

TESTIMONY OF WILLARD W. WRIGHT, Marine Gunner

Taken at the Scene of the Tragedy

HAUSER CREEK FIRE

October 8, 1943

- Q. What is your full name and address?
- A. Willard W. Wright, Marine Gunner, U.S.M.C.R.
- Q. You came in with a company of marines October 2 to help fight this fire?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. How many marines did you have with you?
- A. I believe there were 112, sir.
- Q. Some of those men were truck drivers not used as actual fire fighters?
- A. Most of the men were students, sir.
- Q. Were you present when Mr. Hunt took part of your men and detailed them to Jack Herndon and himself to start cutting this line?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. Were you up in the canyon at any time when the fire went over the men?
- A. I was part way up. Before the fire started, I had asked Mr. Hunt if he should start here. Not being a fire fighting man, I, of course, questioned the tactics of starting so closely.
- Q. What did he say?
- A. He felt that it was perfectly safe, sir.
- Q. Will you give us in narrative form what you observed happening?
- A. The men started up the ravine accompanied by Mr. Herndon and Mr. Hunt and proceeded up the canyon cutting the underbrush and clearing away any grass that happened to be in the trail that they were trying to form.
- Q. Did they tell you what their intent was in building this line?

(Testimony of Willard W. Wright, cont'd.)

- A. It was my understanding that they were going to cut this line up here and backfire from here.
- Q. Where were you when you first observed the fire had jumped and trapped the men?
- A. I saw the flames coming across the knoll of this hill beyond the left flank of the path. Mr. Davis was down at the road at that time and I questioned Mr. Davis as to how long they were going to keep the men in here.
- Q. What did he say?
- A. He thought it was getting plenty warm and he called the men and after he finished, I called to the men who were near the road.
- Q. You knew that Mr. Hunt was with the men above here?
- A. Yes, sir, he and Mr. Herndon.
- Q. Who did you have in detail in charge of the men of the marines?
- A. It has always been the custom in the past that the man driving the truck would be the group leader of the men in the truck; that the group leader would take orders from the rangers. That has always been our practice in the past, sir.
- Q. You did have a truck driver or a group leader, then?
- A. There were eleven trucks and eleven drivers in charge of each group on detail.
- Q. We have understood that a private-first-class, or a corporal Stewart and corporal Beckwith were instructors.
- A. They are instructors in our mechanics' and drivers' school at Pine Valley. They are not instructors in fire fighting.
- Q. Do you know approximately how many men were with Mr. Hunt above the place the fire crossed and in the canyon?
- A. I couldn't tell you the exact number, sir.
- Q. But you mean that in that group there were several men who qualified as leaders, or truck drivers, brought to the fire?
- A. They were leaders in so far as seeing that the men got to the scene of the fire and were to be given orders by the rangers or forestry men.

(Testimony of Willard W. Wright, cont'd.)

- Q. Were they used to carry out the orders that the rangers gave them? Did they relay the orders to the men--the orders the ranger gave?
- A. Yes, sir.
- Q. Have you and your men been on other fires already with my officers?
- A. Yes, sir. This is the fourth fire I have attended, sir.
- Q. Our officers on this fire were Hunt and Herndon. Had they been with you on the fires before?
- A. To the best of my knowledge, I never remember seeing Mr. Hunt but I have Mr. Herndon.
- Q. Had the men been on fires or were they some new recruits?
- A. Sir, I think there were approximately twenty of my men had never been out before but whether they had had any previous experience, I couldn't tell. The twenty mechanic students that we brought up had been on one other fire that I know about, sir.
- Q. You were in complete charge of the entire detachment?
- A. My instructions on this fire were the same as on our previous fires that I was told to escort the men to the scene of the fire and then turn them over to the ranger in charge of that particular area.
- Q. What happened after the fire had crossed? What was the first action that was taken for evacuating these men?
- A. The men that were able to walk came down to the road to where our corpsman was stationed from various angles--some came out through this ravine, others came out over the top of this knoll to your left, sir.
- Q. Were you with the searching party that first found the three fatalities?
- A. No, sir, I wasn't the first there to find the bodies. I was up in here.
- Q. But you know approximately where they were found?
- A. Yes, sir. I know where the bodies were. I was up in there before the bodies were removed.
- Q. Indicate approximately where the three bodies were found.
- A. There is a tree there that is not burned.

(Testimony of Willard W. Wright, cont'd.)

- Q. Above the rocks?
- A. Above that area where that sharp bank--where the tree is unburned. Not the first tree.
- Q. Near that steep bluff there?
- A. There were two bodies near the base of the steep bluff. There was a very decided sheer drop there. That is as far as I can tell from here the place where two of the bodies were found. They were on the right side and there was one body off to the left side.
- Q. That body was close to the other two?
- A. Sir, I would say that there were fifteen to twenty feet between all three bodies. There were two bodies in one spot and another beyond to the left as you face up the ravine. It was on the top side of the ravine. There is more or less of a flat area there inbetween those two sheer spots, and the one man was to the left of the draw as you go up it from here, and the other two bodies to the right.
- Q. What about this body that was supposed to have been found here by this rock?
- A. There was one on the left side of the ravine.
- Q. A previous witness mentioned there was a body in a sitting position.
- A. I would have to go up there.
- Q. I don't know if you can answer this question. Several marines were critically burned subsequently to the time they were evacuated from here. Do you know where they were when the fire went over?
- A. I couldn't give the exact location. They were down in this ravine. I couldn't give the exact location--all I know is that the men came up with the group and came out afterwards to the road badly burned. One man I know definitely walked out but the others I can't say.
- Q. I have one other question. The names of Pfc. or Corporal Stewart was mentioned as being in here.
- A. He was the first man to enter. He was what I term as a lead-off man.
- Q. Several of our officers have mentioned his name. You can concur that he was one of your instructors?
- A. He was an instructor at our driving school at Pine Valley. He was the first man to enter the ravine, but, as I say, he was working just the same as the rest of us.

(Testimony of Willard W. Wright, cont'd.)

Q. He should be able to have some information as to what happened in here?

A. Yes, sir. He was on the upper end and I was on the lower.