DEED OF GIFT

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M: This is an interview with Captain Bill Thomas of the State Patrol, I'm in his office at Greeley, the date is September 14, 1976, and my name is David McComb.

Well, I guess we ought to start at the beginning, somewhere on Saturday night, July 31, you find out there's a flood in the Big Thompson.

T: Well, my notification was rather sketchy. I won't ever forget it because I was watching the professional, I mean the finals of the boxing of the Olympics, and my first notification was, the dispatcher called me and said that we had a ... looked like a mudslide at the upper end, or the west end, of the Big Thompson Canyon near Estes Park, and that Officer [Bill] Miller, who is stationed at Estes Park, was going down to check on it.

Well, I've spent my life in this country and flash floods aren't--or cloudbursts and a mudslide, aren't something that I would normally get excited about. So I told them to keep me informed, and then at 9:20 p.m. they called me, and said that I possibly had two men trapped in the Big Thompson Canyon, one probably at Drake, and the original officer, Officer Miller, up in the Waltonia area, which is between Drake and Estes Park. And that Sergeant [W. Hugh] Purdy, who was stationed at Loveland, was on his way up to check on it.

This was approximately 9:20. Now I have standing operating procedure in that if we have a man in any kind of trouble, that the nearest supervisor gets his tail on the road and starts to check in on it. And it bothered me just a little bit.

I don't know, normally, with just that much information, that I would have necessarily gone up, but when they said, possibly trapped in the Canyon,
it gave me the feeling that maybe we had a little more than a mudslide coming down the Big Thompson.

So I immediately got into uniform and at 9:33 p.m., July 31, I was probably two, three miles west of Greeley, and I checked in on the radio, and they informed me that Sergeant Purdy was going up the Canyon, hadn't found any high water yet, and that yes, I possibly had two officers trapped in the Canyon behind the mudslide.

M: This is coming in over your own ....

T: Over our own patrol radio. At 9:48, I arrived at the mouth of the Narrows, which is at the Dam Store at the mouth of the Narrows on the Big Thompson, and there I met Sheriff Watson of Larimer County.

It was not raining, I had not hit one ounce of rain, and I had driven extremely fast on dry roads to get there, because as I was going, I was gathering information. I could hear on my radio--I could see lightning to the west of me, and it looked like a severe storm going on, and I just had a feeling that we had something bigger than what I had originally supposed.

West of Loveland, I crossed the Big Thompson twice to get to the Narrows. Both times I slowed down enough to hit them with the spotlight, and they were not up. There was no water up.

But still, I'm getting all this, I'm hearing all this radio traffic out of Estes Park, trying to contact my car down in the canyon, by that time I'd heard that his car had been washed away, that it was raining extremely hard, and I felt that that officer would probably drown.

I knew that I had an officer at Drake, at the confluence of the North Fork with the Big Thompson, and that he was running a roadblock. So I was beginning then to worry a little bit about the officer that was running the
roadblock at Drake.

When Sergeant Purdy started up the Canyon--he's a pretty sagacious old Sergeant--he had a feeling that all was not right with the world. So probably along Cedar Cove, while he's west-bound, he tells Officer George Rahne, stationed at Fort Collins, and Office Randy Jones, stationed at Fort Collins, to set a roadblock up at the Narrows, not let anybody come west up the Canyon.

And then he says, "I'm going to continue on up on look for the water." So when he gave that information, he had not yet seen any flood water, but he wasn't taking any chances. Now there's no doubt in my mind that that order of Sergeant Purdy saved many, many lives. Because after talking to Officer Rahne and Officer Jones, who set up that roadblock, incidentally, it saved Rahne's life. In that he was a mile up the Canyon in the Narrows, when he got that order from the sergeant, he reluctantly turned around and went back and set up the roadblock. If he'd have stayed in there, going up the Canyon, he would have died just exactly like Sergeant Purdy died, because they would have been on the highway, warning people.

M: There was an ambulance that got through.

T: Yes, but he run our roadblock, and of course they lost their ambulance, and very, very luckily, they both lived.

M: They, the officers were waving them down, and they thought they were waving them through, and they got through, and of course, they didn't get very far before they were swamped. I do believe they got around, close to Cedar Cove before they were swamped. I've never talked to those people because, that was just one of the multitudes of things that happened during the flood.

So anyhow, they got the roadblock set, and when I arrived at 9:48, when I arrived at the mouth of the Canyon, there was one heck of a lot of water by this time coming out of the Canyon. It just hit at the same time
that I hit the roadblock at the Dam Store.

We looked up the Canyon, and about that time, incidentally, it started to rain a lot. Well, I started hearing propane tanks coming down the river, and they would roll—the valves were broke loose. And you'd hear them bumping, and then you'd hear a "pssh," like a whale blowing, just exactly like a whale blowing.

M: You mean they'd roll underneath.

T: And they'd roll under, and then you'd hear a "pssh: and then I smelled propane gas, we were in an extremely low spot, and I smelled propane gas, and I issued—there must have been 50, 60 people there, who had been stopped by these two officers before proceeding up the Canyon, they were angry that they couldn't proceed until they saw that water coming down. The water was raising fast, but again, I say, it was not a wall of water, it was just raising fast. No big 10, 12, 15-foot splurge of water came down. The old riverbed just started filling, and filling and filling, and you couldn't see any wall.

M: Could those propane tanks explode.

T: No. Propane tanks at the best, if you light them, they'll burn like a blowtorch.

M: But they don't explode.

T: No, I've never seen one explode. And I've had firemen tell me they won't. You knock the valve off of them, they get in the fire, they get pretty hot. They look like an old pressure blowtorch till they burn themselves out.

But, propane is heavy, a heavy gas, and if you're in a low-lying area, now, I've had it explode, or ignite, not explode, really, under slow, like you get a tanker truck loaded with propane—-I had this happen to me one time years ago out on Blue Mesa, in a snowstorm, in a blizzard.
The truck come down, turned over, and it was a propane truck, a highly propane gas, and of course, it flowed out, underneath the snow, about two foot of snow, and then a spark ignited it, and it seemed to me like it, the snow, went and lifted, oh, about 60, 70 feet patch, just lifted about two feet and then settled back down. Didn't blow any one of us, and we were all standing there. Just went "caphump," like that, you know, no loud retort, but it did ignite, and raise that snow, except it didn't even melt the snow.

M: But you know at the Big Thompson, people were reporting those tanks were exploding.

T: They didn't. I was there for, in that Big Thompson, all the time those tanks were floating down there.

Well, let me give you an example. While we were standing there, you know, there's a power station, a generator right there on the riverbed. Well, the water raising so fast washed a couple of propane tanks into that generator. And we had man-made lightning take off. Never ignited one of those bottles, or all that propane we were standing in. If it had of, probably some of us would have been seriously burned.

And I evacuated, gave orders to evacuate that area, back up on the hill, and then it soaked into me that the two men that were going to have to run the rescue, the search and rescue operation during the night and the next day, had stood at the Narrows and got themselves flat marooned. Because although I had just come by, across the Big Thompson twice from Loveland to the Narrows, and the river wasn't up, by the time we took a look at it and seen that yes, indeed, we had a lot of water coming down there.

I think you need to remember we were, we need to remember that we were standing there in the middle road talking, and incidentally, it started raining
real hard at that time.

There was a, the darnedest rain I was ever in. Raindrops as big as the end of my, of the average man's thumb, coming straight down, lukewarm, and not an ounce of wind.

And it caused a spray, those raindrops were so big and so heavy, no wind, that they caused a spray on the pavement like, you know, they'd bounce, splatter, about four-foot-high. And you couldn't even, it just looked like you were wading in water, and really, was nothing but this heavy spray. I never, it was hard to breathe, incidentally, there was so much water in the air. But I've been in a lot of rains in my life.

M: Got you wet in a hurry, didn't it?

T: Oh, just instant wet. You couldn't stand under a pressure hose and get any wetter any quicker. It just (snapping his fingers), just like that. Now fortunately, that didn't last long, but I can see how they can say they got 17½ inches of rain at Glen Haven during the night in a three-hour period, if it rained for any length of time at Glen Haven or in that canyon like it rained on us for maybe ten minutes. Maximum. But we got a lot of water. It just, almost instantly, started running off the hillsides right where we were at, and it didn't rain over ten minutes. And that's not a normal runoff in this country.

M: Did that siphon go about that time?

T: No, the siphon went probably, I got there about 9:48, and I'd say, I'd guess that the siphon went somewhere between 10:00 and 10:15, well, between 10:15 and 10:30. The time, things went extremely fast at that point. We were discussing, standing in the middle of the road in the rainstorm, the sheriff and I, just basically what problem we were facing. I felt I'd lost three officers
at that time. He felt he'd lost two.

We, this was a holiday, Colorado Day, the one-hundredth birthday of the state of Colorado, we felt we probably had 2,500 people, counting campers, in that canyon. And we could immediately, we knew immediately, that the death loss was going to be high.

So there's no sense there standing there talking over spilt milk, we were trying to set up at that time, now, by 10:00, we knew we had a rescue operation on our hands, and probably an extended search and rescue job, because we could see the road in front of us disintegrating, in the Canyon, no thing like it.

Then about that time the siphon went. And of course, that's the water from Carter Lake to Horsetooth Reservoir. And of course when that siphon went, I think that's thing's about ten feet in diameter, and what, a hundred yards long across that canyon, it just seemed to explode.

Now I can't tell you whether that went over my head, whether it swung around and went downriver, but I don't know how it missed hitting the towers on that power station, but it didn't. So I don't think it went over my head. But it did, it just exploded.

M: Did water hit it, or . . . ?

T: Well, the water was high by this time, you know, it was raised up above the road level at this time, and somebody said, and I doubt it, that a trailer house, or a house or something floated down there and hit the abutments of the standards that holds that up.

I really don't think so. I think maybe a big propane tank may have hit it. I think an automobile may have hit it. But I don't think that a house hit it. Because I don't think a trailer house would have floated through that canyon. I think it would have just disintegrated against the . . . .
M: Walls.
T: Right. But it, according to somebody, they got an eyewitness seeing a house, I was there and I was looking, and I didn't see anything hit it, but it exploded.

Well, this caused a serious problem. The water from that canal, then, that was supposedly going through the siphon, is shooting clear across the mouth of that canyon, and we watched the highway just explode into the air, disintegrate.

Well, we were draining Carter Lake, adding to our problem. Well, we immediately radioed in and had them turn the gates off on that canal. But it took an hour for that canal to drain. So we dumped all that water into the Big Thompson.

We got the power shut off in that generator station. And then I figured we were trapped. Well, it wasn't any big deal. We'd already had people ordering rescue helicopters. They could have landed in the highway, picked us up, and taken us back to some command post.

But one of my patrolmen told me he thought he probably could sneak us out on a back road, if we hurried.

We had to get out of there, because we had to get back and set up command posts, get things going on the rescue operation, and you didn't need to be rescuing us, you know, just so we could get to work.

Now, we weren't in any danger. We were on high ground, but it would have been a little embarrassing if nothing else to be marooned up there, and have to be the first two, the sheriff and I, the first two to be rescued, so we can get the rescue operations going.

Meanwhile, I had radioed and sent, and this is an important thing, that
we don't want to lose in this, is that we didn't have just flooding in the Big Thompson. We got to remember that from the Big Thompson north to the Wyoming line we had flooding. In Rist Canyon, in the Poudre.

We had about this ... about this time I get word that a bridge washed out on 287 up by the Wyoming line at Virginia Dale.

And you see, everything was centered on the Big Thompson. The sheriff and I had a much bigger worry besides just the Big Thompson. If all those canyons flooded to the same extent as the Big Thompson, you don't know what a disaster is. Now we would have really, we'd have lost Greeley, we'd have lost Loveland, we'd have lost a few cities. Part of Fort Collins, so ....

M: And at the time you didn't know that.

T: Oh, no. We knew, we were getting fragmentary reports, so I sent Schlageter, our commanding officer of the Fort Collins district, north, I told him, "Don't come down here to me. I'll take care of things down here, you take some men and go north and check all those canyons."

I think one of the reasons that we had, didn't have a big loss of life--now you know in Rist Canyon, we did lose some people, I think two or three people drowned in Rist Canyon.

I don't believe we lost anybody by drowning in the Cache la Poudre Canyon, because we got them warned quick enough, you see. People were going to listen to us then.

We lost some highway; we had some high water. There's people said that we had as much water come down the Poudre as we had come down the Big Thompson, but remember, the Poudre is much wider. And that would have spread the water out.

Now I don't know the truth of that. And it bears checking into, but a
lot, but we had people in there fast enough that between the Sheriff's Office and the State Patrol, we got the people to high ground and we got the warning, and I don't think there was great property loss.

But we did lose quite a bit of highway. We did lose a bridge on 287 clear up at Virginia Dale, the approaches to it, so we had a lot of floodwater. Well, I sent Lieutenant Schlageter and some men up there, and he handled that operation until 7:00 the next morning. They put roadblocks on 287, all this was going on while all the hullabaloo was going on at the Big Thompson.

But meanwhile, I radioed then for a Greeley sergeant by the name of Henry McKee to get to Fort Collins while I'm still at the Narrows--I mean, get to Loveland. While I'm still at the Narrows to start setting up a command post.

The sheriff did the same thing with Captain Englebert. Now Captain Englebert is his search and rescue man. Fire, search and rescue. And a tremendously qualified man, with great resources, voluntary resources, tremendous resources. In people and in equipment.

And I happen to know ... I knew a little bit about his, about the sheriff's organization, and remember the Sheriff of Larimer County fights fires; he's got drownings; he's got minor flooding all the time, in that big county and mountainous county, so he'd got well-equipped, well-trained people.

And most of them, again, as I say, volunteers, in their search and rescue posses, and this kind of thing.

I had Sergeant McKee of the State Patrol go to Loveland and find us a suitable spot for a temporary command post, and to start arranging to get telephone communications in and so on, while I get back there.

Now the way I got back there, a patrolman knew a back road and let us out--we never could cross where we had originally come in, but we took the old
Carter Lake Road way south to I think they call it First Street, clear around and up 287.

And incidentally, coming into Loveland, we crossed the Big Thompson again, at the same time a pretty good head of water hit it.

And it raised at that time, and I think it was due to a bunch of debris breaking loose, and a lot of debris and a lot of water hit that bridge, and we come across that bridge with probably a foot of water on it. With our tongue in our cheek, thinking maybe that bridge was going to go.

But we had to get in there, get into Loveland and get search operations going. As it was, it was, the reason I say I think it was a surge where debris had broken loose, because the water went right back down again for a little bit, and we watched that bridge all night and never did lose that bridge, incidentally, which was a, wouldn't have been too crippling, but it would have cost us a bigger circle to get around, because we thought by that time that we'd lost the two bridges on 34 west of Loveland to the Narrows.

We didn't lose those bridges. The approaches washed out to both of them, and they were impassible, but we didn't lose the bridges themselves.

M: So where was your command post?

T: So we set our original command post up in the parking lot of a beer joint, the Merri-Ax, I think that's what it is, is a beer joint.

Now I hope you're not going to publish this, they may not like to get called a beer joint, but I mean that's what it was, but it was, yeah, a cafe bar and lounge, something like that.

But it was quite a large parking lot, and I knew at that time it probably would only be temporary, till we could find some more permanent quarters.

So Sgt. McGowan by that time had notified the telephone company, and they
were hanging temporary telephones for us.

Captain Englebert had got there, and had already picked the site for three helipads, had ordered, already ordered helicopters.

Now I'm talking, and I'll keep the times in here, because this is extremely important--where we received uncalled-for criticism of lack of organization, which was wrong.

By, and I'm not trying to defend anybody, because it doesn't need defending. If people will look at the record, they'll see that, or they'll wonder, how come we were well-organized.

We practiced disaster plans, too. We, you know, like I say, the Sheriff's Office is in disasters of this type all the time. Maybe not of this magnitude, but at least of this type.

And so he, by 11:00, had the helicopters ordered; they would be in at ... some would be in at daylight. We had the two St. Anthony's Flight for Life choppers on the way, in that rain, because we knew we could perform rescue operations from the mouth of the Narrows down to Loveland during the night.

We then, he also had already one helicopter, a Hughes 500, from Ag Helicopters, out of Fort Collins.

Now we didn't try to land them on our helipads. We landed them right in the middle of the highway just west of the Merri-Ax, because we had no road. The people weren't going to go anywhere, anyhow. We might as well use the road as a helipad.

For our, our immediate needs of rescue our first seven bodies. And that was in front of the Big Thompson School.

How, we did not try to remove those bodies in the middle of the night. But we marked them; we marked the area. Oh, we spotted those by spotlight
from the helicopter. Well, what brought that about, we had word that a, that there was a little girl trapped in a tree out in the middle of the river. And she was alive.

Now I think if you've heard this so-called "miracle baby" story, I think this is where this originated. There was never a miracle baby. But it may have been built up from this story, and it's a story that's been little told.

And unfortunately, I can't tell you the name of the people who were involved. But they came over to the sheriff and I, and said that they'd found, that they thought they'd spotted a girl, in, up in a cottonwood tree, in the middle of the river, up in those flats south of the Big Thompson schoolhouse. Really, just across the road out in those mudflats.

Well, there was a lot of water, debris, coming through there, trailer houses going by, cars going by, and I didn't see any cars going by with people screaming in them by that time.

But one of the teams that Sheriff Watson has on his list, is a set of divers, fully equipped, they have a van; they're self-contained, and they had got there, and they said, "We will try to get that girl out," so we sent the chopper back up to verify and spotted her.

And then while it was up, it spotted a spot where we could land the divers on the other side of the river, and they could work out through the debris, water, trash coming down, an extremely dangerous operation, and get this girl out of the tree. So they did.

We put three of them in a chopper, flew them across the river, across from the Big Thompson schoolhouse. They waded out, they had wetsuits on, and roped and waded, dropped their way out to that tree, got her out of the tree, and as I recall, she had a broken arm.
M: She was alive, though.

T: Yes, she was alive. And her family, as I understand it, it would have to be verified, but I'm pretty sure it's true, were all drowned, from that trailer area along the Glade Road right alongside the first crossing of the Big Thompson west of . . .

M: Riverview Campground.

T: Yes, right in that Riverview Campground area. And she landed in a tree and got climbed up there, broken arm and all. Well, they got her out of there, flew her to the hospital, then flew back, got our three divers and flew them back to the command post. That was the first rescue that we had done.

And this was before midnight. And we at that time had two, three choppers working. We then spent the night flying the river from Loveland to as far as rescue operations, from Loveland to the Narrows, because we refused to allow anybody . . .

I don't think a pilot would have tried to fly into the Narrows that night anyhow, or up the Canyon. Couldn't see anything, still raining, rained off and on on us all night long, and then we just consolidated our equipment.

The Highway Department got there, and started ordering equipment, and this is by 1:00 in the morning. We then had heavy highway equipment, from contractors, Dwight Bower is the man that handled that, the District Highway Engineer, but he was right alongside of me, ordering equipment all night long.

And one of the strange things that happened to us, of course, remember, we lost all our telephones west of Loveland, up the Canyon, but then the word got out, everybody in the country was calling, and overloaded the lines.

And the telephone company, I'm going frantic over communications, because everything's overloaded, and here comes, I believe it was a Pinto with the
traditional telephone company markings on it, and a man in a hard hat pulled up and he said, "You're having trouble with communications." I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I have a bank of telephones in this car, and stack of telephone books, and if you've got a name that you need to call, a number that you need to call, you give it to me, and I'll get it for you."

And he was using the radio-telephone in his car through Ma Bell, maybe he connected into Denver or Cheyenne, I don't know where he connected in to, but he got us quick, and I know he called the Governor for me once, about 2:00 in the morning, got him just like that, right out of that car.

Well, this helped us, and I don't think anybody's patted, given the Bell Telephone a pat on the back, but that helped us, so I have, and he stayed with us all night. We had quick communications, because, man, they had to string lines and everything else to get us land-line communications.

M: How did you guys decide who was in charge?
T: There's no question of who's in charge.
M: You or Watson? Or?
T: No, no, this was in Larimer County, and the most powerful law enforcement officer in the United States is a county sheriff. He has more authority in his county than the FBI, anybody. In fact, the only man that can arrest him is a coroner, so, that's the truth, so it wasn't a question of who had authority.

Now some people wonder about, well, who had authority. None of us in the business doubted who had the authority. It was Bob Watson's baby.

Then it's our job to put our resources, our, everything we've got, at his disposal. Now my job is traffic. I have been and the State Patrol's is, the protection of property and the public, so it is in the same relation to his
job there.

It was, we are friends; we have mutual respect for each man's capabilities and his experience and his training. So it was a case of "Bill, what do you think I need to do?" and I'd say, "Well, I think we ought to do this." And I'd say, "All right, Bob, if you don't have, if you don't disagree, I'll get going on this type thing," and it was a mutual aid thing.

But we never, if it came down to it, a decision, his was the final decision. No problem. The General, General Weller of the, the adjutant general of the State of Colorado, and the head of Civil Defense of the State of Colorado didn't come in and give Sheriff Watson orders.

He came in and said, "What do you need?" and "Where can we help you?" and this was the total form of cooperation in the adjutant . . . .

It just, and incidentally, if you've met Bob Watson, he is a quiet, dignified, very much in control of himself, sensible, common-sense man, who knew his business.

So it wasn't a question of having somebody who didn't know their business. Now I would be honest with you, if I had one there and I thought it needed to be done and I didn't think he had smarts enough to do it, I'd have done it anyhow. I wouldn't have worried about who had authority.

But it wasn't the case with Bob Watson. He's too well-trained and got too good an organization, so [background noise]. But when we come right down to the last thing, this decision, he would solicit all our ideas in the planning session.

Now we'd have two to three tactical planning sessions a day. We had our first tactical planning sessions at 4:00 in the morning Sunday morning, just hours after the flood. Where are we going, what we going to do, what equipment
we're going to need, how much manpower we're going to need, this kind of thing, and got that stuff going.

And then never did we have less than two strategic planning sessions a day. Now I'm talking about the State Patrol, the Sheriff's Office, the Weld County Sheriff's Office sent their people in to help us, the Adjutant General's Office, the Governor's Office, these were the people that were there.

Now we needed the Governor and the politicians to get us money, to get it declared a national disaster.

M: You need some political rulings.

T: Yes, we needed judicial rulings; we needed these kind of things. One of the first rulings that was extremely important to us was one that was a proclamation that the Governor gave the sheriff he had the authority to trespass on anybody's land and go and confiscate any piece of property he needed.

So, well, by daylight, these were the things we were doing. The rescue operation going on; the Highway Department was ordering in equipment; we knew we'd have to have roads to get in to people. We knew we could use a helicopter rescue operation; that was already set up. We, at the peak of that, were using 19 choppers. That's a lot of choppers.

M: That needs traffic control, too, doesn't it?

T: Oh, yes, but there's the key thing. This Englebert, in the Larimer County Sheriff's Office, had traffic control.

Hell, they use choppers all the time for fires, especially in fires. You know, they've got to fly them in, so they had, you know, I was somewhat dumbfounded when I seen them unloading the truck about two o'clock in the morning, and the great big yellow boxes, and it says, "Helipad," and I says, "What is it?" "Helipad equipment." I said, "What's that stuff?" He says, "That's the
stuff we use to set up helipads." He says. "It's got ribbons, it's got markings, it's got lights," and then he had trained helipad commanders.

Now that's a little so-called backwoods county in the state of Colorado that nobody would have ever--and me, who had been in this business and lived in this state all my life, didn't realize that they had that. But I don't go out fighting fires, either.

So, but that's a common thing with them. Hell, they just started unloading helipad kits in an alfalfa, well, two alfalfa fields, and one big pasture there, and had marked-out landing zones, they had red areas, as I recall, was for the severely injured, that's the area they went to; yellow area,—no, the red was fatal--bodies; the yellow was injured, and the green were okay.

But also, while this was going on, we had, we had other people, the Red Cross and this stuff, setting up refugee areas at a high school, all, every bit of this was set up before daylight Sunday morning. And you call that not having your act together?

That thing, when the first chopper started landing, they got in at the helipads the people brought that were well, refugees got into a school bus and went right to the high school, the refugee center, and were put in dry clothes, could have showers, could have, and did get covered up with blankets, got questionnaires filled out, "Where did you come from? Who else is up in the Canyon? Do you know where anybody is that needs rescuing?" All of this was going on, all before daylight.

M: I think the proof of the pudding of all that is that victims up there, apparently, from what I've read and talked to people, nobody died because they were left up there because of an inefficient rescue operation.
T: Nope, we never lost a person, who was injured--well, the funny part about this is, well the good part about this, we never had any seriously injured. The ones that we had injured were skinned up and beat up from trying to climb up a mountain in the middle of the night while the waters coming down on them, rocks are rolling, and this kind of thing. Peeled shins, peeled elbows, this kind of thing.

We had a few victims, one thing that really worried us, was there were a lot of elderly people. A tremendous percentage of those people were elderly. I talk about 70, 75, 65, 80, [years of age], this kind of thing. And we worried about hearts; we worried about exposure, we worried about fatigue, this kind of thing. And these were the greatest people in the world. They were very stoic; they didn't say nothing. They didn't complain; they were very agreeable. You could do anything you needed with them; they were the easiest people I ever worked with.

Now some of them would fight us just a little bit if we wanted to make a stretcher case out of them. They thought they could walk. We're talking about walking across boulders as big as my desk. This kind of thing, and around them. These people had been exposed for quite some time by daylight Sunday morning. And we didn't need to explain that we were stronger and younger. We could pick them up and carry them. And that they didn't like. They didn't like that part.

M: Independent.

T: Independent. As a hog on ice. But they were great people.

And I think the proof of the pudding too, is that we evacuated out of that canyon over 800 people from daylight Sunday morning till dark Sunday night, and you don't do that with a disorganized organization.
I've done a lot of operations, but I've never been in one run that well. And run that smooth, with so many different jurisdictions involved.

You've got the National Guard involved, you've got the Sheriff's Office involved. You've got the Colorado State Patrol involved. You've got fire departments involved. You've had rescue units involved—all coordinated by Englebert, myself, General Weller, and Sheriff Watson.

M: All those people have different communications, too, networks?

T: That's right. And, that's one of the things, now, I go to a critique tomorrow in Denver. And that's one of the things I'm going to bring up. We need a ... a State of Colorado...we've said for a long time...it's a case of money...needs an emergency radio network that we can patch anybody in on. You know, and control.

Let's continue on with the story. So strange things happened that I think we need to keep a record of, because there's a general history, a general story that people can read in the newspapers. Strange little things happened, like at daylight, I, by this time Lieutenant Schlageter, who I had to have up north all the way to the Wyoming line all night working in those other canyons and getting them safe and blockaded, and more than getting them safe, just got the people out and got them blockaded off. He had reported in about 7:00 on Sunday morning.

Another thing we need to remember, before midnight, the Salvation Army from Denver came in with a van, had hot coffee, hot rolls, and stuff for us in the rain, at the Merri-Ax station, so we weren't worried about relieving people for food or anything like that.

Now in an operation like this, the average police officer is good for 48 hours without a break. He can operate, and do well. But as long as you
don't have to release him for food or anything like this, you can keep him... his adrenalin's flowing; all his training is being put to use, that he may be, you know, been trained for, but he never got to use for, and now all of a sudden it's there. And you can work those guys for a good 48 hours hard, never give them a break, and one of the reasons we could do this and one of the reasons we did, was the fact that the Salvation Army was there with hot food, and stuff. We could keep them running. They'd stop and grab a hot cup of coffee, helicopter pilots flying in the middle of the night, grab a hot cup of coffee, this was extremely important, because most of us were wet at this time, too, from the rain.

M: Yes. You might not think that was so important, just thinking about having hot...

T: Well, you wouldn't, except that you want to remember that these men are starting to see shocking things, and of course shock has a debilitating effect, and the chance to get a shot of coffee and a hot cinnamon roll in the middle of the night is a good thing, because you are burning energy like you cannot believe. You've burning it, probably five, I don't know, a doctor could tell us, eight, ten times, the rate that you would normally burn it, and you can burn yourself out.

You can't lose those key people right at that time, so it's extremely important. And they served a great purpose to us, and the thing that I like, and I'd like to see on record, is that you never seen a cup out for a donation or anything. You never did see that.

In fact, I had to find out from them who I sent some checks to, but people sent me checks, now how do I give it back, you know to the Salvation Army. They were earmarked for the Salvation Army, and I finally figured out,
and they were a little embarrassed, when I tried to give them checks, so they're crazy people.

And I'll tell you another good thing about them that's important is that they're uniformed. They're easy to identify, and I'll tell you, that's important.

[Crashes of lightning in background]

M: Is it important, in something like this, that the men are in uniform? The police officers, park rangers, Salvation Army?

T: You see, because that is a source of comfort. To the refugees, it is a clamp of authority; it's somebody to go to, easily recognizable.

I was criticized about keeping my men in uniform for so long. By some people, they'd say, "Well, why don't you let those guys get out of those neckties?" and this kind of thing. That's wrong. I wanted them highly visible. Highly recognizable. So that people could come to them for assistance. And this kind of thing. And when people finally realized this...that's why the Army came. People identified in their fatigues and their caps and their insignia, you see. That's so that you can spot authority quick.

Those people need leadership and guidance in a disaster like this, "Who do I go to?" type thing. In fact, one of the things I'm going to say at the critique tomorrow, that I'm going to ask the State Civil Defense to do, is to put in a lot of armbands. I'm talking about like 3,000 armbands of the type that have a white square that say--three inches--on it, that when we start a rescue operation, we've got a guy there that stencils "Health, Education, Welfare" on the armband. "Police" on the armband. "Search," or "Radio," or something, you see what I mean? So you know.

Out biggest problem was too many volunteers unidentified. "Who are you
with?" "What are you supposed to be doing?" type thing. And when we started using other people than our own, is when we got into an identification problem. [Lightning] Sounds to me like we're going to have another cloudburst.

Well, another strange thing that happened about 7:00 Sunday morning--by that time the Governor, General Weller, and my chief, Chief C. Wayne Keith flew in, and they wanted to go up the Canyon. Well, they needed to go up the Canyon; they needed to fly in. Just at daylight Sheriff Watson and I got in a small Hiller helicopter, which is the one that later crashed.

M: One of the Ag Helicopters.

T: Yes, but it, the reason we wanted it in is it's set up in a bubble, and we've got almost maximum visibility. So just a little, just as day was breaking, we took off from the Merri-Ax, Sheriff and I, and flew the Canyon, and I have never seen such devastation in my life that day.

Then we really knew for sure what we was up against. And at that time we estimated that we'd have 200 to 250 deaths. Is our guess, and we figured maybe we'd find 150 of the bodies. And we're not far off, right to this day, we're not far off.

And we were hoping that, you know, I think we were rationalizing a little I think we both thought we could easily have 500 deaths out of that, and we were hoping that it wouldn't go more than 250, somewhere between 200, 250. We had no idea we'd find as many bodies as we did.

[Electricity cuts off] Yes, we got standby power, you see, I just ticked on a diesel generator out there; our power may still be off. (T. is talking about a thunderstorm which is happening at the time of the interview). But we'd be operating now, off of our standby generator, because the emergency radio, we've got to have the power facilities.
So we flew the Canyon, and we were back, probably by 6:30, and we were shocked. But we at least had an idea, the sheriff and I, what we were truthfully up against. We needed no more trips up the Canyon that day. We had a lot of work to do.

Then about that time the Governor, my chief [C. Wayne Keith], and General Weller got in there, and of course, they needed an overview. They needed to see. We could not in any way—there's not words to describe how we felt about the devastation that we had seen and our internal fears of the loss of lives.

A person had to see that—it was still raining, somewhat foggy, the water was chocolate-brown and boiling off the cliffs, still. Just pouring off the cliffs, draining. In fact, there was a couple of draws there drained for two days. Now I don't know where the water came from.

M: So it's important for someone like Governor Lamm to see that.

T: To see it. The people had to see this to realize what we—there was, Watson and I aren't too bad with words, but there was no way in the world we were going to describe that to anybody. So we said, "Fly it. Look for yourself." So the sheriff got in with them.

And while they were gone, I made a new command post. I knew when I landed that we were there for a month. No doubt in my mind that we needed some permanent installation where we'd have toilet facilities, office facilities, plenty of telephone communication facilities. We would need a big parking area.

And I'm standing there telling my...Lieutenant Schlageter, I said, "I want you to start down this street, and I'm thinking of a schoolhouse more than anything. You find me a building that'll give us four or five offices, that's got plenty of parking space, that's got some shelter to get vehicles in under, that will have good communications, toilet facilities," and I said, "Easy access—
ible to these helipads."

Now these were my instructions to Lieutenant Schlageter. He's standing there, I know, because he told me later, "My god, where will I find anything like this?" And I said, "You might think of a schoolhouse or something like that," but I said, "We will have...the sheriff will give us authority to confiscate it. We'll just confiscate the building for the duration of the emergency."

I didn't want to invoke that, but the sheriff surely would have. Or the Governor, if we couldn't find the facilities we needed. While I was doing this, and that's why I say there's some...several little untold stories, that are really interesting, I think, there's been a man tugging on my sleeve. But remember, there was a probably...we had the area roped off, and there were newsmen up the ears; there was sightseers. We had to waste officers for security of the area, just to keep people out so we could work, but we're out in the open, and this guy, [Earl Phipps] finally in irritation, I turned to him and said, "Sir, what can I do for you?" And he said, "I just heard what you told that lieutenant," and he says, "I come up here to offer you the facilities of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District," and they're exactly what you have just mentioned. I said, "My God, I should have listened to you ten minutes ago."

And he just keep...every once in a while, he was a little guy, keep tugging on my sleeve, you know, trying to get my attention. And I was busy, and I feel, I've apologized to the man because he's a tremendous guy, a dozen times since then, but I was busy, and he understood this.

So we took a look at it, exactly what we wanted, and that's how come we got set up at the command post at the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District.
And so then we operated out of that for what, about the 20th of August, I think is the . . . .

M: You had your telephones there.

T: Yes. We ran extra telephones in there.

M: The Salvation Army came in there.

T: Yes, that was, you know that's another kind of amusing story, there was a little captain out of Denver with the Salvation Army, the nicest man I ever seen, who when, we had now, here's the Governor and all those people up flying the canyon, and now I'm moving the command post. But we had to be under shelter.

I knew it was going to be a twenty-four hour operation. I know it's going to rain some time or other. We got to get something more permanent.

So I didn't ask anybody, I just--and there's a case, see, where really that was Bob Watson's, the Sheriff's Command Post, but I could see the need. I knew he trusted my judgment, and so I decided it was time to get, you know, to get us out.

And course it was three days before he asked me, he asked me, "How'd we ever get this command post moved?" and I told him. But, and he was surprised how it happened.

But the Salvation Army, they, this man was real disturbed when he seen us moving out, I had to move it by signal. We're flying helicopters at that time, and we got radio control with them out of mobile units right there at the Merri-Ax command post, so you don't want to break off your rescue operations and your search operation, so it had to be broken with somewhat of a plan so that we didn't lose continuity of operations.

So we got it moving, here comes the Salvation Army, "What happens to me?"
And I said, "I sent a sergeant down there to pick you a spot. We don't want to lose you. You're under shelter. You can back your van right into a big building; you'll be under shelter, and it's a perfect place to feed people." And I said, "I look for 400 or 500 rescue people there," so I said, "There'll be a lot of people--"

"That's all I wanted to know, I just need to know what to plan for," and I know of a couple of mornings there they fed two hundred breakfasts. Right there. To wet, soaked, tired searchers. So they were of tremendous value, and it was important I'd find them a place to go.

But the thing that people want to remember in an operation like that, let's say that at one time I had 30 officers on roadblocks. Now, I got to relieve those officers.

Well, now, it's not right. We had 30 officers working roadblocks. We had ten roadblocks, running three eight-hour shifts, so it's going to take 30 men to run them, but we can rotate them around, and it didn't take quite thirty patrolmen to run the roadblock. But that was just the roadblocks. Then you think of all the search crews, the four mountain rescue groups, and this kind of stuff.

M: Did you have people out on them?

T: Oh, yes, yes. We had people in the Canyon all the time. But those people managed...you know, we'd fly, they'd take hot food to a empty helicopter going back, and they were flying in water, and food to the people that wanted to stay in the Canyon, and remember, we wanted people to stay in the Canyon that had good homes that weren't hurt, that had sanitary water, or if they didn't have sanitary water, we'd take them pure water.

But if they had food...because we needed people to watch in there. To look, to protect property more than we had officers to do this with, you see.
M: Is looting a problem?
T: No.
M: Is that a real problem?
T: It can be. It can be, but we took the steps, like I'm talking here, we
wanted to leave those people that were well-housed in there, because they
can watch the other people's property, their neighbor's property.

We flew in men and kept deputies flying in relief and fly out the relief
crew, all the time, scattered up and down that canyon, whose job was policing
more than rescue.

Now they did a lot of rescue work, but we had plenty of rescue people
in there, and we didn't--I suppose there was some looting going on, but if it
was, it was damned little.

First of all, it was hard to get in there, and if you got in there, it
was impossible to get out with any loot, because you were going to get seen
with it. And anybody seen carrying anything was severely questioned.

I heard, but I found out it was untrue, that there was two arrests down
by Glen Haven for looting. And it wasn't true. I checked it out. And I'm
not sure that there was an arrest ever made for looting. It just, it was
just almost impossible.

For example, we thought we'd have a looting problem in the Glen Haven
area, because we quickly got a road down from Estes Park into there. A
walking road, at least, and so the Sheriff's Posse of Weld County went in
there, horseback and policed that whole area for I don't know how many days,
horseback, and they were deputized with full arrest authority, in Larimer
County by the sheriff. I think he deputized 30 of those Weld County Posses
at one go. And they're trained people, but there's again, trained volunteers
who work at this all the time.

M: If you had not had those men in there, you think looting would ...?

T: Oh, absolutely. We expected looting. There's property scattered all over the mountains, you know, for 30 miles. You're going to have looting. You're going to have thieves. You're going to have people walking in over the hills, which wasn't impossible to do.

I think it would have been a tortuous walk. But I know people came in. We found them, "What's your reason for being here?" "Well, I wanted to look." "Out!" You know, and they were escorted out. And of course this cost us man-power. But we kept the people out of there.

Our protection of property was a big worry. But I doubt seriously that there was any, any major looting--well, there wasn't any major looting, and I doubt seriously if there was very much minor looting, because although the opportunity was there, the chance to get away with it, was impossible.

So, and people were real alert. A lot of those people were armed down in there. The property owners. And there were signs up, "Looters will be shot." And I believe they would have been shot. There was one for a long time right there at Drake. "You are being watched. Looters will be shot." And I thought, I don't know who put the sign up, but I thought it was a real good idea.

M: Well, you got your command post moved.

T: Well, we got that moved and then of course we were...and then it was just a steady rescue operation, the big push was on Sunday, August the 1st.

M: You got most of the people out then, didn't you? Those that needed to come out.

T: Yes, we got...I was on the last chopper out of Drake. Now the way we did that,
which is important and we need to record, so that if anybody ever listens to this again, this was a canyon area with many fingers. So we used the little choppers to go up these little fingers and get these people off of knobs and out of little canyons and so on, and we brought them to a staging area across the river from the fish hatchery at Drake.

Now the fish hatchery is really, about three-quarters of a mile up the north Fork, or north, up the river from Drake, on the North Fork, and right across from that fish hatchery, was a big...ended up after the flood, a heck of a good sand bar. Real big thing, and that granite sand, after that flood, mixed with that mud, within two hours, set up almost as hard as concrete. And so we could land those big Chinook helicopters of the Army's on that and they carried 33 to 35 people.

Now the reason I say 33 to 35, is that the pilots only wanted 33, and we always managed to sneak on 35. And so the little choppers would fly them down there to the staging area, and then we'd load them on the Chinooks, and fly them out to Loveland, and that way we could conserve fuel, make double use of our choppers, and keep those big Chinooks full.

And, you know, they cost a lot of money by hour to operate, and we wanted them leaving there loaded.

And I came out on the last chopper at dark, and that was a begging job, and there's another story, how strange things can happen. But it was starting to rain, and I had 44 people. I could only get 33 to 35 on a Chinook.

And I had originally gone in there at noon to check on one of my officers [Tim Littlejohn] that was supposed to been lost that was alive and working there, and I finally got radio communications with him and knew he was alive, but by that time he'd been working almost 24 hours. And under extreme tough physical
conditions. He'd been wet; he'd been wading around in that river all night in the dark. He had probably come close to drowning three or four times; he was totally physically weary and mentally worried. He had tremendous pressure on him.

So I flew some relief in with me to relieve him, but I needed to get his story quick, because I was still, at that time, had a faint hope that Sergeant Purdy might be alive, and I wanted to talk to those people from Drake that we were loading on the helicopters to see if anybody had seen him.

As it was, nobody had seen him. We did later find a girl that had flown out on a little chopper prior to our staging-area-type thing in the Chinook, so I'd missed and we found her later, that did see him, and did talk to him, so I got my story anyway.

And I had told my chief when I left there, I left at about noon, the command post at Loveland, and told him, "I'm going to go up and try to get some word on." Oh I couldn't have left the command post but my chief was there, he could run the command, and I could go and look, try to get some word on Purdy. So I flew in there and I said, "If I'm not back in a couple of hours, send somebody by the morgue."

And I just had a feeling and at 2:00 they sent Officer Hughes by the morgue, and he immediately identified Sergeant Purdy.

And they didn't want to radio that to me, because too many people would have heard it, so a pilot came in about 3:00, a chopper pilot, and took me aside and said they found Purdy, and had identified Sergeant Purdy's body, so I quit my search for him.

M: But you had to find Littlejohn anyway, didn't you?

T: But I, well, I knew where Littlejohn was; I'd talked to him on the radio.
There's two stories and I don't want to lose them. One is that the patrol car that was left at Drake, and one is him.

But, well, the last flight out is getting ahead of things on Sunday. I found an old man, there was an old man, his name is [Gordon] Kindred.

And during the night, Officer Littlejohn had radioed me—I knew he was marooned on about a quarter of a mile piece of highway near this trout farm—uh, trout hatchery. And the road was washed out on both sides of it.

But he could take a tortuous walk into Drake, which he had done, which is extremely dangerous, and I was extremely reluctant two times during the night to let him do it, but he finally talked me into it.

And after I saw daylight, if I'd have known what it looked like, I'd never have given him permission to walk back in, because I wanted him to stay with that patrol car at Drake, because it was a radio link, and an information center and so I didn't want that deserted, and I didn't want to lose that. I wasn't thinking of losing the car, didn't want to lose the radio, the communications, but he had mentioned he had with him a man [Gordon Kindred] that had watched his wife [Evelyn] and 94-year-old aunt [Verna Decker] float down the river, and we, I'd already found out that he had tried to wade into the river and get them and Littlejohn had grabbed him, and drug him out, and he'd kept him with him all night to keep him from wading back in the river. And that's a mental strain on an officer, besides all the bodies he found that hid out until we could fly them out, and he covered up [the bodies] and this kind of thing, and marked so we could find them the next day. He was doing this all in the middle of the night plus keeping radio communications with us. And I needed to get him out of there. So I flew in there, and so I see this man sitting up under the tree, and I said, "You've missed two flights out," and I said, "What about that old fellow? It's about his turn to get flown out of
here."

And he says, "He won't go. I've loaded him on the chopper three times today, and he's walked off on me when I turned my back." Well, it's easy to walk right back off a Chinook, you walked into it, and you walk back off. I said, "Well, he's sick." He said, "Well, that's the man I had with me the night before."

Well, that's one life I can prove that an officer saved, and he's alive today and his family and himself. Now he's more, he's logical now, he can think logically, and he knows the officer saved his life.

So I went over and got him and led him to a chopper, and we were flying out a Flight for Life nurse who had to get some more medicine and stuff, uh, so they were going out on a little chopper that needed fuel, and I strapped him down in that chopper and told the nurse, I said, "When you get to Loveland, have an ambulance waiting for him, and get him right to a hospital," 'cause I figured he was going to die of shock. That man was in pretty tough condi-
tion. Well, as it was, he turned out fine. Well, that was one deal.

Then the real strange story; you know, truth is stranger than fiction many times. It's almost dark, it's starting to rain, and I'm there with Officer Schilling who I'm going to leave there with the patrol car all night, and he's there till the next day till we fly in more relief for him.

But my chief is down there wanting me to get out of there. That's not where I'm supposed to be, but I just couldn't displace anybody. We were running out of flying time, and I was healthy, and I could stay there that night, and I had a radio there; I could almost run things from that patrol car, right there.
So I wasn't too excited about it, but I think my boss wanted to get back to Denver, and needed me back in the command post. So I had orders to come out on the next flight.

Well, the next flight was going to be the last one anyhow. I had 44 people, but then they grounded the choppers, grounded every one. Now I've got people there that's going to go into their next, second night exposed to the elements; many of them were elderly. I just, man, I got on that radio and I begged and I pleaded and I threatened, and a pilot walked by the radio at the helipad and he said, "Who is that on the air?"

And he said, "Well, that's Captain Thomas, threaten to kill us if we don't make one more flight. He needs one more Chinook, and he needs a Huey, and that will get everybody out of there." But he says, "Evidently they've stopped the flights for the day." And I told them, "You make that one flight and we've cleaned this area out. We've got them all out." And I thought we'd have them all out of the Canyon, which was right. That last 44 people were all the people.

And he says, "Is that Captain Thomas of the State Patrol?" He said, "Yeah," "I'll fly," and he was a Chinook pilot. And he turned around to a Huey pilot and he says, "If I can go in that big bird, you can follow me." And so they radioed and said, "We've got a Chinook and a Huey coming in to you."

And there was no greater sight in the world than it's just starting to rain, it was almost dark, and see those two old birds at treetop level come up that Canyon, puckety,puckety,puck. And I had to turn on the red lights, the top red lights on the patrol car that was there, and the headlights, and I sent the patrolman out and lined the area with fuses for a landing area.

That's how dark it was down in that canyon. Now they had a little more
light up above, but when they started to come down into the shadow of that canyon, man, it was dark down in there, and they lit in there and we loaded them up, and when I got on the Chinook, the, one of the lieutenants in there said, "When we land, don't get off. The pilot wants to talk to you."

I didn't think nothing of it, I thought maybe he knew where some more people were we had to get in the morning or something like that. So when we landed at Loveland, he, I stopped and I went up to the control panel, and he took off his helmet, and his face was extremely familiar.

He said, "Do you know me?" And I said, "Your face is familiar, but I can't place you." And he said, "You gave me a ticket a year ago for speeding." And he said, "You really chewed me out about setting an example." And he said, "When I heard your voice on the air," he said, "If that tough old goat's up there on that mountain, I'll go get him just to show him that I have got some sense of responsibility."

And that's how come I got flown out with that 44 people. Now that's a fact, and to this day I can't recall this guy's name, I wrote it down on a scratch of paper, because, you know, that's a fantastic story. Just because they didn't have to come and get me.

They were risking their lives to come and get that 44 people. Really risking their lives and risking a lot of equipment.

But he just flat got on that bird and come running and said, "I want to show you I do have a sense of responsibility." So that chewing I'd given a year ago paid off.

M: But you know that next day, though, the weather closed in, too.

T: Yes, it closed in on Monday on us again.

M: So it might have been important to get out then.
T: Oh, we would have been in real trouble. If we'd have left those people up there, I had one alternative. I had already worked that out. If they wasn't going to come and get us, across the river from us, it would have been a tough place to get to, but I'd already arranged with a couple of strong men that were there and I think one of them was a football player, professional football player, from back East, and my officer that was there, a fresh officer we'd flown in, had gone down and found a piece of railing and worked it through—a piece of grill is what it was—about twenty feet long, and with a lot of hard effort and work, they'd spanned the river in a real narrow spot across a lot of debris, but we would have had to lead those crippled, tired, elderly people, go down about a quarter of a mile downriver, lead them across that tortuous, temporary bridge, through all that debris and stuff, then back up the river to a sound building that was up there that was part of the fish hatchery. I'd have kicked the door in and probably got a fire and kept them warm that night and sheltered.

So, you know, I don't think they would have died on us. I had a couple of nurses there, Flight for Life nurses, so we could have taken care of them, but it was a lot better to get them out and not have to put another—the shock value alone could have killed them. There's no kind of treatment we could have given them up there, just shock alone, just discouragement, not getting out; we could have lost some life there.

So it was real fortunate that that guy happened to have, that pilot happened to have walked by and hear my voice screaming on that radio, "You get me some help up, or I'll bang heads when I get down there." Oh, I was mad, and I'd gone past begging and pleading, and I was threatening to kill them by that time, and no amount of it would have done any good if he hadn't have just
walked by at that time.

M: If you hadn't of given him that ticket a year ago.

T: Yes, a year before that, if he hadn't received a speeding ticket and a chewing from me, you know, he said, "You chewed me about setting an example and having some responsibility if I was going to be an officer in the army," and he said, "Well, I just wanted to prove to you," a nice young fellow, "I wanted to prove to you I do have a sense of responsibility." That's a funny story. [Laughter]

M: Let me ask. And so you fly out of there, then, late Sunday night.

T: Late Sunday night, yes, in fact I got back after dark.

M: By the way, have you gotten any sleep by this point?

T: No. I had never been home yet. In fact, I didn't get home until Tuesday. Well, now I never did get home. First sleep I got was late Monday night. Or it was early Tuesday morning. Was the first sleep I got.

M: So you were up all Sunday.

T: Well, I got up Saturday morning, and I went back to bed about, well, I went to bed about 2:00, no 1:00 in the morning of Tuesday morning and slept for three hours in a motel over there. I rented a motel there and kept it for, kept two rooms there, for the next twenty days, because it was a good place to go, for my men to go in. We brought men in from outlying areas, our patrol-men in from outlying areas, and so we kept a couple of rooms at the motel there the rest of the time. And many times, some guys could only pick two or three hours sleep, but they could go in there and get a shower and get three hours solid rest, undisturbed rest.

They were good for a good period of time, and I have always known, I've been in stress situations such as this before, that if I can manage to get
four hours sleep out of every thirty, I can operate good; you've got to watch it with your decision maker, that if you go any longer than that, the quality of your decisions go down as your fatigue goes up. And I know that danger factor, I went over my limit the first stretch. But I never allowed that to happen again. Although I didn't get home, then, until...didn't actually sleep in my own bed until the following Friday or Saturday.

M: How soon do you guys start writing down orders rather than just giving them?

T: Very seldom do we write them down. You see, our radio orders, any orders out on our radio report, automatically, where we key the mike, they're recorded right in here, so those were all recorded.

There was no time for written orders of any kind there, and maybe that's a mistake; well, there's just no time for it, if there was, I wouldn't write them anyhow.

Now, you've got a standing operational order; yes, those are put in writing, my secretary, I get on the phone with her regularly. And this needs to go out, this needs to go out, and so on, and she put those out, I'd dictate them over the telephone, or she came to the command post, and I would handle it that way, and then she'd come back here.

And then I had a lieutenant I called back off of vacation, the senior lieutenant of the division was running the division, and didn't fool, hardly fool, except furnishing us a little manpower. Over there, he ran the regular operation while I handled the flood operation.

M: Yes, what did you do for manpower?

T: Well, I've got the whole State Patrol resources. We've got 500 patrolmen, and of course, in a deal like that, well, I had blanket authority from the chief[Keith] to call any captain, any division, any man in the state and say,
"I need five men, I need four men," "They need to be such-and-such equipped, for x number of days," and I would have them.

They'd say, "Well, they'll be there. The estimated time of arrival is eight hours from now," or something like that.

Then I would hold a...again, I was not only holding these planning meetings, but all the search and rescue people, the commanders of the cooperation, I was also holding staff meeting with my lieutenants. They would meet there; we had a division to run. We had manpower commitments, schedules to meet, court cases that had to either be continued or men had to be got to the court cases.

M: So you had to keep on while . . .

T: You have to keep your regular operation going on a reduced scale. You know, you're going to...but you've still got accidents going on. You've still got drunk drivers going on, this kind of thing. And so you have to call in back-up people.

But then all the other division commanders, I had men here from Durango, Pagosa Springs, Trinidad, Pueblo, clear down as far as Springfield in the southeast corner of the state, all of, you know,

They just came in. We had housing for them in the motel. We had food arrangements made at restaurants to feed them. If they were on duty, then the Salvation Army fed them. If they had been sent in to get four hours sleep, they'd get up, take a shower, eat a good breakfast at some restaurant, report to work, and they were working twelve on, minimum, twelve-hour shifts on, so by the time we could get them relieved and get them in a motel, they put fourteen hours on.

Now this is by the second, by the third and fourth day, we were down to
twelve-hour shifts. By the fifth day, we were well enough supplied with manpower that we could go on eight-hour shifts and keep good, fresh men up on these jobs, which is a lot better situation.

So by the time it went that way, I told my lieutenant, "I'm going to go home and get twelve hours sleep." So I could go get some sleep, you see.

The strange unique thing here is, that this wasn't the classical, book-type disaster in that we had a canyon, thirty miles long, and we had rescue operations going on from the western end, from Estes Park, and we had rescue operations going on from the Loveland end, and body recovery, by the third day now, we'd got everybody that was alive out, and now we were in a heavy body recovery operation. And search for bodies.

And so I didn't have a one-command-post setup. Neither did Sheriff Watson. We had two command posts. Which was, which is the worst way in the world to operate. But we had to, because we had rescue operations on, and no way to get in between but by helicopter. Unless you drive clear down to Lyons and clear around.

M: So you had a command post up there?

T: So I had a command post at Estes Park, and I put a lieutenant in charge, name of Robert Wheeler, up there to start. I brought him in, he was brought in clear from Limon, Colorado. Out of my division.

M: My understanding is that the State Patrol really was the main communication link up there.

T: Right. We were. Now, and that's not fair. That's the Sheriff's Office.

M: Is that true?

T: Well, we had the city police of Estes, who was on our frequency. And we used theirs during the night as the communications post. During the day we would
overload them so bad they couldn't carry on normal duty. And Sheriff Brad Leach of Boulder County, who has never been mentioned in this, sent me a bus, a communications bus, a beat-up, old looking blue bus, looks like a bucket of bolts, and we set, but it's not, it's equipped with fine radio equipment here. Plus he sent me four technicians--to run it.

And they parked, we parked that at the most unlikely place in the world, a little hill where there's a, well, it's four miles south of Estes Park, on Colorado 7, on a knoll, way up high, that could talk right down into the Canyon, at a place called Seven Lazy Queens. That was the name of the place. I still wonder about the name of it, but, well, that's where we put this bus, and this was our communications center on the west side.

And what was good about it, we could talk to all the rescue groups down in the Canyon. We had four rescue groups down in there. Arapahoe Search and Rescue, El Paso Search and Rescue, Rocky Mountain Search and Rescue, and one more, I can't think of the name of it. We had four well-organized search and rescue units. Two of those had doctors with them.

M: Those are volunteer groups?
T: Volunteer groups, they're mountain climbers, technical mountain climbers. This kind of thing. These were the ...and all of them, every one of them, were emergency medical technicians. The finest trained people you can get. Mountain climbers. Technical mountain climbers. They know their business. That's what we had. And all radio equipped.

But we had to talk to them. We couldn't talk to them from Loveland. But we could talk to them from that command post up there at Seven Lazy Queens. And this split my operation, and now I could get between the Loveland Command Post and the Estes Park Command Post, though, in twelve minutes by
helicopter. So I wasn't as bad off there, no.

I would only be at the most out of communications maybe fifteen minutes. And not necessarily so except, because we had communications in the choppers, but of a different frequency, and normally it wasn't that tight and I'm never over fifteen minutes away from a radio for over twenty days, day or night.

So, and the same way with Sheriff Watson. And we would make almost daily at least one pass up and down that canyon to take a look at what we had to do. Then another thing that's little talked of was our car recovery operation. Now, that's still going on and here, this is what, September 14.

M: Is that under your jurisdiction now?

T: Yes. Now that was totally under my jurisdiction. It was a car ... we have an Auto Theft Department, Auto Theft Bureau, within the State Patrol, and although that's only two or three people, we have trained special automobile identification, auto-theft identification patrolmen throughout the state. So we had a built-in auto theft or auto I.D. team.

So what I did was lease a four-wheel drive pickup, equip it with cutting torches, porta-jacks, and their job, then, was to go fish out all these cars and identify them.

Now this is a service that we needed to provide for the people. I have not got the final list yet for the simple reason we're still digging out cars. And it's September 14.

I think I'm going on 600 vehicles that we will recover and identify. As of yesterday, we had 100 percent identification. We hadn't missed on a one. And that is fantastic. Because if you've ever seen any of those balls of junk, of course, you know, once we find them, we have to dig them out now
with a bulldozer. And that isn't the gentlest handling in the world.

Course, they're destroyed, anyhow. And then we've got to go into them and pry them apart and use cutting torches to find their vehicle identification number and identify them. Because these people have got to prove loss to insurance companies, this kind of thing.

M: That's right.

T: So it's a service that we must provide for the people.

M: You also might find some bodies in there.

T: We have found a few. We have found a few, but not a lot of bodies in cars. But every once in a while, about the time when I think we're not going to find a body in a car, we dig up one that's got a body in it. And that's been going on since the first day.

No, we didn't start vehicle identification ... we worked strictly on rescue on Sunday, Saturday night and Sunday. On Monday, we were still rescuing. By Tuesday, we started body recovery action; we got everybody that wanted out of the Canyon, and we were on body--when we went on body operations, the sheriff went basically under body search and identification, and I took over vehicle search and identification. And we started digging out cars.

M: You know, some of those cars are just bits and pieces. How are you going to identify something like that?

T: Well, if you got a bumper, you're not going to identify it. But many times you got a bumper with a license plate on it.

M: But sometimes it's just an axle.

T: Okay, those are what we call ... we don't include the piece, like a bumper or fender, as a vehicle. It's just a piece of tin. [If] we find a frame member
we find an engine, or anything like that, we're gonna make identification. [If] we find a transmission; we'll make identification. [If] we find a differential, we'll make an identification. And so that's what we've been doing. And it wasn't until the fifteenth of August or twentieth of August, it was after that, it was almost the first of September before we found our own patrol car.

M: Where was your patrol car?

T: We found it a half a mile east of Drake. Right where the officer said he was stuck.

M: Still there.

T: No. So we dug it out.

M: I mean the patrol car was still there.

T: Yes, it was still there, right where he said he was, where he was stuck when he went bailing out.

M: Under debris, or . . . ?

T: 'Bout ten, fifteen feet of rock and mud. And we, you know, the reason we found it is the way we found many cars is, to build the pilot road, the road, we had to go to the river bottom to get the material. So we just bulldozed up the river bottom. The river bottom has been bulldozed. From the mouth of the Narrows to Estes Park. That's where we got the material to build the road. As they're bulldozing every piece of that river bottom to get sand and gravel and rock, they'd bulldoze up a car, and then we'd gone in and identified it. And that's the way we found ours.

There's another story about that patrol car that we had marooned at Drake, and that's interesting, and something that's a first in the state of Colorado. We left it there for seven days, and used it as a radio communi-
cations post. We flew gasoline into it, we eventually had got a Caterpillar
in over Cedar Park, small one, and it had come across the river and bulldozed
a little road to where some fill, to where we could drive it into Drake, but
it was hard on tires, and we finally got four flat tires, so we had to fly in
wheels and tires to keep it running, and fly in gas, and finally, its need by
the seventh day ... we didn't need it up there anymore. But we couldn't drive
it out. So we just drove it out on the sandbar right into a Chinook and flew
it out.
M: Is that right?
T: That's exactly right. We went out and flew it out in a helicopter. Just
drove it in. And that has to be a first in the state of Colorado.
M: Now, it's back on the road someplace now?
T: Oh, yes. We had it back on the road the next day. Brought it in, had it
tuned up, and the spark plugs were quite fouled on it, you know, just sitting
there idling keeping the battery up, and got it tuned up, filled it up with
gas, changed the oil, and put it back out on the road. Put four new tires
on it. But that, that's kind of an interesting story.
M: Yes, it sure is.
T: I had known all along that I could fly it out whenever I wanted to, and I
sure didn't want to leave it abandoned up there because it would have been
two more weeks before we'd have got it out. And, you know, a patrol car
sitting on the side of the road unguarded probably get stripped pretty good
before we got back to it.

So the last operation we did with the Chinooks before they left us and
went back to Cheyenne and Colorado Springs, that last flight they made was
to fly out my patrol car.
But that's not the only police car we flew out. We flew out two Sheriff's cars prior to that down around Cedar Cove. Captain Urista's car and one other. We flew those out with the Chinooks. But I kept mine there as a radio post at Drake until the last dog was on it, flew it out.

M: By the way, did you see any examples of panic or hysteria?

T: None whatsoever. None. Now I saw anger and frustration, but panic, none. Never saw an ounce of panic. I have never worked with such calm, good people. I mean, the refugees themselves are very considerate of each other. One emotion that I saw that surprised me was embarrassment.

[Thunder]

M: Embarrassment.

T: Embarrassment. At Drake, we'd have 40, 50 people waiting to get on the chopper, and they were embarrassed if you said, "It's your turn to go get in the chopper." "Well, maybe we ought to let this lady go," or something like that, you know. Well, we already knew how many we could get on and who was going where. They were embarrassed that they didn't have any shoes. Or that they were half-dressed or that their hair wasn't combed or they needed a shave. That was the biggest emotion, embarrassment.

M: Isn't that something? How'd the kids take it?

T: Great. It was like a lark to them. Like a lark to them. I saw a pitiful thing there. I saw a little man that I would like to see again. He was deformed like he had probably had polio seriously, and he was a very handsome 18 year-old, 18 or 19 year-old boy. And he was fairly well-dressed. He had good, solid shoes on, strong trousers, a windbreaker-type jacket, short cropped blond hair, but his arms were terribly withered. Couldn't use them at all. And he walked with a serious limp. And he had a speech impediment.
And he was hurting. That boy had been out, this was at Drake, he'd probably been out in the elements, by that time, a good 25, 26 hours. He'd lost both of his parents, I found out. Not a tear on him, not in shock whatsoever, and he resisted me in putting him on a helicopter and flying him out. He got over to me and said, "Now look, I'm all right. I can take it. I'm stronger than you think I am. And get some of these ladies and elderly people out first."

And I said, "All right, I'll put you to work," said, "You go over to that patrol car, and if you hear them call Number 23, that's me, and you honk the horn or kick the siren on it or something," and I used him, and it made him feel so good. And if ever a kid needed out of there, he needed out.

One of the people there said he'd lost both his parents. And he was, I looked at him, I don't think, I think he was in some shock. But I think putting him to work was the best thing that I'd ever done for him. So in about an hour he had no excuse, and I flew him out.

But some things really warmed your heart you'd see up there that you would have liked to have taken the time to just kind of gather them up and put your arm around them and console them, but it was a lot better just to load them on a helicopter and get them to warmth and food and dry clothes.

M: How long is it before you return to normal operations? You still got men up there?

T: Oh, yes. But give you an example, I'm not going to get back to normal patrolling operations till this time next year, when we get a road through there. I, for example, I'll have to patrol the Canyon this winter with a four-wheel drive vehicle.

M: Will that be--okay, is that the sheriff's responsibility?

T: Instead of a regular patrol--yes, the sheriff's and mine both. The sheriff
has got public protection worries. He's got robbery. He's got suicide. He's got murder.

M: He's going to station some people.

T: Yes. He's got people stationed in there, temporary precinct stations. He won't be back to normal until the highway, the final highway, is built through there.

Me, I will have road problems. Kids in school buses, in mired school buses. I'll have a road that can't be plowed proper. You can't plow a gravel road and a rock road. You can only plow four inches above, you can't put the blade down. So we're going to be wading in mud up to our ears all winter long. So I can't use a conventional patrol car. So I've leased a four-wheel drive vehicle to patrol the Canyon with.

When do you get back to normal? A year from now. Maybe I'll get back to normal. I'm certainly not back to normal yet. I'm making reports. I'm trying to get our money back from the Federal Disaster Agency, get the bills paid.

I'm trying to get all the compensatory time paid back for overtime that my men worked that they don't get paid cash for, but I can give them administrative leave for, which I sure as hell am going to give them. They worked their heart out there, in that job, and they're entitled to some time at home now with their families.

M: So you give them some vacation time, then?

T: Well, it's, we don't want to call it vacation time. [Laughter.] It's administrative leave, which I have the authority to give.

But let me give you an example. I worked 317 hours in the month of
August. That is eight 40-hour weeks I worked in August. And I had men put in that kind of hours. So they're entitled to some time off. If I get the time, I might take a couple of days off and go play golf, too.

M: Well, I don't think anybody would disagree with you.

T: Nobody would even think about it. But I have the authority to give those people administrative leave and give myself administrative leave. It has to be booked, and it has to be accountable. But I can account for it.

M: Sure you can.

T: So, by the time, due to our other commitments, that I pay these guys back a little bit of the time they put in, I won't be back to normal operation manpower-wise for six damn months. It will take me that long to pay them back. I wish I had the cash to pay them time and a half. And it's over with, but I don't have that, so I'll give it back to them, part of it back, on a one-on-one, try to . . . .

M: And you think your other expenses for supplies, equipment, and so on . . . .

T: I spent $16,000 in the first ten days above and beyond my normal operational costs. Well, I'm going to get that; that's counting also the loss of that patrol car. Which was a new car, incidentally. So, this is my luck.

So, yes, through the Federal Disaster Agency, after I get the multitude of paperwork filled out, we will ... the State will be reimbursed for those expenses.

For example, I had a $2,000, well, I will have over a $2,000 food bill. You know, just food. There's well, $2,500 will take care of board and room for the first fifteen days. That was extraordinary expense that we have to reimburse these men for.

I didn't...they didn't pay for it out of their pockets, I just went in
and had somebody go buy and arrange to set up an account in the State Patrol's name and feed them and house them.

But these are all things, now, the aftermath. So when you say, "When do you get back to normal?" I'm going to a meeting tomorrow, more than a month later, just to critique the mistakes we may have made, or to plan for the next disaster while it's still fresh in our minds, get down on paper, what is a better way to do things?

M: Yes, of course you got to count what you did right, too.

T: Yes, yes.

M: There's an awful lot.

T: We, you can't go through one of these things and make the hundreds and hundreds of snap decisions that you had to make, a commander, that you didn't make some bum decisions.

M: Why, of course.

T: And somebody told me when I was going to school, I was in college, that a decision maker made 75 out of 100 good decisions, if he was a good decision maker. Well, I think through this we made out a better percentage rate than that, I really believe we did.

But really, we need to take a very critical look at ourselves and really look at the entire operation with no colored glasses on. And say, "All right, next time I do this instead of this." Get it on paper.

M: One thing, one question they're going to ask you, and I'm sure you've thought about it; is there any sort of a warning mechanism that you could--you know, this is a flash flood.

T: Okay, let me say this, Let's say, somebody said we ought to string a whole
bunch of horns or sirens or bells you can take whatever, you can take them all the way down the Canyon.

All right, I know people. I know the human race. I know bureaucracy. I know politics. My part of it.

So, it's going to cost a lot of money. But right now there's a big craze on, so they—I'm just using it as an example—so they set up a system of sirens, air-raid sirens, down the Canyon. For the first year, they'll test them once a month. The second year, they'll test them once every six months. The third year, they'll get rusty and won't work. And the fourth year, people will forget. Where the hell are they? you know.

M: Or what they're all about.

T: Or what they're for. The best thing that you've got is the thing that we had. And that's the telephone. You see, Sergeant Purdy started the Loveland Police Department calling up that canyon, warning people, "There's a possible flash flood coming, get to high ground." That's your best warning system.

M: And they worked fine . . . .

T: And the police department in Loveland was calling, up that canyon. And we don't know now how many lives that saved. The only thing that happened to us there is that the water started knocking out the lights. But they were talking to Drake, when that phone line went out. And they just kept working down the Canyon, dialing down the Canyon.

M: How about the volunteer fire department?

T: They're fantastic. They are well-trained people. But you only got a couple in that canyon. There's no way in the world they can go warn everybody.

M: I see.

T: You see, you said the word when you said, "Flash flood." You see, a flash
flood is just that--boom (snapping his fingers).

M: 15 to 20 minutes.

T: Yes, and you don't warn many people in 15 or 20 minutes. I go across two bridges and I arrived at the canyon at 9:48, so I had to go across those two bridges somewhere around 9:45; at 10:00 I was trapped. And I went across those bridges, there wasn't an ounce of raised water. I looked.

M: There's a problem trying to figure out what's happening, isn't it? How serious it is.

T: Yes.

M: And in a flash flood, by the time you figure it out, it's too late.

T: And I don't think we ought to say, I, the nature of my business is to react to problems. That's what we're here for--react to emergencies. People say, "Well, won't be another one like that for 100 years," I say it could happen tonight.

M: Sure.

T: You see, and I think we should be prepared for it. But I have no faith in any kind of warning system that I know of now. Your radio is a good warning system, your TV is a good warning system, but people don't believe it.

Hell, they were putting out flash flood warnings on the TV. And nobody was paying any attention to it. We tracked a lot of people. And you talk about warning! Guys were standing in their cabins watching water come up, and said, "Well, I got to go move my car to high ground," and went out to move their cars to high ground, watch their cabins and their families wash away. That's why there were so many men alive instead of women. If you go look at the ratio of the deaths . . . .
M: That's right. Is that because of the men were out trying to . . . ?

T: Yes. They were out to save the car, or they were going to see how bad it is, this kind of thing, and their cabins got washed away.

M: It is true. The ratio's about . . . .

T: The ratio's high with women. I know of two cases. One I just described. Where a guy went out to move his car up to higher ground, and got it moved and went back to move another one and looked and his cabin was gone. Didn't even see it, and his wife and another member of the family was washed away. He went back up to his car and just sat on the high ground. What the hell else could he do?

Another case, I know of a man who, the water was rising, went out and got in his car, went up on the road and used the lights of his car to watch the river, and when he finally realized he was in a flood, he looked back and his house was gone with his wife and another member of the family gone.

So you see, warning--they had warning. It just didn't register. Just didn't register.

M: Yes, it's hard to react to it.

T: Now, for years to come, they'll react to the Colorado Day flood.

M: But there will be a whole new set of people in there.

T: Yes. And then they'll talk about the old-times, "Well every time they mention something, they want to talk about the Colorado Day Flood, July 31." It's, I've been in too many of these things. It's, they'll get lack-adaisical, I don't think there's any kind of warning system, that we have built-in disciplines in the police business, that we, a way of life for notification for responding to a disaster or responding to a problem, this kind of thing. But that's our way of life. It is not the normal people's way of
life.

So I don't know about a warning system. It's, I would like to think it could be a good--the radio, is one, and it's already there, most people are listening to the radios up those canyons. The TV's another one. The telephone's another one, and I don't think we have anything better. You put it on radio or TV at 7:00 at night, and everybody, 99 percent of the people would have got the message. But, you've got to have, to have some forewarning.

When that 17½ inches of rain hit, man, I'm telling you, I've got a sergeant driving up the Canyon trying to find "his umbrella" and gets caught in it himself. That's how fast it was moving.

And of course, we did have ... we'll never know how many lives were saved by the premonition of the sergeant throwing that roadblock at Drake and throwing that roadblock at the mouth of the Narrows. How many lives he saved, I don't know, but I know he saved a lot of them because my men at the roadblock at the Narrows said they seen cars coming out of the Canyon with their lights on and their four-way flashers on. And there was nothing going west and they were coming out. These are people that those men, that that sergeant talked to. "Get your fannies out of here as fast as you can, don't worry about the speed limit, turn your lights on."

M: Plus all the people that you saw stacked up at the Dam Store.

T: Yes, and those people were all saved by the, and those officers took tremendous abuse. You talk about a warning. "There's a flood coming." "Well, that's not going to be much. Let me go on. I can get on over." And then they say, "No, you're not going past this point," and then they start taking verbal abuse.

Oh, you can listen to that tape of Littlejohn. It'll make you sick, the
abuse that kid took. But that roadblock, he threatened one man in handcuffing him, putting him under arrest. And then here the water hits and the guy's begging him, "What can I do for you?"

M: Right.

T: That man will be sorry the rest of his life, probably, for the pressure he put that officer under.

But warning, don't tell me about warning. We[muffled]people in a damned trailer camp down there at Sunny Jim's, and they all laughed at us, and half of them drowned. Wouldn't leave. Well, "We were here in the '65 flood," and they didn't leave and they died. So warnings? No, people ignore it. Except disciplined people who live with emergencies, they will listen.

M: Sounds like the only thing left is just not to let people build again.

T: They shouldn't, in my opinion, they shouldn't let them build in a flood plain. You ought to let them build above the highwater line. They're going to build the highway different. They're going to build it different, the highway, quote, "above the 100-year floodplain." That's above 19 feet above the riverbed.

M: It's going to be hard to do.

T: Yes, I suppose so. But then I, you know, they're not going to get away with it. People are going to build right down in there in those cottonwoods right in the riverbed. And they're going to die someday. Or somebody buys their house and going to die someday. Cause you'll get another flash flood down that canyon.

M: Yeah, that canyon didn't get there by some ...

T: No, that deep groove got cut by the same thing that we saw the other night,
I think. So, but they'll, politics, private enterprise, all of that will allow all that to happen again, I'm afraid. And so they'll, don't even suggest warning systems to me because they don't mean anything. The people's got their warning right now, go back right in there and build. I wouldn't.

M: That's a good point.

T: I'm bitter about that, I'm bitter about it because so many people got their life savings wiped out. You know, they're retired people who spent half their life, and I know a few of them that went up there to build cabins and looked forward for ten years to retiring and go up and live in their cabin in the Big Thompson and one 3-hour rain wiped them out, their whole life savings, everything. Some of them wiped out their lives, no flood insurance, and it makes me a little bitter. And then I hate to see them go right back in there and build again.

M: Okay, is there anything else that ought to part of this? Any other segment of the story that we didn't touch on?

T: Well, we've rambled quite a bit. No, I honestly believe that after 30 years of law enforcement, that it was the best managed, best-run search and rescue operation of this magnitude that I have ever--well, I've never been involved in one of that magnitude--and nobody would have ever made me believe prior to this that we could save that many people that quick, and not, you know, we didn't have a loss of life due to the rescue operation.

We only lost one helicopter, and no loss of life there. And, man, I'm telling you, it's still unbelievable to me, that we could have done that without losing some lives, and we didn't do it. I think the quick operation saved some lives.

I think by getting those people out, and knowing what we know now, that
it rained all night Sunday night, and all day Monday, that if we hadn't got that 800 out of there that day, we'd have lost some people to exposure, to pneumonia, a lot of those elderly people. We'd have heart attacks, fatigue, death by exposure, you can just name it.

So knowing what we know now, while the weather socked back in on us, that operation well, probably was the epitome of my career. I'll never see anything like that again.

And the people I worked with, I don't think anybody can ever realize the worth of Bob Watson. And his unit. Their organization, we've always known the Colorado State Patrol was organized, and we've been a little smug about it, you know, a little cocky about it. We're well-disciplined, we have a very strict chain of command and a very tight operational procedure. There's no questions asked and an order that's given is carried out, period. And they're well-qualified people.

M: You train them.

T: Sure, train, train, train. That's all we do. And then turn around and walk into an operation like that sheriff's office had, with the equipment and the background of experience in search and rescue that they had, that I have never had, boy, the two together made a hell of a team. I'll tell you that.

And I think it was just one of those times when it happened in the right place with the right people if it was going to happen, and it worked good. And then the National Guard and their backing of us and their equipment, their manpower, remember, they sent us in a lot of ground troops we used for--there's another thing that would come out of a planning meeting--we flew in three-man guard troops, three-man squads, in any area we could set them down, before
the rescue operation even, the evacuation ever started.

And their job is to say, "Help is here." "We'll get you organized, we want to make sure that you're warm, that you've got some food." They flew in rations to them. Their job was to get them organized, search out the sick, lame and wounded so that we could get them out first, and see, that's another little-documented thing. Another thing that we did that we need to really read in on that tape. Is that we flew in a folder . . . .

M: That's right, with some instructions.

T: Yes. Have you seen it?

M: No, I read about it.

T: I've got it here, somewhere. I just saw it today, and I'll read it. Early Monday morning, no, early Sunday morning, we needed to get word to those people. We didn't realize that we could get that many people out that day. So we dive-bombed the canyon, and there's a little story on this 8½-by-10 sheet of paper, we said, "We got to get some word to those people, of encouragement and what to do," and so it was General Weller, Sheriff Watson, myself, Chief Keith of the Patrol, were setting there, "We'll dive-bomb them with a flyer of instructions."

And I had a pad and a pencil, and I said, "Give me some ideas," and one guy would say something then all of a sudden they had everybody else do something and I had a whole bunch of ideas. So I turned to a young officer and said, "All right, start writing this down." And I dictated him this:

"Help is on the way. Attempt to organize leaders in your group for self-help and mutual aid. If you need medical aid, place a large 'A' with blankets or other material so that it may be seen by a helicopter. 'F' for food, 'W' for water, or 'OK' meaning you need no immediate care."
If you believe your water is contaminated, boil it. Get the names of all people in your immediate area and the names of any people who are missing. Flight operations will cease at dark on August 1, and will begin again on August 2 at daylight," so that they knew if they didn't hear the choppers anymore, that they wouldn't think, "Oh they've abandoned us." We'd be back at daylight. You know, it's easy to say, "Well, they'll be back," if you've got something in writing that says they will be back, that's a little morale factor.

"Please stay put and stay on high ground. We are expecting more rain tonight."

We dive-bombed that, we printed 1,000 of those, or 2,000 of those, and then I put them on the choppers, had them put on choppers, all day long on Sunday. Starting, these were being flown out of helicopters at 8:00 Sunday morning. August 1.

M: Up and down the Canyon.

T: And so, then, I've got 35 millimeter slides that show 'F' in the middle of the road put out by sheets or blankets in the middle of a piece of road, or 'A' for medical aid, and of course, we landed, immediately landed somebody in there, as fast as we could, where we'd see the A. And it worked.

And that's a product that I just read you, that took the ideas of four guys in three minutes, and that was put out. And that's the only one left in existence, that I can find. I keep that; I'm going to frame that someday.

M: The title of that is what, "Help is On the Way?"

T: "Help is On the Way." Right. And then the general told me he said, the sheriff said he was going to arrest me for littering. [Laughter] Yes, you know, I'd get fifty or sixty and say, "Is anybody taking off in the chopper?" If they were going to a strange place in the Canyon, I'd say, "Just throw
this out," "Just throw this out," you know, that canyon looks like a dump anyhow.

And he said, "You're littering," and I said, "I don't care whether I'm littering or not. I want people to get the word." And it worked.

Now that wasn't my idea. That was a conglomerate of five or six people's idea to get quick word into the people on the ground.

And what makes me feel so good about it is that it worked. You know, it was, within an hour we started seeing A's and F's and W's and, you know, out there, and so when the next chopper, "I got to drop off a load of water at Sleepy Hollow," or the next one would say, "Well, load me up with food. They need food at Glen Haven," or this kind of thing.

And so it really worked for us, and it just was another tool, you see, the choppers were always flying back in the Canyon empty. So they went in with food and water. And it wasn't till about 11:00 that we quit flying them out, but we had enough food and water. Well, we put a couple of choppers, sole job was to fly food and water and medical aid wherever they seen these signs. But the rest of them were evacuating.

M: By the way, did you hear that rumor? This kind of thing would help stop rumor. Did you hear that rumor that the Olympus Dam had broken?

T: Well, yes. You see, we had evacuated the Canyon twice on Tuesday and Wednesday because of the rumor that the Olympus Dam had broke. It broke three times on Saturday night, and a nine-foot wall of water coming down.

In fact, it got so bad that we stationed an officer, no it was a Highway Department employee with a radio, where he could keep a spotlight on the spillway of Olympus Dam. So we could work. But there are people like that, that put out false rumors. Get their kicks.
M: But that Olympus Dam never did break.

T: The dam was never in danger.

M: Yet you keep hearing all these.

T: You see, it never rained very hard in Estes Park. It rained east of the Olympus Dam. All they did when we got high water was to quit diverting water through the Trans-Mountain diversion tunnel and put main water in Lake Estes, or in Mary's Lake, the other part of the Big Thompson project, of the two lakes up above. The minute they quit diverting water, they didn't fill up anymore.

But you see, that's goofy people who want to get in the act and don't know what they're talking about. We had a lot of problems, these were CB messages, that come in. Now those people are either sadistic or crazy that would put out that kind of false information.

M: Or irresponsible or something.

T: Irresponsible--well, they've got to be crazy to do that. They've got to know what the expense and the risk of life, just moving equipment and people out of the Canyon, because you figure a nine-foot wall of water's coming down. Well, that isn't the only ... they reported dams all the way from, all along that, you know, that whole country from the Big Thompson north to the Wyoming line is loaded with lakes and dams and hell, all of those dams were reported breaking on us to the point that I called for a fixed-wing aircraft, a State Patrol aircraft to be there Sunday morning to do nothing, I was hoping the weather would break, it didn't break for us for fixed-wing, and all I was going to have that airplane do was to fly and check on false reports of dams breaking apart.

M: Verify it.
T: Yes, just verify it for us. We had to put people there we could trust.

M: How did you get along with the reporters?

T: Great, great. I was sabotaged by one reporter.

M: That's not a bad percentage.

T: No, no, I'll tell you this. I, first of all, I would not give a press interview. It was the sheriff, he and I made that decision at the start, he was, if you want to get technical, was in overall command of the operation. I felt he should delegate that to a public information officer, designate A PIO man, so that, and then I asked for two press conferences a day to be given to keep the newspeople off my back.

And my people's back. Because we're uniformed and well, you know, it's easy to see us and come up and, "Well, hey, would you give us an interview or would you have a press conference to bring us up to date?" and I'd say, "No, go see the sheriff." I don't like giving press conferences, and frankly, news reporters get on my nerves. But I'll say this for these guys. They were good. They sent us a bunch of pros except for one guy.

I had successfully ducked him for four days. And I had to go to the restroom. And so did the sheriff. And we're standing in at the urinal, and I'm saying to the sheriff, I said, "You know we're not going to find all these bodies," I said, "Three years from now some farmer down below is going to be plowing in his cornfield, and he's going to plow up a skeleton, and you won't know whether that's a flood victim or if you've got a murder on your hands."

M: That came out in the newspaper.

T: You're damn right. It made every newspaper in the United States, and where that newspaper reporter got it, he was setting on the john. And he come out and said, "Thanks, fellas." And he never got back in the command post again.
But it was too late then.

M: I think we're at the end.

T: I do, too. I think we've covered it pretty well.

M: Okay.

T: I hope it's worth something.
Draft materials not scanned

See originals in folder

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