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M: This is an interview with Brigadier General William D. Weller, who is the head of the military division of the State of Colorado, the Colorado National Guard. I am in his office in Denver, Colorado, and the date is December 13, 1976, and my name is David McComb.

Well, I think we need to start at the beginning. When did you first hear about the Big Thompson disaster?

W: I first heard about it in disaster proportions at 4:00 on the morning of the 1st of August, 1976, in a telephone call from Governor Lamm.

M: Early in the morning.

W: At 4:00 in the morning.

M: At 4:00, 4:00 a.m. And was this to put you on alert or tell you to stand by, or to mobilize, or what was the nature of the conversation?

W: Well, the Governor indicated that he was aware of a considerable distress in the Big Thompson Canyon. He was not fully informed as to the extent of the disaster, and was having some difficulty identifying and getting information concerning the disaster.

M: Yes. And so what did he ask you to do, just stand by, or to alert the Guard, or what?

W: Well, he indicated that I was to get in touch with Chief Wayne Keith of the State Highway Patrol, and that the chief had some people in the canyon who were acting somewhat as the Governor's eyes to evaluate what the situation was, and he asked if we could have elements of the National Guard alerted to perhaps be at the disaster site by near, or very shortly after, daybreak.

M: Well, let me ask you a basic question about the mission of the National Guard. There's the obvious military mission for training for warfare and so forth. But National Guard units are often working in disaster areas
when such things happen. Is that formally part of the mission of the National Guard, to aid in disaster relief?

W: The National Guard is organized with a dual role. It's a military force in response to the defense mission of the United States, and it's a militarily trained and equipped unit for use by the Governor in any fashion, particularly in emergencies of this nature, in the state. Each National Guardsman subscribes to an oath to support the President in the time of a national disaster; he subscribes to an oath to accept direction of the Governor in the state affairs.

M: Yes. So then it's actually part of the mission of the Guard to respond to the needs of the Governor, however he sees fit.

W: Very definitely, and it has been since the time of the formulation of the United States Constitution, provided for in the formulation of the State Constitution of Colorado in 1876.

M: And is the National Guard, then, given training in relief measures? For example, first-aid measures, rescue operations on victims and things like that? Is that part of the training process?

W: Some elements of it are. Generally, the training of the National Guard is in the military mission.

M: Yes.

W: Defense, and of course, as you probably know, that that training in that military mission does contemplate a certain amount of first-aid training; it contemplates some survival training; it contemplates some assistance to distressed parties.

M: Sure.

W: These are not necessarily those training elements of the military mission, but they're part of the military person's training.

M: Sure, I understand.
W: And a general part of their training, and we do have some units which are probably better trained in the field of reactions to flood requirements than some other units are.

M: Yes.

W: As far as being able to respond. Some units are . . . have a better communicating capability than some other units do. Some units have more training of a type which permits them to traverse difficult terrain.

M: Sure.

W: Our Special Forces units, for instance, are designed to sustain themselves indefinitely in a hostile environment. And are well-trained in this field. They have very limited communications capabilities, however.

M: It seems important that the Guard also has equipment that can be readily used? Supplies, things like that.

W: Equipment which is used by National Guardsmen in training is furnished by the federal government, is the same kind of equipment that is used in the active military services, primarily the Army and the Air Force, and this equipment is available to the Governor for use in disasters.

M: Yes. Okay.

W: For use in National Guard units and persons in disasters.

M: Yes. I assume, then, when the Governor's call came about the Big Thompson, that you had to make some decision as to which units you would move, and at least from what the papers said, the Fort Collins unit was gone. Had left for training someplace, Florida, someplace like that. Is that correct?

W: Yes, the Fort Collins unit was scheduled to leave at 2:00, I believe, for Fort Gordon for some particular training that they were participating in on an annual training basis.

M: Yes.

W: And in the period of time shortly after the Governor called me, of course we
began examining what kinds of units would be required, and in order to ascertain that, we got in touch with Chief Keith at fifteen minutes after four, and reviewed with him what he knew about the situation, and from his reports, it became evident that the desirable kinds of things that we might be able to do would be to provide some evacuation assistance and some communications assistance and some control, and perhaps some security assistance, and as a result of that, we alerted the Army Aviation support facility, which operates with the aviation helicopter units of the Army National Guard, up at Buckley, and we alerted them and asked them to have three helicopters ready to leave Buckley as quickly as possible, anticipating about a 6:00 takeoff.

M: Yes.

W: We also alerted a MP battalion headquarters, and the one MP company stationed at Camp George West, primarily because they had a variety of transportation, of four-wheel drive transportation, which might, could, prove useful in the evacuation effort, and because they had a substantial communications capability between these vehicular units.

M: Yes. Okay. And when did these units, then, start to move toward the Loveland area?

W: [Weller checks papers.] Well, the first units arrived at Loveland at 09100 [9:10 a.m.] The . . .

M: That's at . . . ?

W: The units were alerted, with the prerogative of beginning movement toward Loveland as soon as they had fifty persons assembled.

M: Yes.

W: We expected to assemble about 150 Military Police personnel in the entire operation. Of course, the helicopter crews were alerted and were ready to go earlier than that.
M: These are by and large Denver area people that you pulled in there? George West people?

W: Metropolitan area people.

M: Yes. And so the time of reaction, then, is what, about five hours? Something like that? By the time they're alerted and by the time, until they get there?

W: Well, the units, the organizations, weren't alerted until 4:40.

M: Yes.

W: So this process of determining what the requirements were, and making the coordination effort necessary to at least have some sort of an organizational plan for response takes a certain amount of time, and at that time of night some communications, even telephone communications, are a little slow.

M: And I suppose the men, some of the men had to be called, and things like that.

W: Well, of course, all of the men had to be called. None of them are on a continuous standby situation.

M: Right.

W: We expected a substantial turnout of National Guardsmen in about two hours, after an alert is called.

M: Is that about what happened, then? Did they assemble in that . . . ?

W: Yes, that's about what happened.

M: And then, okay, and then they, what, started arriving in the Loveland area, about 09100 or something?

W: About 9:00, yes.

M: Well, that's, well, from a layman's point of view, that would seem to be a fairly quick response.

W: I think it was a very reasonable response. You, of course . . . you have,
after you assemble the people to the armory, you have to organize the people you have, you have to assure that they're equipped.

M: Right.

W: With the proper equipment, personal gear, and because you don't know what kind of a situation you're going into, you have to assure that all the logistical problems of fuel and food supply have all been taken care of, and of course, they were.

We try to maintain the capability to respond quickly to situations of this nature. But you have to evaluate those response capabilities unit by unit, and I think in this case we had a very reasonable response.

M: Then you had some travel time, too, from here to there.

W: Oh, yes.

M: About an hour or so. Okay, then, you have the helicopters; did you go up there with the Governor then, by helicopter?

W: Yes, I met Chief Keith and the Governor at 6:30 at Buckley. We departed Buckley at 6:45 for Loveland, and met Sheriff Watson at the operations center at Loveland at 7:30.

M: Yes. Let's see, was he . . . ? Where was that center? Was that at the Merri-Ax then?

W: That was at the Merri-Ax then.

M: That is, before he moved to the Water Conservancy . . . ?

W: Yes, after we arrived in Loveland, we conferred rather quickly with the Sheriff and his deputies, a couple of them who were there, his operations officer and his air officer.

And with the Chief, the Governor, myself and Sheriff Watson and Mr. Lloyd, the representative, the state legislator from up there, made a reconnaissance flight up the valley, and went into Estes Park, reviewed the situation with the sheriff's deputy at Estes Park, did some preliminary
planning of what our requirements might be, went back down the other fork of the Big Thompson, the North Fork of the Big Thompson, and back to Loveland, and arrived back at Loveland at, right about 09100, I guess.

M: What did you observe in all this? What did you see and what did you think about what you saw? Was the Canyon pretty much of a mess?

W: Of course, at that time there was a substantial amount of water, overflow in the lowlands behind the Merri-Ax, and on down toward Loveland there were large quantities of water still coming down the river through the Narrows.

It became pretty obvious that the housing structures immediately below the Narrows had been demolished and were strung out well downstream from that location. As we went on up the Canyon we could see that the transformer station near the Narrows was badly damaged.

It became evident as we went upstream that the roadway had been badly damaged, and had left isolated, numbers of persons along the undamaged portions of the roadway, and in the housing which had not been damaged along the roadway, but they were pretty well isolated in the Narrows of the Canyon.

Of course, it was early in the morning, we flew fairly low. We could see a lot of people; a lot of people saw us. There was an interchange of, I suppose, of recognition between the people in the helicopter and those on the ground, that these were probably the beginnings of some massive effort to assist recovery.

I think I was impressed by the apparent isolation of the groups of people cut off by the separations of the highway route and emphasized by the volume of water being discharged, still, which kept them isolated.

M: Sure.

W: Now, as the day went on, that volume of water became less evident, and
less confining to those who were isolated, and before the day was over, there was some movement by persons along the stream bed or along the stream banks to allow them to collect at various points, but early in the morning this was not the capability, and I think I was very much impressed with the apparent isolation of these various groups of people.

M: Did that fact influence the rescue efforts, then? That is, what you decided to do in the role of the National Guard in the Big Thompson?

W: Yes, it did. As we discussed the matter at Loveland, the Sheriff's officers and myself, we undertook in our planning there to determine how best we could assist those groups of isolated people.

If you recall, it was expected that there would be additional rain that afternoon. There was additional rain that afternoon, with a considerable warning of possible flood conditions again that night, so it appeared prudent not to impact the survivors in the valley by adding others who might become victims of a later flood, and so we were somewhat cautious, I suppose, in retrospect, in introducing people into the valley which might have to require subsequent removal because of increased disaster conditions.

M: Yes. Okay, so what was decided, then, that the National Guard should do?

W: Well, one helicopter, we went up there in three helicopters. At the Merri-Ax one helicopter was dispatched to the State Highway Engineer in charge up there, and his mission was to determine the kind of access that existed to the disaster area, including all the highways, and we subsequently determined, of course, that Estes Park was itself reasonably well isolated by the disaster, although restoration of the highway permitted traffic into Estes Park fairly quickly.

But the second aircraft was put into service immediately after arrival there to assist the evacuations of persons, which was beginning using
a MAST helicopter from Fort Carson and a MAST helicopter dispatched from Fort Warren, Wyoming, [Warren Air Force Base] both of which had just arrived there minutes, within minutes of the time we had arrived there.

When we arrived there, there were, I believe, three civilian helicopters under contract to the Sheriff [Sheriff's Office] and the Forest Service, which had been located at a couple of helicopter ports up there, and so that was the initial use of the three helicopters there.

When we returned, when the Governor and his reconnaissance party, I'll call it, returned to the Merri-Ax, we immediately permitted the use of that helicopter to assist in evacuating injured persons from the Canyon as well, so by that time, this would be perhaps by 8:30, there were four Huey-type helicopters, two MAST and two National Guard helicopters, working in the evacuation effort, with a priority assigned of evacuating those who had been injured, those who might require medical assistance, or who were incapable of being evacuated in some other fashion.

M: It sounds like that there are a lot of helicopters there that are going to need organization of some kind. Some kind of an air traffic control or something. Did that take place?

W: The Sheriff's, one of the Sheriff's deputies, was assigned as the air traffic control officer, and he put into service a traffic control procedure that is normal with any CAP [Civil Air Patrol] operation, or with a National Guard operation, and I would say that began, oh, within a few minutes after the helicopters arrived there. And it proceeded with a voluntary manning for the entire day of Saturday.

We, the National Guard, took over pretty much the dispatch and control organization beyond that time, but in the, about the first day of operation, the elements, of the CAP, the Forest Service, the FAA, and others very competently put together an air traffic control center that performed
a dispatch function.

M: Yes.

W: And established control of the air space within the area.

M: And you say after that first day, Sunday, that would be, after that Na-
tional Guard took over the air traffic control . . .

W: No, that isn't what I said. The National Guard began controlling the air-
craft operation.

M: Oh.

W: The dispatch remained with the people who were doing it . . .

M: I see.

W: But the volume of assistance, the matter of establishing the priorities for
moving materials, food supplies, water, the organization of what was to be
transported, was undertaken by the unit commander of the 1157th Helicopter
Company up there.

M: I see. What about the MP's that you were bringing in?

W: Well, the MP's began arriving up there at, as I said, about 9:00 in the
morning. It was determined that probably the best use that could be made
of the National Guardsmen was to assist in organizing the people in these
isolated groups in the Canyon so that they could prepare for helicopter
evacuation, to bring them together and to assure that they were assisted
in being, to being brought to places in which helicopter landings could
be made. And in response to that, we began the organization of teams out
of that Military Police company organization, and began moving teams in a
back haul, you might say, with the evacuation operation, shortly after,
about noon that day. There was some delay in introducing some of the
helicopters into the area because of the fuel situation. Early on, it
appeared that the fuel would be necessary and the fueling point initially
was at the Loveland-Fort Collins Airport. A supply of fuel was ordered;
a small supply of fuel was ordered to supplement that available up there.

It was obvious after the helicopter operation started that we needed more fuel, so we obtained fuel resources from the Air National Guard at Buckley Field and dispatched tankers and fueling personnel from that location to assist in the fuel operation at the heliports which were being used at Loveland instead of at the Loveland-Fort Collins Airport.

And during the transitionary period of placing this fuel, there appeared to be some confusion Actually, I don't think the confusion existed. The helicopter pilots had been getting their instructions from the dispatch center. They knew what was going on, but some of the people around didn't really know that a shift in fueling locations was being made, and so there may have been some perceptions there of capability that existed for a short period of time. It was pretty obvious.

See, as a result of the request through the division of Disaster Emergency Services, the two Chinook helicopters were requested from Fort Carson. One arrived up there about noon, and immediately began bringing out large loads of evacuees. The other one arrived about 2:30, and both of them then began bringing out large numbers of evacuees.

The National Guard helicopters, upon the arrival of the larger helicopters, began making collections within the canyon of persons who were more isolated than could be reached with the Chinooks, and bringing them to the points from which the Chinooks could operate.

So there again was a shift in helicopter operation that was directed. It wasn't casual, but it was a directed shift, and greatly improved the capability of bringing evacuees out. And before the day was over, we really had evacuated about 840 people.

M: Yes. There's a question I want to ask you about ... a line of authority ... which you might want to comment on. Who's in charge of all this?
I mean, you're coming in with your units. There are helicopters and various sources; there are various police units, who takes charge?

W: Well, I can describe the structure up there. The Sheriff, under Colorado law, is designated the responsible official for all search and rescue activity within his jurisdiction.

It didn't take us very long to establish that the jurisdiction of the immediate scene of the disaster was a one-county, one-sheriff jurisdiction, and our job under those circumstances is to assist that responsible elected official with his duties, and in order to accomplish this, the Sheriff operated his immediate organization of his deputies, the coroner, and the organization of search and rescue people within his county from his command post.

M: Yes.

W: We co-located in this particular circumstance, a state coordinating command post. I would prefer now to call it a forward command post, at the Water Conservancy District building in Loveland, and it was immediately adjacent to and in coordination with the Sheriff's command post, and in that state coordinating center, we brought together the elements of the Department of Natural Resources, for dam investigation and reporting, for water flow reporting.

We brought together representatives of the Health Department who became interested in the water supply, the contamination of the water supply, and eventually in the action of operating the morgue and the identification center that became necessary.

The State Highway Patrol, of course, was vigorously identified by the state coordinating center, as Captain [Bill] Thomas was there almost continuously during the early operation, and several of his immediate subor-
coordinates were there. The State Patrol probably furnished the most distinct communication capability in the initial part of the operation except that provided by the Sheriff with his own deputies.

The Sheriff had his system, limited as it was by terrain and by locations of people in the disaster situation, and this was somewhat paralleled and assisted by the State Patrol radio system.

M: You say it was distinct. What do you mean? Distinct in what sense? From the Sheriff's.

W: They're two separate networks.

M: Yes, I understand that. You mean it was playing a unique role of any kind in the disaster, or supplementing that of the Sheriff's, or what?

W: Supplementing that of the Sheriff's.

M: Yes.

W: Primarily by the use of the patrol officers at their various locations—at roadblocks and assistance points, where they were assisting the Sheriff's deputies.

M: Right.

W: And so forth.

M: Well, did you have, then periodic staff meetings with the Sheriff and Captain Thomas and the other people to assess the rescue operation and what was going on? How did you get together to keep things moving in the right direction?

W: That's how we got together. We called together those people of the co-ordinating group with the Sheriff's group, and we discussed very clearly the situation as it existed, what needed to be done, and identified the resources necessary to do it, and set about organizing those resources, and putting them together.
There were large numbers, because of the, I suppose, limited area of the disaster, there were large numbers of volunteer talents made available to the sheriff and his organization up there, and I think one of the things that we need to be very careful with are identifying those talents and assuring that they're legitimate talents. And . . . .

M: That's right.

W: We discovered that there were people who were willing to portray talents that didn't have them because of an interest in being there, or an interest in the Canyon in some fashion that, and certainly the identification of those volunteer talents is an important aspect of assistance.

M: Sure.

W: And I think in this particular case, we used them reasonably well. I think we probably could have organized better to identify and qualify those talents than we did.

M: That would include what, search and rescue teams, people walking around . . . .

W: Search and rescue teams, medical people, nurses.

We had a rather unique situation. It was evident early on that with those who had survived, they didn't need medical, much medical attention.

M: Right. Yes, they were either . . . dead or in pretty good shape, I guess, huh? Well . . . go ahead.

W: It's interesting, I think, to note here, that early in the operation the morgue at both Loveland and Estes Park were designated by the Sheriff as points at which bodies would be taken.

It became evident pretty rapidly that the capabilities of providing for identification services and providing for the large number of bodies recovered quickly exceeded the capability of both those organizations.

The city of Loveland people volunteered the use of the old Loveland Hospital as a site, and the State Health Department began working to bring
together a team of people who would, could assist in that operation of controlling and identifying persons and the transition from those early collecting points for bodies to the hospital. I think it was a rather major undertaking and accomplished very quietly and very efficiently and very effectively.

M: Did the National Guard do this?
W: No.

M: Was the National Guard, then, the people on the ground, involved in the body recovery?
W: They were involved in searching for the bodies. We introduced into the Canyon eight, no, we introduced into the Canyon ten teams of three to five persons each, early, or during the afternoon of the first day up there. Other National Guardsmen were organized to assist in attempting to find bodies in the floodplain below the Narrows and at other locations there.

You have to recall at the time when this is all happening, that that mud in the floodplain is about waist deep, and it's pretty difficult for anybody to . . . .

M: Right. It's hard to move.
W: To traverse it. As a matter of fact, the Sheriff at one time, I think, restricted the use of horses in that kind of search simply because it presented another hazard to compound the effects of the disaster.

M: Yes. Your teams that went into the Canyon, they were there to assist victims?
W: Yes. They assisted victims; they assisted the recovery victims; they assisted in locating bodies . . . . Some of them remained overnight and assisted in the security effort there.

M: Now let me ask about that. Is security a problem in a situation like this?
W: Security was identified as a problem. I'm not convinced that the magnitude
of the security problem was as great as some persons thought perhaps it might have been.

I suspect it would have been, had the area not been somewhat isolated in character. The Sheriff was able to establish control points for access that pretty well controlled the area, and I suspect that in this particular situation, the security was not as vivid a function as it might have been in the 1965 flood in the Denver metropolitan area here.

M: Yes. But, okay, but in disasters in general, security may be a problem. Is that something to consider?

W: Security and control of property that has been damaged or abandoned is always a problem in a disaster. Any kind of a disaster. And it's one that we must be alert to.

M: I see. Well, does that mean that National Guard went in with arms?

W: No, they did not go in with arms of any kind.

M: Okay, then the security would be just being on the spot and observing.

W: That's true. It was of that nature. There were Sheriff's deputies available in each of these areas that were charged with the law enforcement function as such.

M: Sure. Okay. So if anything went on, the Sheriff's deputies would really be responsible, then, to do something about it.

W: That was the intention in this particular case.

M: That is, you say intention, that was decided to handle it that way from the beginning?

W: Yes.

M: Okay. About how many men, then, were involved from the National Guard in the Big Thompson, all total?

W: Oh, at the maximum, about at the maximum time, we had about 160 involved.
M: And then did they rotate in and out, or?

W: Yes, there were helicopter crews involved up there which came from National Guard manpower resources that of course extended the total number of people involved in the disaster, but didn't add to the number of people, that 160 peak that we had up there.

M: I understand. Yes, that's kind of an interesting point, because apparently a lot of the Sheriff's people were stretched and worked to the maximum. They didn't have the resources to rotate, to spell them, at least in the first couple of days or so.

Yet the National Guard can do this, so that you in effect have fresh people there coming in and out. Which, I would assume, although I don't know, might well make the National Guard pretty effective in what they're doing.

W: Well, there were volunteer law enforcement people from other locations that were volunteered to the Sheriff, and I guess, in the fact that they were volunteered, then they were persons with whom he had worked before, it was the choice of the Sheriff.

Initially, he didn't suspect that he was going to need as large a control structure for the security as it turned out, that he finally organized.

M: Yes.

W: I'm sure there were people worked long hours. There were Guardsmen that worked long hours up there.

M: There were, yes. Okay, how long was the National Guard, then, at the Big Thompson? I mean, how long were you officially on the spot?

W: We had people on duty in the helicopters crews up there until Thursday night.

M: That's another question I . . .

W: The Military Police organization was extracted, the last elements came out
Monday morning.

M: So they were there . . . they worked, what, through Sunday and then came out the following Monday? Or is that a week from Monday?

W: No, no. I don't have the record here of their return.

M: Well, okay, the flood took place, then, on Saturday night, you were on the spot and working through Sunday.

Then the helicopter crews, of course, keep working till Thursday, and the ground units come out, what, Monday? Two days or twenty-four hours after the flood.

W: The MP units were largely out of there by Monday evening.

M: By Monday evening, okay, that means 48 hours or so after the disaster.

W: Yes.

M: Okay. Okay, how do you know that it's time to pull them out? Is this a result of the staff meetings, or what?

W: Well, that's exactly how it happens. We assess security requirements. We assess the capabilities desired by the Sheriff and the civilian authorities, and when it appeared that the urgency of evacuation and the urgency of removal of injured, when the substantial part of the body recovery effort had been accomplished, and it appeared that the civilian authorities could again control it without the needs of the National Guard, the National Guard was removed.

M: Yes. Is that standard operating procedure in disasters? That the Guard goes in and does its job and then pulls out as soon as the civilian capability is there? Is that . . . ?

W: The National Guard's function is to support the requirements of the civilian authorities.

M: Right.

W: And . . . .
M: When that's done, that's done.

W: When that's perceived to have been accomplished, then it's finished.

Actually, we had National Guard equipment. We had some water trailers up there for an extended period of time; we had some generators up there.

M: Right.

W: We had refueling crews from the Air Guard up there all the time the helicopter operations were operating.

M: Sure.

W: Those elements that could not be handled by the civilian authorities continued to be handled by the National Guard until they were no longer needed. After access roads began to be established to the Canyon so that surface transportation could be restored in there, the need for helicopter supply of food and water began to lessen, and so when you find out that your helicopters aren't purposely doing an emergency job, then you do it with the kind of equipment that can be controlled more directly by the civilian authorities.

M: Sure.

W: Well, our function in this thing is to assist the civilian authorities. And we try to identify those areas that we have training and equipment and with which we can help them.

We operate a military support section in the National Guard. And they have access to any military equipment in the United States, if it can be identified. And it was rather interesting to note that there were people who had been discharged from various Army activities who knew of certain capabilities that existed someplace, and I think, however, in only one case did we find that that capability was something that had to be provided from a longer range than in the local Fort Carson, Fort Warren, Rocky Mountain Arsenal capabilities.
M: Sure. Okay, and so then by Thursday or so, most of your units are out, some equipment is left behind, and supply for that. So then by the Thursday of the following week, by and large, your role has ended. Is that reasonable?

W: As far as the National Guard was concerned, it was probably, understand that the Governor designated Roy Romer and myself as co-coordinators for the disaster recovery effort of the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration, and so as quickly as the emergency phases of this were over, and even simultaneously with the emergency phases of it, I was working, particularly in the area of gaining the coordination of the civilian agencies involved with the FDAA. We had a large volunteering of search and rescue capability.

M: Yes.

W: That was made available to the Sheriff up there, and I suppose in all your interviews you've heard of some communications deficiencies, and I think that that's one of the things that was discovered that the communications deficiencies were between the search and rescue organizations and the control point, or the Sheriff's Office or the state coordinating office, and some of them got worked out, most of them did.

There was a massive input of CB capability into the Canyon, and to the extent that it was somewhat confusing because there were rumors passed on that should never have been passed on.

M: Like the dam breaking?

W: That was one of them.

M: Yes.

W: But we did have some very reliable assistance from the amateur radio operators.

M: These are the ham . . . .
W: Yes. There are two organizations of them, RACES [Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service] organization, and then there's another very similar organization. There was a REACT, [Radio Emergency Associated Team] organization up there as well, and . . . .

M: That's a curious point. Why should the ham operators—I've heard this before, incidentally—give great assistance, and the CB operators be kind of confusing at times?

W: Well, I think it's a matter of organization. I think that's one of the things that we're trying to pursue now in this matter of communications is to identify some leadership in the CB organizations with which we can bring about some effort to perhaps control or at least try to bring together, coordinate, their efforts, instead of just a splinter effort, to try to identify some leadership, try to identify some control procedures that are acceptable to them, and make them more useful. Certainly, they have a tremendous capability.

If we can find some way of channeling it into a useful function. And I don't intend to say that some of it wasn't useful at Big Thompson. It certainly was. But it was somewhat disorganized, and created some confusion. On occasion.

M: Let me ask you another question about the National Guard, and then we'll talk a little bit about your work with disaster relief. Now, bringing all these men in and bringing equipment and so forth, costs money.

Do you have a flexible budget? Is that a worry for the National Guard, to worry about or to be concerned about where to get the money to do all of this sort of thing? What do you do about budget?

W: Well, in a state operation of this nature, the troops are put on a status, called state active duty, and the state becomes responsible for the pay of
National Guardsmen and for the subsistence of National Guardsmen under those circumstances.

The funding in this case was within the capability of the Governor's Emergency Fund, and we identified, with the Executive Budget Office and the Joint Budget Committee, the need for funding and it was transferred... actually, the Governor's emergency budget paid the payroll, and there have been some funds transferred from that emergency budget allocation to the department, and to the division of disaster emergency services, with which to conduct the reparations activities necessary in the recovery of federal funding for state or other public agencies.

M: Yes. Okay.

W: Yes, funding is distinctly a problem. We have attempted in the last two or three years to create a disaster emergency fund. The Colorado Disaster Emergency Act of 1973 provides for a fund, provides for a manner of distribution. It has never been appropriated, as such a fund has never been appropriated by the legislature.

M: Can't do you much good unless it's appropriated.

But obviously, things like this cost money. And it will have a budgetary impact someplace along the line.

W: Very definitely.

M: In the Sheriff's Office? Your department? And somebody's got to pay for it. Somebody. That's why I asked you that question.

Okay, then after this you're appointed by the Governor to work on disaster relief. Is that with Romer in coordination, setting up, being sure offices are working, what is your role in that?

W: Well, we immediately upon notification of disaster and of the numbers of lives lost in the disaster, it became evident very early that this disaster
would qualify as a major disaster, with a Presidential determination as such. And the people in the Disaster Emergency Services Division brought together the documentation of the application for it to be considered for a Presidential declaration; on Sunday, and a major Presidential declaration was made at, I believe, 9:30 the morning of the second of August, which is one of the, I'm told, is one of the most quickly-declared major disasters that has happened.

When this happens, this brings into play the Public Law 93-288, which is the Federal Disaster Act which provides substantial recoveries for persons and for organizations damaged by disasters. And the immediate implementing of this assistance capability by the federal government is to establish a individual assistance center, and an individual assistance center was set up and began operating in Loveland on Thursday.

M: Yes. That's right.

W: Under the auspices of the FDAA, and there were some, my recollection is, twelve organizations represented in that disaster assistance center up there.

M: Yes.

W: There were some 850 persons in touch with that disaster center, and of course the various eligibilities for assistance to them has been examined and is still an ongoing thing.

The statute, the federal statute provides certain recoveries to the public agencies, cities and counties, and ditch companies, things of that nature, and it's for those application efforts that the additional funding to our division has been made, and we have Mr. Logan Rappe working in that field.

M: Well, where do you fit into this? I mean, what does the Governor want you
to do? As far as this disaster relief and working with the FDAA?

W: Well, my charge is to insure that the efforts of the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration have begun promptly, that the state agency responses required, and the state agency capabilities required are devoted to the operations during and immediately following the disaster.

M: Well, does that mean, then, that you're involved in setting up this individual assistance center and that sort of thing?

W: Involved to the degree that I was aware, I ascertained that it was going to happen, when, where. I didn't personally make the arrangements for it, no.

M: That's what I mean, but you did have a certain role, state assignment to see that that was going on properly.

W: Yes. Another interesting aspect of the evacuation operation was that the City of Loveland and the school system in Loveland set up in the high school a evacuation refugee center, which they staffed, which they began the elements of identifying persons recovered, and established another listing of persons thought to be missing, and that was initially operated in the high school up there.

Of course, they assisted in feeding and permitting persons to rest and sleep in that area, during the emergency phase of the operation, and it was done very wholesomely by the Loveland community, I think. And Loveland responded very, very favorably to this circumstance.

Then as time went on, the extent of the identification of missing persons and the identification of those thought to be missing, to be compared with those that had actually been evacuated or recovered, became quite a sophisticated operation. At the morgue, as I said, initially it was managed and staffed by the people of Loveland at the high school.
As the capability became present in the operation of the Red Cross, the Red Cross assumed that function and began working it in connection with their center here in Denver. And their communications to their center here in Denver was a rather interesting aspect of that operation, also.

M: Yes.

W: But then eventually, as the massiveness of it scaled down, it moved to the morgue and became primarily one there, of course, of identifying to the listings of missing persons, those persons identified in the body identification system.

M: Yes. Okay. Does this mean that even today, here we are on December 13, you're still involved in this disaster?

W: Yes, I'm still involved in the disaster. Probably will be in the recovery to public agencies for another nine months.

There are substantial, the whole process of this, applying for Federal Disaster Relief funds, ascertaining that the work for which they've applied has been accomplished, the federal audit of the various disbursements has to be accomplished, and we're estimating that it will be perhaps nine months or more yet before all that is accomplished for all of that.

There's some thirty-eight applications from public agencies being processed at the present time. Some of them have been fully paid, and only remain to have the terminal audits completed on them.

M: So that disaster really has long range effects, doesn't it?

W: Yes.

M: I mean, if you want to call them bureaucratic effects if nothing else, the processing of all those papers and applications and being sure that the money is allocated properly.

W: Well, I don't know of any public officials today that are willing to put
money out without having some kind of a record that, with which they can substantiate that they were trustees of that money.

M: Yes. So the disaster really, in a way, is still reaching out. And the costs are still mounting.

Okay. Let me ask you kind of a summation of something. Are there any sort of what you might call lessons, or things that you learned from this? Now you mentioned the CB element and how it might be better to have some organization there, so that they would have a higher capability. Are there any other sorts of lessons to be learned from this experience?

W: I think you learn lessons from every experience you undergo.

M: Right.

W: The effects of community planning, I think, are a constant thing that we must be alert to. The responsible people for organization under disaster conditions change as the elections come along, as time goes along, and we've got to be alert to the continuous need for people updating themselves and updating their plans and programs for disaster responses.

And I think in the Big Thompson, I think almost every official involved in it recognizes the sum value of prior planning, of some prior exercising that has taken place that has become a matter of their knowledge and their experience, which assisted their capability to make the Big Thompson Disaster evacuation recovery effort as well as it was.

M: Yes.

W: And that kind of thing has to be continuous and has to be participated in in every community. Not just those subject to floods; we have tornadoes in Colorado; we have forest fires in Colorado; we have foothills fires; we have deep, isolating snowstorms. I suggest that every community has it vulnerability to some kind of an emergency or disaster.
And the community officials in those communities have the responsibility of knowing what those vulnerabilities are, organizing their local resources to react in the event one of those vulnerabilities results in a disaster, and I think I'd be inclined to emphasize that from the matter of planning, from the matter of exercising, from the matter of knowing that responsible people are designated to do particular jobs in disaster circumstances.

M: Okay.

W: I think one of the important things that we learned out of Big Thompson is the need for validated warnings. And I suggest a validated warning in contrast to the warnings which were somewhat callously taken and somewhat, in some cases even ignored in the Big Thompson Canyon.

M: You mean, like the Sheriff telling somebody to get out and their not believing it or something.

W: Yes. Some way we've got to create a means of validating warnings so that people will understand what their response should be when they're warned.

We're doing, I think, a very reasonable job in this field in the Civil Defense effort, we're doing this, perhaps with a higher degree of continuity, community to community and state by state, than in any other kind of disaster operation, because it is a national program in this field.

M: Yes.

W: I think we have to find ways of bringing the volunteer communication capabilities into a coordinated effort, and we've been working a great deal in this field in some of the after-action critiques and after action-reporting that's been going on.

I've already mentioned this need for identifying volunteer capabilities and determining the authenticity of those capabilities.

M: Did Civil Defense play any kind of role in the Big Thompson? I haven't
run across much on that.

W: Well, there's the Civil Defense director for Larimer County . . . was actively involved in the Sheriff's command post operation and assisted within the capabilities of his resources. Remember the Civil Defense organization is a coordinating agency; they have very few resources of their own.

M: Sure.

W: And the Civil Defense state operation at the state emergency operating center at Camp George West was complete. It was responsible for a substantial amount of the logistical support that was not available to the county.

M: Okay, and in the same line of lessons learned, you mentioned pre-planning and community planning. Do you have any impressions about what you do with a canyon like that? And land use, do you let people live along the riverbank? And if you don't do that, what do you do about the rest of the canyons in the state of Colorado? Which are letting people live along the riverbank?

W: Well, that's a political problem. Of course, it's been addressed by the Governor and the officials of Larimer County in that particular instance.

M: Yes.

W: The awareness of potential disasters is something that people should be conscious as they dispose themselves at various points in the state, and somehow, I feel that perhaps that we're a little, a little too sophisticated sometimes, in this effort. We understand there's a vulnerability, but "it couldn't happen to me."

M: (Laughing.) Yes, right.

W: And some of our effort, community by community, I think, has to reinforce the validity of a particular vulnerability in that area, and that's perhaps a community function. Certainly, as it reaches the community of the
state, it becomes a state function, and there is, there are mechanisms through which it can be addressed.

M: Yes. That sure is a problem.

W: We have a potential for Big Thompson disasters in almost every one of the outlet canyons down the Front Range here.

M: Does that worry you?

W: Yes.

M: I mean, Boulder Creek, or something like that. And that has the potential of being even a greater disaster than the Big Thompson.

W: Yes.

M: So . . . ?

W: And the Boulder officials are, I think, very alert to it. As a result of Big Thompson. Not that they were insensitive to it before at all, but I think they're more alert.

M: Sure underscores it, doesn't it?

W: Yes.

M: Okay, any other sorts of lessons to be drawn from this experience that you've come up with? You mention quite a few.

W: Well, I think there's no substitute for a coordinated effort in responding to disaster conditions. I think that's a pretty general statement, but it means examining quickly where the damage is, what the disaster is, determining what has happened, and when you determine what has happened, then you can begin applying resources to recovery, and to assisting recovery, and it's essential that that be carefully coordinated by knowledgeable people.

M: Okay. This is kind of an awkward question. But looking at the Big Thompson, are you pretty satisfied with the way that was handled? You know, there's always room for improvement, like communications and things like this.
But overall, are you pretty satisfied with what went on? The response, the people, the National Guard, working with the Sheriff? Rescuing people and so forth? What do you think about that?

W: I think it was quite successful.

M: Okay. How do you measure that? What kind of indication do you get that this is true?

W: Well, I think in today's world one of the best indicators we have is the kind of criticism and the kind of assistances that develop out of the affected community and out of those affected. And I think, when we draw and consider that kind of criticism as being formulative of what our efforts should be, I think that you have some evaluation of the success of the project.

M: Right, right.

W: The fact that there was substantial federal recovery to the persons damaged in this situation, I think, has to some degree mitigated the terrible aspects of the disaster. Certainly it's been terrible for many others.

M: Terrible.

W: From which no recovery can be expected.

M: Yes, yes. Okay. Anything else you think we ought to throw into this interview? Something I've missed, something that stuck in your mind? Anything significant? Anything you want to add?

W: Well, I think I would be inclined to reinforce this distinct need for determining plans, exercising plans, and requiring cooperation of response agencies.

M: Okay.

W: From a public administrative, administrator's, viewpoint.

M: Okay, thank you very much.
(Pause in tape, then re-enter)
Okay, it's going now, and that microphone will get you, and the question is involving the media, and you had mentioned that this is one of the first disasters in which there was this major media interest in Colorado.

W: Yes, we discovered that there was a large national interest in the Big Thompson, primarily because a lot of public officials and a lot of people had visited the Big Thompson in the tourist aspects of the Big Thompson. Over a number of years, and because of the national interest in the disaster, we had a flood of media representatives in the Big Thompson area, trying to ascertain and to find out what had happened, and to ascertain how resources were being applied to alleviate the disaster, and I think one of the lessons that may be a result of this is to point up again the need for a good, sound interchange of information between the people in authority and the media, and a respect on the part of those people in the media that the people in control have a responsibility for operating, and must be permitted to operate, and this may require in the future information and assisting the media and allowing the media to assist in the total communications and information flow. I think it's a very important part of the disaster operation, and certainly, it's one that if a disaster happens in the United States, it's going to be immediately impacted by media requirements.
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