

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of informant Major Chris Mechling , 109 Engr Bn.  
Address Sturgis, South Dakota  
Date of Interview June 29, 1972  
Name of Researcher O. A. Rothlisberger  
Others Present \_\_\_\_\_  
Location of Interview National Guard Armory, Sturgis, South Dakota  
Added Notes \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Headings under which you feel this interview should be filed:

National Guard Rescue Operations, Rapid City Flood; Draining and Demolition of  
dam in Deadman's Creek above Sturgis.

Demographic Information on Informant

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex M County Meade  
Socio-economic status \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation National Guard, 109 Engr Bn, Staff  
Education \_\_\_\_\_  
Religion \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_  
Where? \_\_\_\_\_  
From where? \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of Moves in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_ Reasons for move.: \_\_\_\_\_

- Q. This afternoon I'm talking to Major Chris Mechling, 109th Engineering Battalion. Major Mechling, you are a resident of Sturgis, South Dakota, I believe.
- A. That's correct.
- Q. All right. And your unit or battalion, the 109th, was in camp at the time of the flooding that occurred in Rapid City, and I guess there was some here in Sturgis as well, was there not?
- A. No, the troops were at Rapid City, Robait Lake, and we had one unit at Camp Grafton, North Dakota, which we called back the night of the flood.
- Q. Oh, I see. I see. Now was the, could you tell me very quickly then, what units were where?
- A. 842nd Engineer company was located at Robait doing projects for the Forest Service; the 214th Engineer company was at Robait also, supporting the 842nd; and the 211th Engineer panel bridge company was at Camp Grafton, North Dakota.
- Q. I see. Now Robait, that, that's here in. . . .
- A. That's located up above Lead and Deadwood, between Lead and Deadwood and Pactola Lake, on Highway 385.
- Q. All right, well, you tell us then, if you can Major, what your role, what the role of the 109th was when this crisis situation developed then.
- A. Well, of course, the flood hit Rapid City on Friday evening and most of our personnel were on leave. . . . (Phone rings, pause in taping.)
- Q. Okay, Major, go ahead with your story.
- A. As I stated, most of the personnel were on leave. We had planned a long weekend. Most of the troops had left approximately 1600 on Friday, the 9th. I myself was about ready to depart Rapid City when I was called by Colonel (Lemasters) to report to the emergency operations center at state headquarters,

and was told at that time to takeover the emergency operations center until we could be relieved by other troops at a later date.

Q. Major, could you, could you explain this emergency operation center a bit for us, is it a unit or a special. . . ?

A. We are set up in five districts in the state of South Dakota, the same as the Highway Patrol is. And these five districts each have emergency operations center and a certain amount of troops and equipment that are assigned to that area. And during the time of the emergency, of course, the emergency operations center is geared so that it can work with the highway patrols, radios and gives us back up all the way, and all agencies are called in; Red Cross, whatever it might be, and it's just a center that can run the show from one area.

Q. Okay.

A. Immediately upon getting the report from Colonel Lemaster, I phoned the KOTA radio and television and the other station in Rapid City and had them start notifying the people in the lower areas to get out. And about 1900 hours we had approximately 40 or 50 people returning back to Camp Rapid. We sent out to recons, one team headed by Captain Knapp, Cleghorn Canyon, Highway 40, to see what was coming down there. And another crew headed by Captain Mallow went up Nemo Road. Very unfortunate on this particular recon patrol, we lost two guardsmen. Who were engaged in saving the lives of some people. All through the night, Friday night, and all through the day, Saturday, until about four o'clock in the afternoon, our headquarters was engaged in running the EOC, and I don't believe there was a call that wasn't answered by somebody. We dispatched teams immediately upon call. At approximately 1600 hours on Saturday the 109th Engineer group took over the EOC and we were relieved to go back to our own

headquarters. Approximately 1030 hours on the morning of the 11th of June, I was called back again to the EOC and was told to get on the helicopter with Lieutenant Colonel Austin from the Corps of Engineers to come to Sturgis and look at the Fort Meade Dam which is located in Dead Man Canyon, approximately 4 and one half miles southwest of Sturgis, and this dam had been (topped) and was causing a threat to the people of Sturgis who could very well be in more danger if the dam would give out.

Q. \_\_\_\_\_ water was flowing over the top of the dam at this point?

A. Approximately two foot of topping over the complete dam was going on at this time. Upon flying over the area I found out upon landing that Captain Robert Daily from (group) had already went to the area on foot to find some type of

road to get there with equipment. Colonel Austin and myself quickly formulated a plan and from there on the following actions were taken. On 11 June we asked for and received two B-7 dozers and we started to make a trail to the threatened dam site southwest of Sturgis. The Corps of Engineers were requested to bring in large pumps for the operation. All available small pumps in the area were

placed in immediately pumping action by 1800 hours. From this time on, all pumps were run continuously 24 hours a day. At this time we requested two one-

quarter ton vehicles, one three-quarter ton vehicle and two one, two and a half ton vehicles and ten men from the Rapid City area for continued work on the road so that we could get the pumps in when they arrived. On 13 June operations

started to cut the spillway down to let out more water and to ease the tension on the dam. Requested two compressors and one wrecker from Camp Rapid, which we received and put into operation by 1100 hours. There were six Civil

Defense 1500 gallon per minute pumps flown in from Kansas City with one technician,

and these were all in by 2400 hours, or midnight on 13 June, and on 14 June, the first thing of course we did was to take these large pumps up and place them on the sides and on the face of the dam and we were pumping at full capacity by 1 o'clock in the afternoon on the 14th. We also continued work on the spillway during this day, and we requested from the EOC at this time a phone line which was installed by 1400 hours that afternoon. A plan to blow out the cover or damaged part of the dam was prepared, and explosives were on the site by 1900 hours that night. Now, this was in case of emergency and only to be used in case of emergency. If no water was coming, we wanted to rid the area of the dam so that a larger wall of water would not be coming toward Sturgis. On 15 June we continued work of the spillway and started work upstream to rechannel the incoming water to the spillway and away from the dam. This was accomplished by 1500 hours. It was realized by this time that pumping operations were going to be hampered, as the water was lowered because Civil Defense pumps had only about 15 foot of suction capacity. We again contacted the emergency operation center and asked for a light tactical raft in an attempt to place pumps on the receding water to continue pumping operations. At this time we built a shelf with dozers on the east side of the dam, fifteen feet below the top edge of the dam and two of the large Civil Defense pumps were lowered to this level to continue pumping operations. On 16 June, the light tactical raft was received, constructed, and two Civil Defense pumps placed on the raft and floated onto the face of the dam to continue pumping operations. Work was continued on lowering and widening the spillway. On the 17th, 18th, and 19th of June, all of the above stated operations were continued. On 20 June, a rough train crane was requested and received and place on the face of the dam to lower fuel

to the pumps on the light tactical raft and also was used later to lift the pumps from the light tactical raft and the light tactical raft itself from the water. Late on 20 June it was realized that pumping action would have to cease and actions for removal of all Guard and Civil Defense equipment was started so they would be clear of the area during demolition and the damage to half of the dam. On 21 June an additional 16 men were received to help with drilling the holes in the dam and filling the sandbags for the demolition action. A new road was cut down the spillway and along the creek bottom to take out all equipment as a spillway road at this time could not be reached because it had been cut to an additional depth of 14 foot and widened to widths of 50 feet. On 22 June, all engineer and Civil Defense equipment had been evacuated to the (Owen Ness) yard at Sturgis by 1000 hours. Continued work on the preparation for demolition. A total of 3000 pounds of explosives had been delivered to the site and were placed by 2100 hours, 2100 hours this date. On 23 of June, the wire was laid out upstream from the dam for a distance of one mile for the electrical \_\_\_\_\_ charge. Completion of hooking up detonation cord chain for explosives was completed, and all sandbags were placed on the charges. The damaged portion of the dam was blown out at 1215 hours. The wire was rolled up and then returned to the (Owen Ness) for farm inventory on the Civil Defense equipment. And 24 June, of course, the job on the Fort Meade dam had been completed, and the Guardsmen were returned to Rapid City for pay and excusal at that time. Now they comment here that this project was in support of the Corps of Engineers and all personnel from the Corps were very helpful and very easy to work with.

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- A. There was many Verteran's Administration, Forest Service, and county and civil officials that were also working on coordination with this project. All fuel for the project was from Guard or city sources, the food to feed the Guardsmen was procured at local restuarants and the on-site food was provided by Red Cross and Salvation Army. I would not attempt to try and list the personnel or all the Guard units involved in this project, as they were dispatched from the Guard EOC at Camp Rapid as required and as available. I would say that all personnel involved, Engineer, Artillery, or civilian pitched in and performed at a degree above and beyond that which would usually be asked of anyone and the threatened dam was taken care of without an incident or an accident. And I'd also like to state that Captain Robert Daily of the 109th Engineer group assisted me completely throughout this operation and was really valuable. And that about sums up the Fort Meade Dam situation.
- Q. Okay, Major, now earlier you mentioned here that a couple of reconnaissance patrols were sent out. One, I believe, Captain Knapp commanded one. . . .
- A. That's right.
- Q. And Captain Mallow did you say?
- A. Yes, Captain Mallow of Rapid City.
- Q. Mm-hm. To Nemo. And you say a couple of men were lost on that patrol. Do you know anything about, about that patrol, or. . . ?
- A. Well, of course, we were getting many phone calls from areas, and the reports coming into EOC at that time. And it was pretty hard to determine what really was what and what was really happening and some of them were crank calls, we're sure, this always happens during times of emergency. And so it was felt by myself and the other people in charge of EOC, including General Corning, that

the only way we could find out what we really facing was to dispatch a recon patrol of each of the areas that we knew the flooding water was coming down. We had many calls for help in the area, both on Highway 40 and Nemo Road. Highway 40, we were very fortunate that Captain Knapp and his people were not some of them lost, because they did help a lot of people off of rooftops and back to the road and up to high ground. And Captain Mallow did the same thing on the Nemo Road, and in fact, the two people had rescued a lady and a small child and were attempting to get back down off a tree which was hanging over the creek when it let go and both men were, were thrown into the creek and we never gained sight of them again. And I'm not sure at this time whether the bodies had even been recovered.

- Q. I see. I see. Yes. Now, there was a threat of flooding here in Sturgis, indeed, there was some flooding here, some destruction. I looked at it around town the other morning. Were any of the Guardsmen on duty here in Sturgis, \_\_\_\_\_ any connection with the dam there in Dead Man's. . . ?
- A. Definitely. As soon as the word came out for all units to report back to Camp Rapid, of course the I-90 bridge was out, one of the bridges, and this area the people were told they could not get to Rapid, so approximately 20 to 30, and maybe even more, I don't have the exact number of Guardsmen that were home in this area, reported to city hall where Colonel Leonard Hertz, the group commander who also lives here happened to be. And Warrant Officer Murphy who works in this headquarters also happened to be. And with these people they started already to help the civilian population as best they could with evacuation. We received a call at EOC from Colonel Hertz that evening and asked for approximately ten trucks with teams if we could possibly help them out in the Sturgis



area. We dispatched these people and came from, most of that \_\_\_\_\_ from the 139th Transportation Battalion. And they arrived in Sturgis approximately an hour later by fording the creek where the bridge was out and they did, in fact, work all that night and part of the next day evacuating families from the creek, flooded areas in Sturgis.

Q. Now, you say the 139th Transportation Battalion, what are the home stations of that?

A. That would be Brookings, De Smet, Milbank, there's a couple others \_\_\_\_\_ eastern part of the state.

Q. I see.

A. This was one of the first emergency operations of such magnitude that I can recall, and I've been around for 26 years in this Guard business. But all facets of the Guard were not intact. Had it been a day earlier when, before the leave for the weekend had started, we could have done a lot more good. But those that were there really worked. And I would say that first night what few did get back in were tremendous, the way they reacted.

Q. All right, well, thank you, Major, I think you've given us a very valuable and informative tape here on the operations of the dam. Not only that but the manner in which the Guard was able to respond immediately to this situation, thank you very much.

A. Thank you.

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Education \_\_\_\_\_

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Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_

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OR All right. And your unit or battalion, the ~~109~~ 109th, was in camp at the time of the flooding that accured in Rapid City, and I guess there was some here in Sturgis as well, was there not?

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OR All right, well, you tell us then, if you can Mjor, what your role, what the role of the 109th was when this crisis situation developed then.

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OR Okay , Major, go ahead with your story.

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MECM Approximately two foot of topping over the complete dam was going on at this time.

Upon flying over the area I found out upon landing that Captain ~~in~~ Robert Daily from

OR (Group) had already went to the area on foot to find some type of road to get there with equipment. Colonel Ausfin and myself quickly formulated a plan and from there on the following actions were taken: on 11 June we asked for and received two B-7 dozers and we started to make a trail to the threatened dam site southwest of Stuggis. Dozers were on site by 1500 hours and started the proposed road. They worked all night, and on 12 June, by 1 o'clock in the afternoon, the road had been completed. The Corps of Engineers were requested to bring in large pumps for the operation. All available small pumps in the area were placed in immediate pumping action by 1800 hours. From this time on, all pumps were run continuously 24 hours a day. At this time we requested 2 one-quarter ton vehicles, one three-quarter ton vehicle and two one, two and a half ton vehicles and ten men from the Rapid city area for continued work on the road so that we could get the pumps in when they arrived. On 13 June operations started to cut the spillway down to let out more water and to ease the tension on the dam. Requested two compressors and one wrecker from Camp Rapid which we received and put into operation by 1100 hours. There were six Civil Defense defense 1500 gallon per minute pumps flown in from Kansas City with one technician, and these were all in by 2400 hours, or midnight on 13 June, and on 14 June, the first thing of course we did was to take these large pumps up and place them on the sides and on the face of the dam and we were pumping at full capacity by 1 o'clock in the afternoon on the fourteenth. We also continued work on the spillway during this day, and we requested from the EOC at this time a phone line which was installed by 1400 hours that afternoon. A plan to blow out the cover or damaged part of the dam was prepared, and explosives were on the site by 1900 hours that night. Now, this was in case of emergency and only to be used in case of emergency. If no water was coming, we wanted to rid the area of the dam so that a larger wall of water would not be coming toward Sturgis. On 15 June we continued work on the spillway and started work upstream to rechannel the incoming water to the spillway and away from the dam. This was accomplished by 1500 hours. It was realized by this time that pumping operations were going to be hampered, as the water was lowered because Civil Defense pumps had only about 15 foot of suction capacity. <sup>WE</sup> They again contacted the emergency operation center and asked for a light tactical raft in an attempt to place pumps on

Cw the receding water to continue pumping operations. At this time we built a shelf with dozers on the east side of the dam, fifteen feet below the top edge of the dam and two of the large Civil Defense pumps were lowered to this level to continue pumping operations. On 16 June, the light tactical raft was received, constructed, and two Civil Defense pumps placed on the raft and floated onto the face of the dam to continue pumping operations. Work was continued on lowering and widening the spillway. On the 17th, 18th and 19th of June, all of the above stated operations were continued. On 20 June, a rough train crane was requested and received and placed on the face of the dam to lower fuel to the pumps on the light tactical raft and also was used later to lift the pumps from the light tactical raft and the light tactical raft itself from the water. Late on 20 June it was realized that pumping action would have to cease and actions for removal of all Guard and Civil Defense Equipment was started so they would be clear of the area during demolition and the damage to half of the dam. On 21 June an additional 16 men were received to help with drilling the holes in the dam and filling the sandbags for the demolition action. A new road was cut down the spillway and along the creek bottom to take out all equipment as a spillway road at this time could not be reached because it had been cut to an additional depth of 14 feet and widened to widths of 50 feet. On 22 June, all engineer and civil defense equipment had been evacuated to the (Owen Ness) yard at Sturgis by 1000 hours. Continued work on the preparation for demolition. A total of 3000 pounds of explosives had been delivered to the site and were placed by 2100 hours, 2100 hours this date. On 23 of June, the wire was laid out upstream from the dam for a distance of one mile for the electrical charge. Completion of hooking up <sup>demolition</sup> demolition cord chains for explosives was completed, and all sandbags were replaced on the charges. The damaged portion of the dam was blown out at 1215 hours. The wire was rolled up and then returned to the (Owen Ness) for <sup>(own)</sup> inventory on the Civil Defense equipment. And 24 June (of course) the job on the Fort Meade dam had been completed, and the guardsmen were returned to Rapid City for pay and excusal at that time. Now they comment here that this project was in support of the Corps of Engineers and all personnel from the Corps were very helpful and very easy to work with.

OR All right.

CM ~~There~~ there was many ~~XXX~~ Veteran's Administration, Forest Service, county and civil officials' that were also working on coordination with this project. All fuel for the project was from Guard or city sources, the ~~food~~ food to feed the Guardsmen was procured at local restuarante and the on site food was provided by Red Cross and Salvation Army. I would not attempt to try and list the personnel or all the guard units involved in this project, as they were dispatched from the ~~guard~~ guard EOC at Camp Rapid as required and as available. I would say that all personnel involved, engineer, artillery or civilian, pitched in and performed at a degree above and beyond that which would usually be asked of anyone ~~when~~ <sup>and</sup> the threatened dam was taken care of without an incident or an accident. And I'd also like to state that Captain Robert Daily of the 109th Engineer group assisted me compeletely throughout this operation and was really valuable. And that about sums up the Fort Meade Dam situation.

OR Okay, Major, now earlier you mentioned here that a couple of reconnasaince patrols were sent out, one, I believe Captain Knapp commanded one..

CM That's right..

Or And Captain Mallow did you say?

CM Yes, Captäin Mallow of Rapid City.

Or Mm-hm. To Nemo. And you say a coupel of men were lost on that patrol. Do you know anything about, about that patrol, or..

CM Well, of course, we were getting many ~~fax~~ phone calls from areas, and the reports coming into EOC at that time. And it was pretty hard to determine what reallly was what and what was really happening and some of them were crank calls, we're sure, this always happens during times of emergency. And so it was ~~felt~~ <sup>felt</sup> by myself and other ~~XXXX~~ <sup>we</sup> people in charge of EOC, including General Corning, that the only way we could find out what we were really facing was to dispatch a recon patrol of each of the areas that we knew the flooding water was coming down. We had many calls for help in the area, both on highway 40 and Nemo Road. Highway 40, we were very fortunate that Captain Knapp and his people were not some of them lost, because they did help a lot of people off of rooftops and back to the road and up to high ground, and Captain Mallow did the same thing on the

CM Nemo Road, and in fact, the two people had rescued a lady and a small child and were attempting to get back down off a tree which was hanging over <sup>the</sup> creek when it let go and both men were , were thrown into the creek and we never gained sight of them again. And I'm not sure at this time whether the bodies have ~~even~~ been recovered.

OR I see. I see. Yes. Now, there was a threat of flooding here in Sturgis, <sup>(indeed)</sup> ~~maybe~~ there was ~~some~~ flooding here, some destruction, <sup>(I talked at it)</sup> around town <sup>the other morning</sup>. Were any of the guardsmen on duty here in Sturgis any connection with the dam there in Dead Man's..

CM Definitely. As soon as the word came out for all units to report back to Camp Rapid of course the I-90 bridge was out, one of the bridges, and this area the people were told they could not get to Rapid, so approximately 20 to 30 and maybe even more, I don't have the exact number of Guardsman that were home in this area reported to city hall where Colonel Leonard Hertz, the group ~~commander~~ who also lives here happened to be, and Warrant Officer Murphy who works in this headquarters also happened to be. And with these people they started already to help the civilian population as best they could with evacuation. We received a call at EOC from Colonel Hertz that evening and asked for approximately ten trucks with ~~teams~~ if we could possibly help them out in the Sturgis area. We dispatched these people and came from, most of that from the 139th Transportation Battalion. And they arrived in Sturgis approximately an hour later by fording the creek where the bridge was out and they did in fact, work all that night and part of the next day evacuating families from the creek , flooded areas in Sturgis.

OR Now, you say the 139th Transportation Battalion, what are the home stations of that?

CM That would be Brookings, De Smet, Milbank, there's a <sup>couple</sup> ~~couple~~ others eastern part of the state.

OR I see.

CM This was one of the first emergency operations of such magnitude that I can recall, and I've been around for 26 years in this Guard business. But all facets of the Guard were not intact. Had it been a day earlier when, before the leave for the weekend had started,



CM We could have done a lot more good. But those that were there really worked. And I would say that first night what few did get back in were tremendous, the way they reacted.

OR All right, well, thank you Major, I think you've given us a very valuable and informative tape here on the operations of the dam, not only that but the manner <sup>in</sup> ~~of~~ which the guard was able to respond immediagely to this situation, thank you very much.

CM Thank you.

(End of interview)