

After the Flood: The Shadyside, Ohio, Disaster

By—Hatch & Judy Graham
Contributing Editors

On the evening of June 14th, it was raining hard in eastern Ohio. In a 30- to 40-square-mile area of Belmont County, on the Ohio River, five and a half inches of rain reportedly fell in less than three hours.

Shadyside Fire Chief Mark Badia had his firemen out in the hollows with loudspeakers, warning residents of the Appalachian foothill community to evacuate. The National Weather Service had issued a flood watch, according to Associated Press, to indicate the possibility of flooding in low-lying areas, but not a flood warning, “which alerts residents to take shelter.”

Massive debris

Soon, the Shadyside firemen had to seek higher ground themselves as a 20- to 25-foot wall of water swept through the hollows of Wegee and Pipe creeks and 5 miles downstream into the Ohio River. “The Weather Service called it the once-in-a-thousand-year rainstorm,” reported Cecil Hypes, founder of West Virginia K-9 SAR, the first organized volunteer SAR dog unit to respond to the disaster. “The flood didn’t start at the head of the hollows as you would see in normal flooding situations,” he said. “The water actually amassed off the sides of the hollows.” As it came off the hillsides, it scoured out debris, which became trapped at bridges, temporarily damming the flow so that, when it broke loose, it burst downstream with a vengeance.

More than 100 homes and trailer homes were destroyed, according to wire services. One of Cecil’s teammates, Mary-Leavelle Colbert, described the scene: “Cars were tossed like toys and crushed or deposited atop 20-foot-high

piles of debris. Trees were uprooted, bridges and roads washed out.” At the bridges that held, news photos showed great logjams of trees, telephone poles, sheds, roofs of houses, vehicles. At Hannibal Dam, 25 miles below Shadyside, “it was a pile of debris about 8 feet thick, and at the width of the Ohio River, just probably a little over a mile (wide),” Chief Badia told us. “Three hundred feet upstream of the dam it was approximately a foot to 2 feet thick. It was compacted to the point you could walk on it. We’re speaking of big metal objects, a lot of trailers, sheet metal, and then covered with rocks.”

And amid the destruction, 10 people were dead and more than 50 others reported missing—some actually seen being swept away by the water, others simply unaccounted for. It kept raining off and on during the night, while neighbors tried to rescue neighbors. “That night, Shadyside firemen saved 13 people from the flood waters,” Mary-Leavelle reports. Chief Badia wasted no time in calling for dogs to help find the missing.

SAR turnout

A local professional dog trainer, Bill Youst of Youst K-9 Command volunteered his three search-trained German Shepherds and began working the banks the next morning, Friday, June 15th. Meanwhile, from the neighboring county on the West Virginia side, Marshall County’s assistant disaster services coordinator came to Shadyside to help. He knew how to get more search and rescue dogs; the call went through West Virginia’s Office of Emergency Services to West Virginia K-9 SAR. “We choppered five teams over,” Cecil Hypes

reports, “and four teams drove over that Friday afternoon. And I invited Kentucky (Search Dog Assn.) and Mid-Atlantic D.O.G.S.” And so, with nine teams on their way from West Virginia, additional dogs and handlers got ready to respond from Kentucky, Maryland and Virginia.

Others were making their availability known. Rescue 200 and Rescue 600 from Pennsylvania joined the operation, as did a dog and handler from the Akron/Cleveland area. There was reportedly also a water-search dog team from Michigan. “At the time, we were looking for as many (dog teams) as we could get,” Chief Badia explained. “We called the people we were aware of, and we screened the people that called us. You know, I had people call from California with one dog, from Texas with one dog! But why should I call in a dog trainer with one dog, when I can get six out of Kentucky and six more out of Maryland?” As it turned out, by the weekend, when the fire department made its big push to locate victims, there were 26 dog/handler teams on scene. “For the area we had,” he said, “we had plenty of dogs.”

Team deployment

Plenty of dogs, but what to do with them? Chief Badia acknowledged he didn’t know how to deploy search dogs on an operation like this. In addition to the dogs and handlers, there were more than 800 Army and National Guard and emergency medical personnel, firefighters, and civilian volunteers to weld into an effective work force. That didn’t count the dozen boats patrolling the Ohio River for victims that may have been swept the 5 miles down from Wegee and Pipe Creek hollows.

When West Virginia K-9 SAR leader

Cecil Hypes arrived Friday night, he put his experience in emergency services planning to use. "We sat down with a couple of people from the Army and the Reserves and Ohio Disaster Emergency Services, and came up with a game plan for the next day. They made me responsible for putting the dog teams in place and coordinating with the other agencies." The initial group of five West Virginia teams had joined Bill Youst in the field as soon as they arrived the evening before, searching along Pipe Creek until nightfall. The Ohio National Guard reportedly had already recovered body parts from places where the handlers marked their dogs' alerts. For Saturday, the plan was to deploy dogs and handlers first thing in the morning along Wegee and Pipe creeks, Cumberland Run, and the Ohio River. Teams of foot searchers would follow an hour later, "so they wouldn't interfere with the dogs."

Bodies recovered

Saturday dawned sunny and not too humid. Bill Youst was again on scene, with nine West Virginia teams that started out searching the banks of Wegee Creek. Six dogs and handlers from Kentucky arrived by Ohio National Guard C-130 transport plane in the midmorning, and were immediately plugged into the search in another area. "They recovered a body in about 30 minutes," Cecil remarked. Kentucky Search Dog Assn. reports that the bodies of two victims were ultimately removed from spots marked by its teams. Mid-Atlantic D.O.G.S. was on-scene, with six teams re-searching Pipe Creek; the unit reports one find.

Also responding was K-9 Alert Search and Rescue Dogs from Richmond, Va. In the wake of the search dogs came National Guard crews with hand tools to check areas where the dogs showed interest. "Once they did the hand digging," Chief Badia explained, "we moved in the heavy equipment behind them."

Dog teams double-checked each others work according to Bill Youst, "and all the dogs hit in the same places; everybody was working." Youst does a lot of volunteer searching in his own area for lost people, but this was his first experience with

disaster work, and also his first contact with organized volunteer SAR dog teams. I was amazed," he said.

"These guys were pros"

"I know from experience, you can tell if a guy knows what he's doing with a dog or not. And these guys were pros. Everybody was almost identical in the way they were handling the dogs, so you could tell these people had been around." Bill found that his own method of working his dogs off-lead, directing them by hand signals and whistle, was well-suited to disaster work. "In the conditions we were in, if you have to have that dog on a leash, you're in a little bit of trouble. Some of the (debris piles were) 30 and 40 feet high." While Bill has some students that can handle his dogs, he chose to (handle the dogs himself in the aftermath of the Shadyside flood, drawing on his 18 years of experience working dogs. "In a catastrophe like that, you have to be really able to read that dog, knowing right from wrong what your dog's telling you."

In most cases, the dogs were alerting on victims they couldn't reach or even see—buried deep in debris or submerged underwater. Chief Badia notes that the dogs kept alerting the mouth of Wegee Creek. Divers spent nearly 30 hours trying to follow up on the alerts, but couldn't find anything in the jumble of compacted debris. Finally, a massive power-mounted crane was brought in from Pennsylvania. "I think it's the second biggest in the United States," Badia said. After the crane removed large amounts of debris, two bodies were found floating just downstream, apparently released from where they'd been held trapped. "The way the dogs searched the area, we were certain that there were bodies there," Badia added. Most of the out-of-state volunteer dog teams went home at the end of the weekend, although two West Virginia dogs and handlers returned the following Friday to "clean up a couple of hot spots."

Bill Youst kept on looking for his neighbors "day and night, whenever they needed me." The search for flood victims lasted "all the way to the 23rd, when we finished everything on the ground," Chief Badia told us.

Dogs found nine

We'd dig in an area, then he'd bring the dog back, check it, see what the dog found. Then we'd dig some more. That's basically what we were doing to find the last three or four people." In the end, the death count from the Shadyside flood reportedly reached 26. Chief Badia noted that "we were fortunate that we found and accounted for everybody that we know went in the water. The dogs did help." Bill Youst added, "from what we could understand, the dogs had located nine bodies out of 26; two of 'em were underwater." For the handlers and their canine partners, it was a grim success. "We saw a little depression among our dog handlers," Cecil admits, "and quite a bit of depression among the dogs. They were acting very leery, but they also had a drive .like I've never seen them have before. They knew they were there to work, they worked hard, but .yet at the same time they were apprehensive." Kentucky Search Dogs handler Patty Petzinger agrees. She was quoted in the Covington Kentucky Post, "Dogs get depressed with all that death in the air...They love people, and they get as upset as we do." "We had handlers see people standing there with nothing more than maybe just gathering up pieces of family portraits," Cecil Hypes continued. "The people didn't talk to the handlers, and the handlers didn't talk to the people, but they'd stop sometimes and just hug each other, and then go on. I wish there was some way that I could express this better ... the hurt that we suffered right along with those people....I realize that all search and rescue people are out there 'that others may live.' But once the others aren't living, we're still there from the human side of it, to try to find the victims and put their families at rest." Volunteer dog teams from at least six states came together in Shadyside to help a stricken community put itself back together. Now Fire Chief Mark Badia is helping pass the word to his peers in other communities.

"Other departments are bugging me," he confides. "'Hey, find out where you got (the dog teams) and how you got 'em, because we want to keep them in mind.'"
