to be as good as our own. We administered the last of our water to them and tried to relieve their burns as much as possible. We used some of the water to sprinkle the ground around our shelter to keep the flames from getting too close.

By this time the flames had passed, the heat was dying, and smoke was the only discomfort which we encountered at this time. As soon as possible we began to fall to the others down canyon to send up uninjured men to help those of us who were burned. In four or five minutes men came from the road area and assisted those of us who were burned to the

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end of the canyon to the edge of the road. Here the burned men were given what treatment was possible by our Corpsman and made us comfortable as was possible and awaited the ambulances, which took us to the Camp Lockett hospital.

I stayed at the scene of the fire until all the men were moved with the exception of the bodies of the three men who were burned to death. After this I took the last truckload of men and proceeded to Camp Lockett where they were also given first aid.

- Q. Were the men who lost their lives in close proximity where you were in your shelter?
- A. One of the men was below me and around a rough abutment of rocks approximately 75 to 100 feet from the shelter where we were. The two men who were burned to death together were above us and around a turn of the canyon a short distance farther - perhaps 100 or 125 feet away.
- Q. What kind of shelter did they have? Did they have any shelter? Were they protected at all?
- A. The man who burned to death alone was right at the edge of a brush and rock entanglement. Scrub brush seemed to hang over the cavity of the rock in which his body was laying when it was found.
- The two men who were burned to death were laying in the bottom of the canyon wall with scrub brush to the canyon side of them and the canyon wall on the other. Below them or down the canyon approximately 15 or 20 feet was a protective point which could have been utilized. I do not know to what success it could have been used.
- Q. Were you and your men at the head of the line construction crew?
- A. Yes, Sir. We were farthest up the gulch.
- Q. Were these men who were burned to death of your detachment?
- A. No, Sir, they were not. The men who were burned apparently became mixed with our crew when we went down the canyon and when we went up they became confused, all of us trying to make as much time as possible.
- Q. These details consist of the men in each truck who are presumably under instructions of the truck driver.
- A. It has always been the practice for the driver to take charge of the men. The driver on the truck relays orders from the forestry men to the individual.
- Q. Was there any discussion between Wright, you leaders and Mr. Hunt in laying out plans for that attack?

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A. Not that I know of, Sir.

Q. As I understand it, you kept your men with you substantially when you sought shelter?

A. No, they weren't all with me. I'm not clear how many. There was a group of men whom we called in to the shelter. We managed to protect each other.

Q. You stayed tight as a group, when the fire was going over?

A. Yes, Sir.

Q. Is there any question in your mind as the truck crew leader . . . ?

A. After we usually started work under a forestry service man we ordinarily depend upon him entirely for directions and have never had occasion to refer back to Gunner Wright for any direction whatever as far as fire fighting is concerned.

Q. How many fires have you been on since you've been stationed at Pine Valley?

A. Indian Creek, Viejas, Laguna, Hauser - Four in all.

Q. On any of those did you have any supervisory command over anyone but your truck group?

A. No, Sir. I had approximately nine or ten men on each occasion.

Q. At the time the fire crossed the canyon did you hear Mr. Hunt or Herndon request that the men come to the bottom of the canyon?

A. I did not personally hear them, but the word was passed up to us. The word was carried on from man to man to fall back into the canyon.

Q. Can you tell me whether you designated anyone to go ahead of you or whether you had any working relations with the radio man?

A. No, Sir, I did not. I questioned the radio man and a man who was following as they passed me as we were building our trail the radio man rushed past us and another followed with a shovel. I had already instructed the others to go to work and asked this man where he was going as I knew he was not needed at the head of the detail. The radio man informed me that he was going with him. I told the radio man he didn't need a man with a shovel to work a radio and asked the man to fall back. After the radio man had gotten above us, standing on a rock he hollered down to me and pointed to the fire and indicated the fire was coming along the ridge pretty fast, and again indicated with his arms.

Q. The man with the shovel fell back. Was he in your detail?

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- A. No, he was not, Sir. The men in my detail were given brush hooks; the later ones took up shovels.
- Q. You mentioned that after the call to fall back in the canyon that some men started over the hill from the road. Did any of them succeed in coming out? Did they fall back?
- A. They did not attempt to go over the hill until after they had gone down the canyon and had been notified that it was too hot. When they started coming up the canyon it got so badly blocked they attempted to pass on the right and then go over the ridge.
- Q. Did any of them get over the ridge?
- A. Four of the men in the lead made their escape without injury at all.
- Q. Then, that, as far as you know, was over this route down the ridge and back of the fire?
- A. The four men who were ahead of me when I injured my leg and turned back. Two of the men who were with me turned back also. I do not believe anyone passed me on my way back to the canyon.
- Q. Were any of the men who had succeeded in getting out burned in any form?
- A. I understand that the men who filtered over the hill from this point were all badly burned.
- Q. But managed to get out to the road?
- A. Yes, Sir. One of them reached the road with nothing but the bank of his trunks. He was a casualty.
- Q. Where did he cross?
- A. Right up across the road where we had our shelter. You can tell very easily where he was. You can see a lot of metal buttons and metal pieces of the helmets on the ground and as you go around the ridge.
- Q. There was evidence that they had tried to negotiate this steep bluff.
- A. Across the rock where we had our shelter is still grass that isn't burned. We managed to break the fire with our canteens and by spilling water.
- Q. When the marine contingent came in they came in here and turned around at the flat and discharged the men near the entrance of the ravine?
- A. Exactly at the entrance.
- Q. You took the trucks back to the camp?

Testimony of John H. Stewart (Continued)

A. No, Sir. We detailed men to the trucks.

Q. In other words, you as driver directed other men to take the trucks back.

A. The men on the rear end of the convoy took the trucks back.

Q. They stayed with the trucks?

A. I'm not sure how many there were, and I don't know if there was a driver for every truck. But I do know there was a guard posted.

Q. There were eleven trucks and 10 men to a truck?

A. Yes, Sir.

Q. Do you ever take ambulances up to the fires.

A. We have no ambulances attached out here, Sir.