

James B. Lindley (PSS)
No date

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STATEMENT OF MR. JAMES B. LINDLEY

To Miss Sabiston.

BY MISS SABISTON: Q Which camp were you in?

A Camp 3.

Q We are trying to take statements on this situation, to help Mr. Williams out, to find if there was anybody to blame, and if so, to get the blame placed where it belongs. Would you tell us what you know about it?

A Well, we were warned on Saturday that there was going to be a storm.

Q Who warned you?

A Well, the first warning we had was from our Captain, Captain Davis; that is the first I heard of it. I was working in the kitchen, I was on duty Friday, on one end off two, and Friday was payday, and just happened to be my tough luck that I was on duty, -- or good luck, anyway we didn't think so very much about it, you know, none of us being used to these hurricanes, and down there in the tropics. And the next we read in the morning in the paper, the storm warning, I think it was in the Saturday News, if I am not mistaken, it was in the Saturday Evening News, that there was a storm, but they claimed it was off in Cuba, which would make it 400 miles from us, southeast. And Sunday I didn't hear much more of the storm, -- Sunday that was, and Monday there was a wind and a rain, which I was on duty again. And they told us there was a train coming in, that there was nothing to

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worry about. So at noon time, Captain Davis and our first top sergeant, Paul Pugh, jumped in the little pick-up and went up to headquarters, and Mr. Sheldon gave them a paper in writing before they even got out, he ran out and met them and said there was nothing to worry about, that a train was ordered. That was about 12:30; and they returned -- I think Mr. Pugh has the paper, in Jacksonville Memorial Hospital. He gave them orders that there was nothing to worry about, that the train had already been ordered. This was about 12:30, and they returned to camp. We were right on the lower keys, lower Matecumbe. They came back and told us boys we had nothing to worry about, that there was nothing to worry about, it stated, until eight o'clock the next morning anyway, if we got it, but we might not even get this -- that is, the full blast of the hurricane. So then Captain Davis gave orders for us not to get a regular dinner, to make sandwiches. I was in the kitchen; Harry Smitty and Big Smitty was on duty; Harry Smitty was our mess sergeant. We made cheese sandwiches and weenie sandwiches; we made a sandwich for everybody, and didn't serve a regular meal. Then the next order we got, the train would be there at 5: by that time the wind was blowing I judge from 40 to 50 miles a gale; the small trees was bending right over and the rain was terrific. And it began to get worse, and we had our rations ready to load on the train, by the door; and there was about 20 or 30 of us in the mess hall waiting for the train. Then the captain give orders not to try to load anything; we had orders to get our

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personal belongings, then we had orders not to try to load anything, the minute the train got there to jump on it, just to get ourselves on and never mind anything else; but they still said we had nothing to worry about. The train was to be there at 5:, then 5:30. No train; and it began to get worse and worse; it would have been impossible to have even got out by motor or any other way, it was too late, and I think some of us began to realize it was too late; I did for one, realized that we was in it, from what I had heard, and heard the fishermen, since I had been down there the nine months. And about between six and six thirty, our mess hall went in, went in, right from the center; that was the first. Of course our roof blew off first, and it was a crash, nearly everybody ran just like a bunch of rabbits; and when we ran out, we ran right into that wind; and after that I don't remember much what happened to the boys, because The wind knocked me right on the bannister of the mess hall, and I hit the ground, and I got up, and it knocked me down three times before I stayed down; then I began crawling, because the timbers and pieces were flying from those stacks and buildings; and one of the boys that had that piece stuck through him, was right in front of me, the piece passed by me. I got behind the railroad track in the first storm, and I hugged that track as long as I could, up to the bank, until after the first was over; then I suppose it lasted, this terrific wind lasted for perhaps an hour, I don't know, I didn't have any way of telling; and it quieted down just like that,

just stopped, and the stars come up and the wind seemed to get warm, and it was just as still, a piece of paper wouldn't flutter in the air. But then we began to all huddle together, naturally, and it was a fisherman come by and he told us, he says, "Boys, find a place," his name was Smitty, a fisherman; he said, "This is right in the middle of it, and it will be back", he said, "Whatever you do, don't go back where that lumber is laying piled and strewn, it is very dangerous; I think the best place would be up this way". So we walked up the track I suppose between a half --- not quite half a mile from our camp, and we had a water car up there, a tank car -- regular oil tank car, but we had it with water, which had been dropped off that morning; and we all huddled around that car. I suppose it was 100 or maybe more of us, we got around that car during the lull. And when the wind came again, we could hear, twenty minutes before the wind hit, we could hear that roar, it began to roar in your ears just like a far away rumble, that wind and water, and the water, when it come over just like that, and we began to mount the car. We got up on the car, and they were all around the car, that is where we lost most of our boys that was washed away, or blown off the car, that couldn't hold; some of them perhaps jumped off when the car began to go over -- we thought it was going over, several of the boys leaped from the car and were drowned and killed that way. I remained on the car all night; until daylight the next morning. I was right up on top of the car.

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Q At any time were the men forbidden to leave the camp?

A We were told not to leave the camp, to stay there, that we had no danger.

Q Who told you? A The orders came in, Captain Davis, they told us he had the orders for us to stay there, there was nothing for us to worry, that the train was coming in.

Q Did you personally identify any of the dead?

A Yes, ma'am.

Q That group that Captain Davis has the list on?

A Absolutely; the first seven men was about in line, I helped carry, I knew the boys, I had been with them nine months; George Carr, him and I worked together side by side the first three months I was in Florida, and practically being one of the first men, I think, coming down there with all the boys, I knew practically all the boys, even the new ones; and I have told them about 37 identified.

Q Yes, we have that list.

A And I am absolutely positive of the total, because there was more than myself, we were all together, and I helped put those bodies in there.

Q Is there anything further you would like to say, anything else that you know from your personal knowledge, about what should have been done, or was planned?

A Well, I don't like to make any statement for the simple reason I don't know what could have been done, but I do know that there was an awful mistake some place; there was no excuse

for us boys being on the keys. For the first reason, we had enough transportation in our camp alone to have taken every veteran off the keys; absolutely brand new trucks that wasn't seven months old. We had stake bodies, pick ups, dump trucks, which is plenty good to haul men out of a stricken area. We had enough trucks to have taken everybody, not only the veterans, we could have cleaned the keys, had we been given --

Q Did you have competent men to drive these trucks?

A Absolutely, yes, ma'am, plenty of competent men.

Q And the roads were in such condition you could have gotten out?

A If we could have gotten out before four o'clock; after that, I can't say; about four miles from us where No. 5 was, here is the road that has been filled in for three miles, where you cross the railroad; then there is a stretch of three miles here; here is the highway, here is the gulf just right at the edge of it; here is the railroad, and right here is the Atlantic. I think there was water over that by four o'clock; I don't think we could have gotten out after that, but we could have gotten out even if we had to leave at two o'clock, with the trucks, we would have had plenty of time to make it on to Snake Creek.

Q Do you know who had the authority to order those trucks out?

A Well, I think Mr. Sheldon could have ordered those trucks at any time. Colonel Sherron -- we call him Colonel Sherron, he is a civilian, he is engineer at No. 3

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on the bridge project, he is in charge of all the trucks; if I am not mistaken, he was, and the keys to the trucks was locked up in a box. Of course had we known this storm would have been like that, we would have taken the keys; we would have overpowered them, and we wouldn't have asked or needed any permission. But we were depending on the other people, waiting, depending on the other people; I was placing my life, I thought, on somebody that knew; they have these barometers down there; Colonel Shorron has been through these hurricanes, he was walking around with a barometer in his hand; and I should think he would know. And they were telling us to the last minute, five minutes before that mess ball went in, to take it easy; because the boys were beginning to get nervous, to see the roofs going, the tar paper off our roofs, and those trees bending over to the ground in that wind and rain: not a thing to worry about before eight o'clock in the morning, and the train will be here by that time. I thought to myself, if the train don't come in we have the train coming from Key West at 7:45; if there was no danger until eight o'clock I hadn't in my mind to get on that train regardless, whether there was orders or not, I was going out of there. But to lay the blame, why it was somebody very much to blame, there is no doubt about that, because they knew the storm was coming; and with as many lives as there was down there, they should not have taken the chances, because it wouldn't have cost them anything to pull us up the line; we had our own rations packed and ready

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to take with us, enough for two days, so we wouldn't have to have been put any place, the expense would only have been, if we were motorized, the gas and oil, if there was no hurricane. But as far as pointing anyone out directly, I wouldn't like to lay the blame for death to anyone, unless I could be positive of what I said. If I really knew who was to blame, seeing my friends and the boys I have been with laying there in the condition I did, I would certainly be willing to see him hanged, I would be willing to hang him.

my boy P.I. hang him

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