

Oak Ridge military reports on 1944 troop train wreck, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | June 12, 2007

Last week, we looked at the Army Service Report of the July 6, 1944, L&N troop train wreck at Highcliff, Tenn., which killed 35 and injured 98. This week, we will reprint the War Department report on the accident. This report, like last week's, was provided to me by Bill Sergeant, who was captain in the Army Service Forces stationed at the Manhattan District in Oak Ridge and was personally involved in rescue activity.

FROM: War Department, United States Engineer Office, Manhattan District, Clinton Engineer Works, Oak Ridge, Tenn.

SUBJECT: Report of Intelligence & Security Division Activities in Connection with Troop Train Derailment at Jellico, Tenn.

TO: Officer-in-Charge

1. Following is a summary report of the activities of the Intelligence and Security Division, Manhattan Engineer District, Oak Ridge, Tenn., in connection with troop train derailment which occurred near Jellico, Tenn., about 9 p.m. 6 July 1944. Report includes actions of 264th MP Co., and the Oak Ridge Fire Department.

2. At 11:40 p.m., 6 July 1944, Intelligence Duty Officer, Capt. C. L. Clark, was notified by District Officer of the Day, Lt. Berger, that a report had been received of a troop train derailment near Jellico, Tenn. Report was that a troop train on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, carrying about 500 troops, had been derailed about 9 p.m., a few miles from Jellico, Tenn., about 45 miles from Knoxville, Tenn., and that about 200 had been injured. Fire Chief H. H. Maples, of the Oak Ridge Fire Department, had received notice of the wreck a few minutes earlier, by a telephone call from the Knoxville Fire Department, and the Guard Officer, Major L. R. Block, received notice about the same time through a radio newscast.

3. Upon receipt of notice the following actions were taken:

a. All officers concerned were notified.

b. All Fire Department engine companies were alerted.

c. Three engine companies, with two engines, and one brush truck, and necessary emergency equipment, were dispatched to the scene of the derailment under control of Asst. Fire Chief Rudd, leaving Oak Ridge at 11:55 p.m.

d. One platoon of the 264 Military Police Company, under command of Major L. R. Block departed at 12:55 a.m., 7 July 1944 for the derailment, with a convoy of two radio police cars, two two-and-one-half ton trucks, one scout car and one Jeep.

4. After dispatch of Fire Department contingent and Military Police group the following actions were taken by the Intelligence & Security Division, under Major McLeod, Deputy Director:

a. The following persons were notified of the accident and the provisions for emergency aid being taken by Oak Ridge: Colonel Robert E. Myhrman, Chief District #1, Shelbyville, Tenn.; Special Agent in Charge John Ruggles, FBI, Knoxville, Tenn.; Col. Marsden, Executive Officer, Manhattan Engineer District; and Capt. Stone, 4th Service Command, Security and Intelligence Division Officer of the Day.

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5. The Oak Ridge Fire Department, under the direction of Capt. James W. Haley and Chief Maples, after the departure of the engine companies, made the following preparations for the handling of the injured.

a. Notified Maj. Ryan of the Oak Ridge Hospital, that two new fire halls would be available for use as emergency hospital wards if needed.

b. Assisted the hospital in procuring additional beds from the warehouse and setting these up.

c. Notified R. T. Barnett, Roane Anderson Safety Director, and requested that he make a survey of additional emergency lighting equipment available.

d. Notified Mr. M. E. Ridge of the District Office Safety section.

e. Alerted Tennessee Eastman, Clinton Laboratory and Carbide and Carbon Fire Departments to stand by for emergency duty.

6. Upon arrival at the scene of the derailment it was found that the accident had occurred on the L & N Railroad in Clear Fork Gorge, about five miles south of Jellico, Tenn. At that point the railroad is on the east side of the Clear Fork River, and about 60 feet above the stream bed, with U. S. Highway 25W on the opposite side of the stream and about the same height above the stream bed. The walls of the gorge are wooded, and very rocky and precipitous. The troop train consisted of 14 cars and contained 1,006 troops, and was proceeding south at the time of the accident. The engine, tender and five of the cars had been derailed and were piled on the stream bed. Two of the coaches had burned.

7. The Fire Department upon arrival, set up emergency lights, furnished hand torches, and assisted in the rescue work and first aid. The emergency equipment was used in transporting the wounded and dead across the river and up the side of the bluff to the highway. Water was urgently needed and this was provided from the booster tank on the brush truck. Shortly after the arrival, fire started in one of the couches and this was extinguished. Several of the firemen drove an ambulance, hauling wounded from Lake City, to Oak Ridge Hospital.

8. Troops of the Clinton Engineer Works arrived at the scene at 3:15 a.m., and relieved the State Highway Patrol in traffic direction, at their request. The troops were also used to guard the personal and government property recovered from the wreckage and to prevent numerous spectators from interfering with the progress of removing dead and injured from the coaches. These activities continued until Army withdrawal at 8 p.m., 10 July 1944, after all personal and government property and all bodies had been recovered.

9. Relations with the press were handled by Maj. Block, until the arrival of the Public Relations Officer of Manhattan Engineer District.

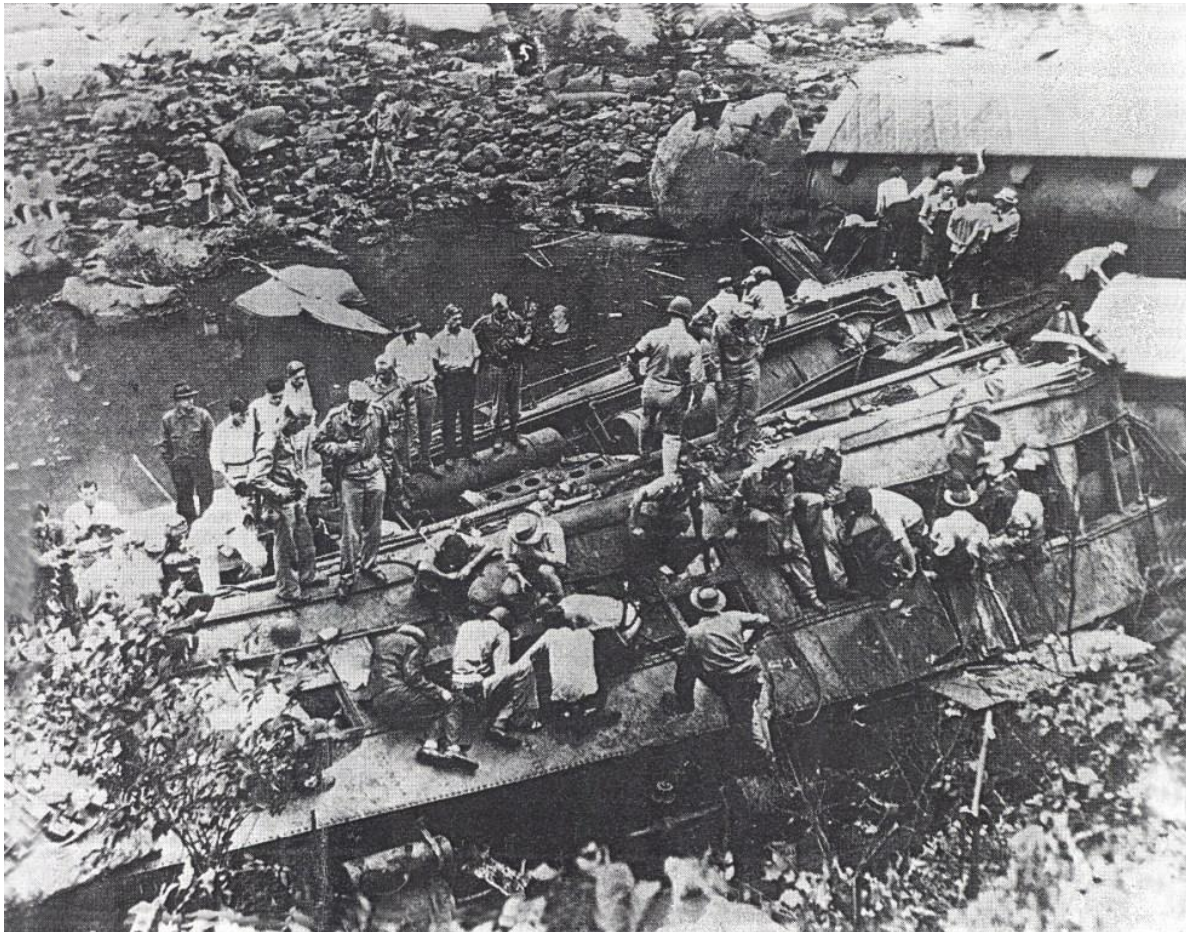
10. Military Police and medical detachments from Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., arrived about 4 a.m., 7 July 1944, with the Commanding Officer of that post. The CO directed the Guard Officer, Manhattan Engineer District to retain control of the area with the 264th Military Police Company and directed the Fort Oglethorpe Military Police detachment to return to their post.

11. A train was made up by the L&N Railroad to transport the wounded from the scene to Lake City, Tenn. Ambulances were provided at that point by Oak Ridge, to transport the wounded to the Oak Ridge Hospital. Fire Department Chief Maples lined up fire department personnel to act as alternate ambulance drivers if needed. Arrangements were made by the Intelligence & Security Division to expedite movement of ambulances by use of additional guard personnel at key traffic points.

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12. Last live victims were removed from the wreck at 11 a.m., 7 July 1944, and removal of all bodies was completed by 5:30 p.m. 9, July 1944. Troops were withdrawn at 8 p.m., 10 July 1944.



Work at the wreck continues into the morning of July 7, 1944, as 16-year-old Jim Tidwell, the first on the scene the night before, sits on a rock across the river, upper right background. He had spent all night helping with the rescue efforts.

As we continue the saga of the 1944 troop train wreck next week, we will look in more detail at what happened to the 16-year-old boy, Jim Tidwell, who was first at the scene — you will be amazed at what he did later in life regarding the train wreck. We will also hear from his son, Mark Tidwell.

We will look at some details of the book “She Jumped The Track” by John P. Ascher, and note the conclusion the author arrived at regarding the ultimate cause of the train wreck. More than the speed of the train may have been involved.

In addition, I recently interviewed 90-year-old Bertha Trammell, who still lives beside the railroad track as it enters the “Jellico Narrows” of the Clearfork River. We will hear about her memory of that night, and the impression she had when the locomotive came by her house.

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We will also hear a first-hand account of Leon Hatcher, still living in Oak Ridge, who drove the first bus bringing both dead and alive soldiers to Oak Ridge Hospital. The memory of hauling injured and dead soldiers over long and crooked roads continues to have an impact on him.