

# Oak Ridge military reports on 1944 troop train wreck, Part I

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | June 6, 2007

For the past two weeks, we have introduced the concept of Oak Ridge coming into existence among Appalachian communities and the relationship of mutual aid in response to disasters such as the July 6, 1944, L&N troop train wreck at Highcliff, Tenn. We have looked at the 35 deaths and 98 injuries and noted that Oak Ridge was involved in the response in a number of ways. We have also seen the FBI investigation of possible sabotage that resulted in a finding of no sabotage but also resulted in uncovering details of the potential reasons for the wreck.

This week we will explore further the Oak Ridge response by looking in detail at one of two reports created by the Manhattan Engineer District regarding their involvement in the response to the disaster. These reports were provided me by Bill Sergeant, who personally supported the troop train wreck as a captain in the Army Services Forces stationed at the Manhattan District in Oak Ridge.

Here is the Army Service Force's report:

From: Army Service Forces, United States Engineer Office, Manhattan District, Oak Ridge, Tenn.

11 July, 1944

Subject: Troop Train Disaster at Jellico, Tenn.

To: Chief, Intelligence Division, Manhattan Engineer District, Oak Ridge, Tenn.

1. At 11:45 p.m. on 6 July 1944, C. T. Vettel notified the Guard Officer, Maj. L. R. Block, of a commercial radio report concerning the wreck of a troop train near Jellico, Tenn. Maj. R. J. McLeod, Deputy District intelligence officer, was notified and the following officers were ordered to meet the Guard Officer at Guard Headquarters: Capt. G. W. Barnes, Capt. W. T. Sergeant, 1st Lt. A. J. Hayes, 2nd Lt. T.H. Leahy. On orders of Maj. Block, Capt. Barnes readied one platoon of the 264th M. P. Company and at 12:55 a.m. 7 July 1944, a convoy of two radio police cars, two 2-1/2 ton cargo trucks, one scout car, and one Jeep cleared the Elza Gate of the Clinton Engineer Works.

2. Troops of the M.E.D. reached the scene of the wreck at 3:15 a.m. and relieved the State Highway Patrol in traffic direction at their request. 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.

3. Clearance was given very shortly to newspapermen and photographers. The public relations officer of the M.E.D. was notified and came to the scene to supervise this activity.

4. At 4 a.m., 7 July 1944, a detachment of Military Police from Ft. Oglethorpe, Ga., arrived under the command of Maj. Hickey (initials unknown). They were followed shortly by the Commanding Officer, Ft. Oglethorpe, Ga. Since Military Police from the M.E.D. had arrived first and were from a closer Military Area, the C.O., Ft. Oglethorpe, directed the guard officer, M.E.D., to assume charge and the Oglethorpe M.P.s were returned to their post. Medical officers and ambulances remained to render assistance.

5. Last live victim was removed from the wreck at 11 p.m., 7 July 1944, and arrangements were then made for the removal of the wrecked coaches by the L & N Railroad in order to recover other bodies trapped within the wreckage. Work continued until 11:30 p.m., when a Mr. Howard of the train crew ordered operations to cease and all spotlights to be turned off. Efforts were made by the M.P. officers to have the train crew continue to work but with no success. Request was made of Mr. Howard to leave the spotlights on in order that the personal and government property in the wreckage could be protected by the Military Police; but this request was refused. As a result of these actions, progress in removing bodies was delayed for at least eight hours and security of property was hampered by lack of lighting facilities.

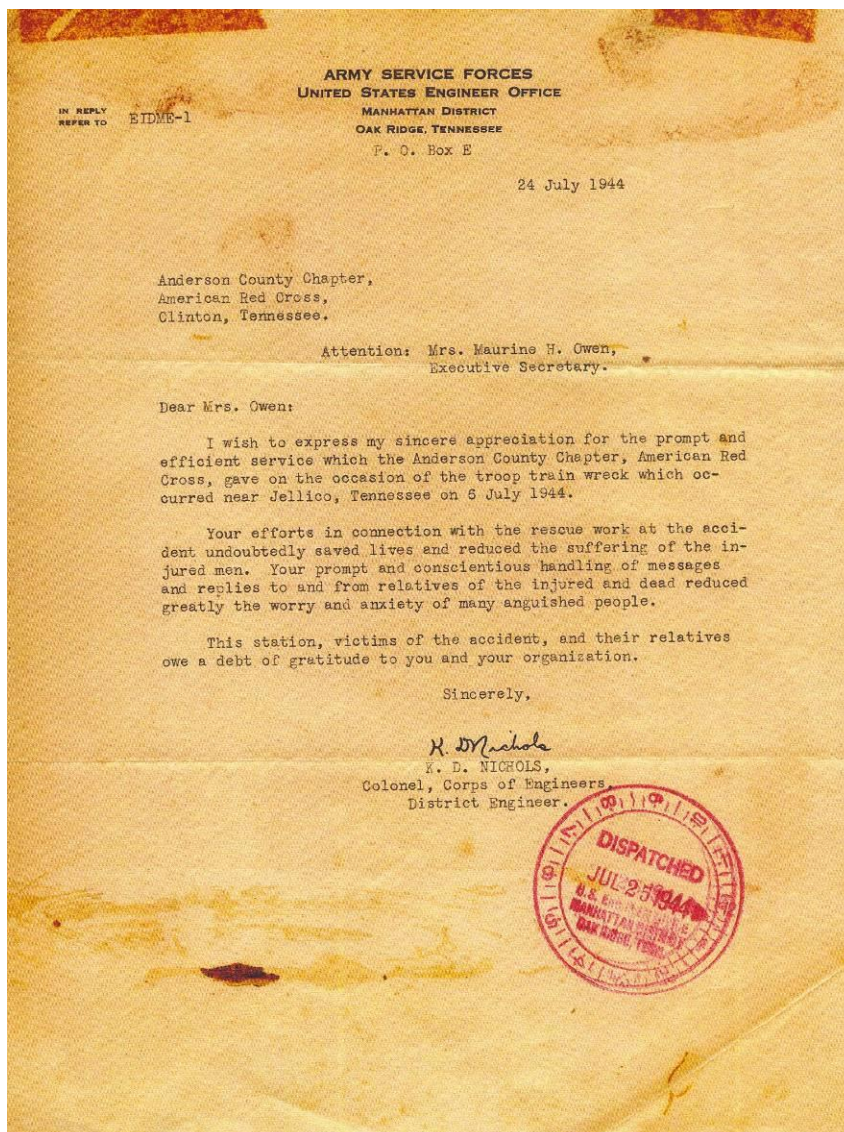
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6. On 8 July 1944, two cranes were returned to the scene but little was accomplished as the wrecking crew was only able to work for a few hours at a time before leaving to permit both north and south bound trains through. No progress was made until late in the afternoon of 8 July 1944 when the cranes removed part of one coach to permit the recovery of five additional bodies.

7. On 9 July 1944, the train wrecking crew arrived at 7:30 a.m. and remained until 5:30 p.m. and all bodies were recovered. Train traffic was rerouted during the day permitting the crew to work uninterrupted.

8. Many volunteers were on hand to lend assistance. The following named men were present almost continuously day and night and many volunteered for the most for the difficult tasks of removing bodies from the wreckage:



- Lee C. Ely, Service Motor Company, LaFollette, Tenn.;

- Hersel Treece, Service Motor Company, LaFollette;

- Leonard T. Ferguson, Service Motor Company; LaFollette;

- Arthur A. Ames, Route 3, Clinton, Tenn.;

- Fred Haynes, Route 1, Duff, Tenn.;

- Bill Hatmaker, Route 1, Duff;

- Fred Craig, Marion, Tenn.

9. The work of the Red Cross of Jellico, LaFollette, and Jacksboro was outstanding. Without their aid, the Military Police would have been faced with the difficult problem of messing. The cheerful assistance of volunteer Red Cross workers contributed greatly to efficiency of the military troops. Assistance in traffic control was also given by the State Highway Patrol, who cooperated in every way with the military authorities.

10. It is suggested that letters of commendation be written to all parties mentioned in

This is one of the letters of appreciation suggested by the Army Service Forces report and is written by Colonel Kenneth Nichols of the Manhattan Project Clinton Engineer Works

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paragraphs 8 and 9 for their help in this emergency.

11. At 8 p.m., 10 July 1944, all troops were withdrawn from the scene of the wreck and returned to the Clinton Engineer Works. All personal and government property and all bodies had been recovered at this time.

L. R. Block, Major, C. E., Guard Officer.

Next week we will publish the War Department report concerning the accident.