

NARRATIVE

The Kentucky Division of Forestry district office at Hazard Kentucky received a phone call on Tuesday night October 29, 1991 approximately 10:50 p.m. from the dispatcher at Neon, Kentucky. The dispatcher informed us that there was a fire in Hogg Hollow at Neon, Kentucky. The Neon and Mayking Volunteer fire departments were responding to the scene. The Division of Forestry dispatcher advised that all Letcher County forestry crews were tied up on other fires at the time. The fire department dispatcher was told that a Division crew would be sent to the scene as soon as a crew became available. The dispatcher was also told that the Division appreciated the volunteer fire departments cooperation and help in responding to the fire at Hogg Hollow.

The Hazard forestry office received a second call from the dispatcher at Neon Volunteer Fire Department about 11:00 p.m. They said that the fire department urgently needed fire rakes. They were told that possibly rakes could be delivered to Neon from the Sandlick or Whitesburg Volunteer Fire Departments.

The Letcher County guard and the Unit Ranger for Letcher County were working a fire on Dry Creek on the Knott-Floyd County line. They were informed of the Hogg Hollow fire in Letcher County at 11:00 p.m.

One of the seasonal crewleaders for the Kentucky Division of Forestry came off the Smoot Creek fire about 11:30 p.m. The Hazard forestry office told the crewleader of the Hogg Hollow fire and he was asked to respond to that fire.

The Unit Ranger and Letcher County guard were advised that the Letcher County crewleader was in route to Hogg Hollow as of 11:50 p.m.

The Letcher County guard left from the Knott County fire en route to Hogg Hollow at approximately midnight.

The accident happened before the seasonal crewleader or the Letcher County guard arrived at the scene.

The Hazard Office received a third call from the dispatcher at Neon at 11:30 p.m. The dispatch said that the Hogg Hollow

The district forester for the Kentucky River District, Kentucky Division of Forestry, David Peercy, received a phone call from Unit Ranger Howard Ratliff, Jr. approximately 3:10 a.m., October 30, 1991. Ratliff informed the District Forester that there had been an accident on the Hogg Hollow fire. One firefighter was dead and three were injured. Ratliff advised that both the seasonal crewleader and the Letcher County guard with firefighting crews from the Kentucky Division of Forestry were at the scene. However, the decision was made not to put the crews in the woods until daylight and until the situation was investigated. This discussion with Unit Ranger Ratliff was forwarded by District Forester David Peercy via phone call to Jerry Zoochi, Regional Forester at Frankfort, Kentucky at approximately 3:15 a.m., October 30, 1991.

Unit Ranger Howard Ratliff and District Forester David Peercy of the Kentucky Division of Forestry arrived at the Neon Volunteer Fire Department office approximately 9:40 a.m. on October 30, 1991. The Kentucky State Police and the State Police Arson Investigator were already at the scene and much of the investigation had been carried out.

Hogg Hollow is a narrow one lane road that runs northwest off of Highway 317 in Neon, Kentucky. The road services several homes and an active deep mine at the head of the hollow.

The fire started on the ditch line bank. The bank faces toward the south-southwest. The bank leads directly into the woods. The fuel on the bank consisted of leaves and small twigs and branches from a variety of hardwood species such as oak, hickory, beach, maple, etc. No homes appeared to be in a direct line of sight to where the fire started.

The Neon Fire Department said that they received the fire call between 10:15 and 10:30 p.m. on Tuesday October 29, 1991. They figured the accident occurred about 11:15 -11:30 p.m. on October 29, 1991.

The Jackson Weather Service reported a temperature of 66°, humidity at 37% and east winds at 10 m.p.h. at 10:00 p.m. on Oct. 29, 1991. The temperature was 65°, humidity 38% and east winds at 8 m.p.h. at 11:00 p.m.

Ratliff and Peercy examined the scene of fire origin with the State Police trooper and the state arson investigator. Peercy and Ratliff along with Neon Fire Department Chief Carter Bevins, then, climbed up the roadside bank and examined the area which was burned and looked at the exact spot where the accident happened.

There were two flats or benches in the area. The second bench was approximately 60 feet wide. Behind this second bench area was a very steep slope leading up to the top of the spur ridge. The victims were found at the back of the second bench area. Apparently they had tried to escape straight in line with the advancing fire. However, the slope was too steep to climb and also, there were the remains of an old wire fence just a few feet up from the base of the slope. No doubt this hindered their escape efforts.

The fire scars on the base of the tree indicated the fire was not real hot as it left the ditch bank and entered the woods. The fire scars were not in excess of three feet or so even as the fire advanced up the slope to the last bench area. However, when the fire reached the last bench area, fire scars were observed to reach 20-25 feet up the back sides of the trees. This indicated that the fire was extremely hot at that time and place.

A small drain lead all the way up the slope from the Hogg Hollow road. Behind the last bench area was an extremely steep slope. It is believed that possibly some incomplete combustion had occurred on the lower slopes with a build up of gases. These gases were essentially channeled into the bench area and then blocked by the rugged slope. As more air was moved into the bench area by means of wind currents there was rapid combustion and an extremely hot fire.

The forest fire was contained by Kentucky Division of Forestry crews on Wednesday October 30, 1991 in the early evening hours.

The four firefighters in the accident were the first firemen to respond to the fire. Other firemen did respond after the initial four arrived.

The four firemen - members of the Neon Volunteer Fire Department were:

John Emerson Spangler - SSN

John R. Adams - SSN

David Paul Polis II - SSN

Robert Wayne Cox - SSN

Emerson died at the scene;

Adams - admitted to UK Med Center - severe burns -45-60%

Polis - Whitesburg A.R.H. - 2nd degree burns; abrasions

Cox -Whitesburg A.R.H. - 2nd degree burns; back pain.



Neon Volunteer Fire Department

P. O. Box 156
Neon, Kentucky 41840
Phone 855-7303

On 10-29-91 at approx. 10:30 p.m. a call was received at the Neon Volunteer Fire Department from a resident of the Hogg Hollow Section of Fleming-Neon reporting a Brush Fire.

The Forestry Division was notified but said their crews were tied up on other fires,

The Appropriate alarms were sounded and Firefighters Mike Baker living at the beginning of the hollow arrived first on the scene and confirmed the fire thus an engine and personell responded to the scene.

Neon Volunteer Fire Department members John Adams, Robert Cox, David Polis Jr, Trey Quillen, and John Emerson Spangler whom had been aiding members of Mayking Station and heard the alarm sound and responded to the Hogg Hollow Brush Fire.

Returning from meetings in Hazard approx. 40 miles north of Neon were Asst. Chief of Rescue Thomas Haynes and Asst, Chief F.G.O. Sam W. Quillen, Jr.

Asst. Chief Haynes arriving first, immediatly made the call for addittional Fire Rakes which were brought to the scene by Jenkins P.D. Officer and Volunteer Firefighter.

The Fire was then burning in a V pattern on the Right side of the road covng approx. 1/4 acre with small flames and a mild flame spread.

Asst. Chief Quillen arrived on the scene and the work continued to contain the fire utilizing Fire Department protocal working in two man teams.

At approx. 11:15 a sudden change in wind speed and direction caused the fire to burn more rapid and intense and the call was given that there was a man down, Immediate Recue operations were began by on Scene personnel with additional personnel requested.



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Two Ambulances were dispatched immediatly from the Neon Station Responding immediatly was the Neon Police Department and Mayking Fire Department.

The First Firefighter Robert Cox was Located within Minutes and Immediatly Firefighter John Adams was located and was at that time the most severely injured.

Both men were removed from the forest to the awaiting ambulance and burn and shock treatment began.

David P. Polis Jr. was able to cross the top of the mountain even though he had suffered severe burns to his body. David Paul had managed to come off to the highway traveling approx. 3/4 mile.

All three men were transported to the Whitesburg Appalachain Hospital Emergency Room.

An Immediate head count of Firefighters was taken to determine the number and indentity of any missing personnel. The search continued and the count indentified still missing John Emerson Spangler a Firefighter with the Neon Volunteer Fire Department as the search and rescue work continued additional personnel from Neon Volunteer Fire Department and Whitesburg fire department and Jenkins Fire Department were summoned to the scene to aid in the search for John (Emerson).

Chief Canter Bevins was out of town but notified of the injunie of the firefighters and immediatly began his travel back to Fleming-Neon.

At 2:04 a.m. on 10-30-91 John Emerson Spangler was located and the corner of Letcher County Winston Meade notified. Also notified due to the suspicious cause of the fire were Ky State Police Anson Invesigator James Bunnett, Forestry Division also notified were the proper state and federal agencies as to the fatality and injunies of the firefighters.



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The Three Firefighters Transported to Whitesburg ARH.

John Adams: Extensive burns to his face, head, neck, wrist, hands and lower extremities hospital estimates were 60-80% of his body. Treated and transferred to the University of Ky Burn Unit in Critical Condition.

Robert Cox: Admitted to WARH with severe burns to lower legs face and back pain.

David P. Polis: Admitted to WARH with severe burns to lower back and buttocks.

During Interviewing eye witnesses to the magnitude of the fire during the increase of the wind speed and change of direction their accounts are, it looked like a fire tornado and lasted only seconds and then a cry for help from Robert.

Robert and David both say that they believe that Emerson could have made it out, but he stayed behind to give assistance to John and Robert because the direction they had ran was very steep to climb and the fire was advancing quickly.

There is no evidence of any misconduct or negligence on the part of any Officer or Firefighter on the scene.

The cause of the Fire is still under investigation by the Kentucky State Police and Forestry Division.