

Evacuations continue as water gets higher and more dangerous

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ter was forced out toward the river channel by the fences around the homes on Heather Lane. We continued to our destination, slipping down a side street and right up to the sliding glass door of the house.

There were four occupants, a man, two women and a child. There were also two dogs. Because of the heavy current on the way back to the pickup, we decided to take only two people at a time and no dogs. The child was distraught about the situation and it was gut-wrenching to stick to our decision. We headed back toward the pickup and, as we had thought, the current was considerable. After Jim powered us about two-thirds of the way we came to a shallow section where I could jump out of the boat and push. Jim and I were getting a little played-out when we got back to the pickup, which by this time had water running around it. We decided our smartest move would be to have Jim drive around Stoney Point Rd. and meet me and the other two evacuees. Back at the house, I noticed concern in the two women's voices as they asked what had happened to my partner. I reassured them that everybody was fine and we had a change of plans. Since I would be able to drift with the current on my exit of the residence, I decided to take the two dogs with us.

We had just left the house when we noticed a pig swimming around in circles in the middle of the former street. I had to think twice about the safety of my occupants, and

the potential of mixing dogs and pigs, but I headed over to try and save the frantic animal. Unfortunately, just as we reached the pig, it gave a few last kicks and rolled over on its side. It was scary to observe the animal dying in front of me, and it reinforced the reality that this flood was a very real and dangerous event. We landed the boat about two blocks downstream on Hwy 47, on what I would call Buckner Island. Shortly, Jim pulled up in his pickup and we were off to a friend's house on State Avenue via a submerged Hwy 47, and Stoney Point Road. State was mostly under water when we arrived, but the evacuees felt safe at their friend's house. Jim and I needed a rest, so back to the station we drove, for food and dry clothes.

We filled our stomachs and I got my sweatshirt dried out before we were sent downtown to help shuttle people back and forth across what I now referred to as Bridge Street Lake. As we went to check on a residence on D Street, we met my grandmother, who was quite concerned about her house on North Street. On our return trip we swung into my grandmother's house and with the help of my uncle, Larry Bernardi, and Jim, managed to get most of her furniture up off the floor. The water had just reached the front porch.

Next, Jim and I were dispatched to evacuate an older gentleman from a mobile home park on Riverview Drive. The river ran around a house at the entrance of the park and right down the roadway. It was awesome to see the completely flooded trailer

park. Looking toward the river we could see almost two feet of difference between where we floated and the hump in the middle of the river. Mobile homes and fences held back the water. At space 22 we loaded our precious cargo—an elderly man, three dogs and a cat. Rowing back up the street was taxing, and I know Jim's arms were bulging beneath his shirt. Finally, we reached shallow water and I jumped out to help push us back to land. The city police canine unit (inside joke) showed up and transported our refugee and his animals to the "Bridge Street Lake" Motel for the night.

After grabbing some dinner, Jim and I were assigned to help shuttle people and supplies across Bridge Street and did one more evacuation, from Washington and B Street. It was quite a sight, one I will never forget, rowing down Vernonia's streets under the street lights.

Jim and I were just two of many volunteers who helped on February 8th. My cousin, Dean Bernardi, helped people out of houses with his boat; Jim Bergerson worked the Riverview area of town; Don Dailey used his Jet sled to pull people from more dangerous sections of the river and, I'm sure, there were plenty more. One of the real heroes was the helicopter pilot who lifted 19 people from the roofs of their homes. One of the unsung heroes was Mario Leonetti, a volunteer firefighter on board that helicopter to help spot, and assist in loading people onto the helicopter from the roof tops. Mario said it was quite an experience to jump onto a wet shingle roof while a helicopter

was shaking the heck out of it (From now on I'm going to refer to Mario as "The Flying Leonetti"). The men at GTE put on a heroic and successful effort to save our local phone service, keeping two pumps going all afternoon and all night to keep the circuits dry. Two more volunteer firefighters, Kevin Roberts and Gene Weller, delivered the second pump by boat late Thursday and, I can say from experience, it took considerable nerve to maneuver a boat so close to the raging river.

By late afternoon Thursday, when Rock Creek divided the town, a decision was made to split fire and medic personnel and equipment so there would be some protection on both sides. The personnel in the Incident Command Center deserve real respect; it takes a great deal of self restraint to sit inside a building all day and night and direct the troops in the field. It is human nature to want to be where the action is, especially for people who have years of experience. But somebody had to direct and control the workforce in order to avoid

chaos. Many of the people in the Command Center were awestruck when they were finally able to view the high water. Listening to radio reports is not the same as experiencing it.

You probably noticed I talked a lot about eating. Let me tell you, when you're working hard, it takes a lot of fuel and the volunteers at the fire station had plenty. Having Nannette Leonetti was like having Betty Crocker in our station, she cooked up a storm. My mother also slaved away in the kitchen and made sure all the volunteers were well-fed. Many people brought food to the station for us.

I feel lucky to live in a town like Vernonia, for as we all know, when the going gets tough we all pull together to overcome the obstacle before us. I think this flood will only strengthen our community.

I wish everybody a speedy recovery from this disaster and I want to extend a very big pat on the back to Vernonia's fire and medic personnel and to all the other "charge ahead" volunteers, for a job very well done.

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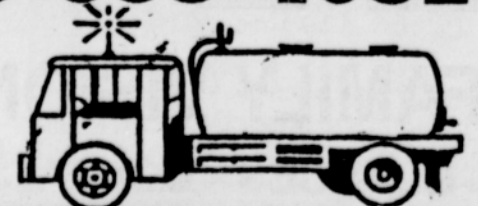
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