

Written History – CAPT Robert B. Workman AvNumber 914

Vermillion Dam, Ohio SAR Case Summary

During 3 – 7 July 1969 a strong weather front blanketed the eastern Great Lakes and the North East. Within the front were an unusual number of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. CCGD9 RCC in Cleveland was overwhelmed with over 200 overdue vessels and distress calls.

At 2246, July 4th I departed CGAS Brooklyn for Buffalo, NY in HH52A 1443 with copilot Glenn Serotsky and crew AD1 B. Castro and AD2 J.E. Mason. HH3F 1469 also departed with two crews lead by pilot Paul Resnick. Night and IFR conditions with occasional moderate turbulence and heavy rain were encountered as we approached Allentown, PA. The HH3F was running well ahead of us dodging heavy cells with hail using their weather radar. Paul kept us informed of cell locations until their helo was out of range. FAA weather information was marginal, so we were glad to have Paul's data. Turbulence increased as we crossed the mountains. After fighting strong headwinds, and knowing we could not make Elmira, NY, we landed at Wilkes Barre airport at 0144. After fueling and a detailed weather brief, we departed 0232 and headed in and out of clouds, rain and increasing headwinds for Elmira. It was civil twilight an hour past Elmira, with 45 knot headwinds when it became obvious that fuel would be critical if flight was continued to Buffalo. We returned to Elmira for fuel at 0552. Upon arrival I learned that HH3F 1469 had been diverted from Buffalo to Cleveland by CCGD9 RCC, and that RCC wanted us to divert to Cleveland also. We departed Elmira 0630 on a direct course over the mountains to Erie International Airport. Conditions were 300 foot overcast ceiling and 1 to 3 miles visibility in rain and fog. 45 knot headwinds persisted. We arrived at Erie International at 1002, 5 July with 8.7 hours flight time, 11.1 hours crew mission time and no sleep for 28 hours. We CHOPed to CCGD9 and went to a motel for a little food and sleep. At 0400 the Station Chief at CG Station Erie relayed a phone call from RCC stating that HH3F 1469 was at the mouth of the Vermillion River, near Sandusky, Ohio, and had been hoisting people in distress from rooftops in the flooded town. The Vermillion River Dam had breached. In addition occupied trailers had been washed into Lake Erie. The 1469 had been flying all night and was reaching fatigue and fuel limits. We were asked to relieve 1469 as soon as possible. We were airborne at 0504 and conducted a track line search for debris and signs of distress 5 miles off shore for the 110 miles from Erie to Vermillion. Weather reroute was 400 foot obscured ceiling with 2 miles visibility in fog.

We arrived at Vermillion 0603 and landed in a football stadium next to the 1469. A nearby church was acting as a disaster control receiving center. We received a briefing from the pilots of the 1469 and a map of the city from the local police. A hoistable litter was transferred from the 1469 to our helo. I left AD2 Mason at the stadium to coordinate CG efforts on the ground with local authorities and departed the stadium at 0604. A hasty departure was required since the local authorities were concerned about one family in a house in danger of breaking-up. One of the family members had sustained a broken hip and was not ambulatory. Further briefing from the 1469 was made by radio as they departed scene. A large oak tree grew next to the house with its canopy covering the entire roof. A tall antenna and a circular wind flow mixed with up and down drafts hampered hoisting. A minimum 70 foot hoist was required with the fuselage pushed down into the tree's canopy so the tree limbs were spread for the basket or litter to have a clear path. Further information revealed that the occupants of the house were in a state of shock and that they were not reacting normally. My copilot, Glen Serotsky, with a portable radio, was lowered to the roof top to further assess the situation and to prepare the injured woman and the others for hoisting. Five people and their three dogs were hoisted to safety without incident due to Glen's efforts and presence. After retrieving Glenn from the roof top we debarked the survivors to local police at the stadium. Six additional people were recovered from similar tree covered roof tops by hoist prior to departure for fuel at 0821. Since RCC still had many active cases with unknown locations, we conducted a trackline search on off shore portions of the river mouth and along Lake Erie shoreline to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. We landed at 0838, fueled and departed 11 minutes later. Returning to the scene, we conducted a search 10 miles up river. Since there were no signs of distress, we returned to the houses at the mouth of the river and continued to hoist people in danger. Five more were hoisted from tree covered rooftops. At 1024 we landed at the football stadium and assumed a "Ready Alert" status to evacuate MEDICOS since the town was cut off from medical facilities by flooding. The weather never improved to more than a 400 foot obscured ceiling with 1 to 2 miles visibility in rain and fog. At 1320 local police confirmed that emergency

medical centers had been established and that no one appeared to be in immediate danger requiring helo evacuation. We departed Vermilion at 1330 for Burk Lakefront Airport in Cleveland and for crew rest.

We departed for CGAS Brooklyn at 1032, 7 July and CHOPed to CCGD3. We spent the night at Wilkes Barre, PA due to impassable weather along the mountain ridges and at destination. After 85 hours, we had flown 21.2 hours, had an additional 31.1 hours crew mission time, 14 sorties and 16 injured people or persons in immediate danger evacuated.