

The Kentucky National Guard's Response to the Great Flood of 1937



January 21 - June 8, 1937



Special to the
Kentucky National Guard eMuseum
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About the Cover Photos: Two images of Frankfort during the Flood of 1937. The top photo shows Bridge Street, looking North and the bottom shows the State Reformatory from Mero Street. Photos courtesy of Anne H. Lee
(<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ky/county/franklin/index/1937Flood.html>)

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Dedication – In Memory of SGT Thomas J. Brown

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Sergeant Thomas J. Brown and all the forgotten casualties of the Kentucky National Guard.

Sergeant Thomas J. Brown of Madisonville, age 34, drowned at approximately 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, January 23rd while on state active duty in response to the flood of 1937. He was assigned to Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion of the 149th Infantry from Madisonville. He is the only known Kentucky National Guardsman who perished on duty during the great flood of 1937.

According to newspaper accounts, Brown, Second Lieutenant James L. Moore, Private C. W. Anthony and a civilian, Emmett Ashby, were in a boat that lost its stern from vibrations from an outboard motor and quickly sank by the stern throwing all four into the nine-foot deep water. The other three were able to swim to shallow waters but did suffer from exposure and shock. Brown was last seen clinging to the boat bow debris before he sank from sight. The Guardsmen were on a survey mission to assess conditions in Ashbyburg and Jewel City area and Ashby was catching a ride to Ashbyburg in hopes of getting another ride closer to his home. Brown was a butcher in civilian life and was married and had one child.

Brown's battalion commander, Oren Coin, wrote a letter to a legislative committee on the widow's behalf in December of 1937 seeking some sort of relief for his family. SGT Brown's death most likely was the beginning of the push for the state's death gratuity for soldiers who die on State Active Duty missions.

Statement of Acting Governor Keen Johnson

Acting Governor Keen Johnson Issued the following statement tonight [January 23, 1937] to all Kentuckians:

"The worst catastrophe in the history of Kentucky has fallen upon our people in the valleys of the rivers and streams of Kentucky and the Ohio river. Thousands upon thousands of families have been driven from their homes without food or clothing. Many thousands of these people have lost all their personal belongings. Tonight they are exposed to the terrific weather without food or the proper housing. All State departments of government for twenty-four hours have devoted their entire time towards an attempt to relieve these stricken people. The federal government is giving its aid, the Red Cross is giving highly helpful service and may other organizations and individuals are working faithfully to try to relieve this horrible situation.

"Let me call upon the citizenship of Kentucky to get in touch with the Red Cross units or other organizations in the stricken communities at once and offer what they have in the way of food, clothing, bedding and money for these thousands of stricken homeless people."¹

Introduction

It is hard, even today, to imagine the scope of the catastrophe that befell Kentucky during the flood of 1937. Louisville Mayor Neville Miller and Governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler distinguished themselves in responding to the tragedy. The situation was indeed dire and the consequences of inaction were deadly. Except for the sheer willpower and determination of the citizens and those that came to help, Louisville and many other river towns in Kentucky might have dried up with the flood waters and ceased to exist.

Thousands upon thousands were displaced and by some reports 500 died some by drowning but most by exposure². In today's dollars, the flood wrought some 5.4 billion in damage³.

The Kentucky National Guard called out every unit in the state with the exception of one. Two thousand one hundred and ninety four members of the Kentucky Guard saw service in the flood. Some served as little as two days and some as long as one hundred and thirty six days. It was still not nearly enough to stem the suffering.

The Louisville Armory, now known as Louisville Gardens, processed some 75,000 refugees.⁴



Photographs published in the media prove how useful it became as it was filled with cots and leaving little room to walk but providing much needed shelter⁵.

Yet today, almost no trace of the story of the service by the members of the Kentucky National Guard during the Flood of 1937 has survived.

30 Days & 30 Nights

Measurable precipitation was recorded somewhere in Kentucky every day during January 1937 and averaged 15.77 inches of precipitation across the state for the month⁶. Taylorsville Kentucky received 7.36 inches of rain on January 24, 1937 alone.⁷ During January 1937, Kentucky's precipitation totals averaged more than four times the normal rate.

Earlington in Hopkins County established a new monthly record of 22.97 inches. Almost all of the precipitation was rainfall rather than snowfall and included eight days with thunderstorms⁸ — nearly matching Noah's record.

Kentucky is bounded in three directions by rivers, north, east and west and with some 13,000 miles of streams and 1,500 miles of navigable waterways, more than any of the other 48 contiguous states.⁹

That much rain meant trouble along almost all of these many waterways but, despite days of predictions of rising waters — many discounted the seriousness and stayed in their homes content that it would be no worse than any of the floods before.

The rain, snow and sleet kept coming and the water kept rising. It came to be known as the Great Flood of 1937 and surpassed all prior floods in the previous 175 years of modern occupancy of the Ohio River Valley.

At McAlpine Lock and Dam, then called Lock and Dam 41, situated at the Falls of the Ohio in downtown Louisville¹⁰, the normal level of the river was about 28 feet. Before January 1937, flood stage was 55 feet. The 1937 flood crested at 85.4 feet.¹¹

Over half of Frankfort, Louisville and ninety-five percent of Paducah were inundated. Mass evacuations from those cities and others along the Ohio River occurred. The Kentucky, Green, Barren, and other rivers and creeks in central and western Kentucky reported major flooding.¹²

Devastation was spread throughout the Ohio River Valley. In Cincinnati "a house with five screaming people hanging out the windows was reported sailing down the Ohio as onlookers stood helpless on the bank."¹³

Louisville was the hardest hit city in the whole flood area. Sitting on comparatively level ground where the Ohio drops 26 feet in the distance two miles, Louisville watched its west end sink under the "yellow torrent."¹⁴

"Three-fourths of the city, at flood crest, was inundated. Over 230,000 Louisville people were homeless, at least 200 dead, few of them by drowning, most from exposure."¹⁵ Figures on the number of displaced and the dead vary from source to source but the most conservative quoted

numbers were 175,000 displaced in Louisville alone and 190 casualties not including at least two looters who were shot.¹⁶

The statistics of the devastation are staggering. In Louisville 270 miles of the city's 350 miles of paved roads were inundated. Seventy percent of the city's residents were evacuated from their homes. The Red Cross fed 230,000 people a day during the crisis. The Health Department and the Red Cross provided 220,000 typhoid injections.¹⁷

When it was all said and done the Kentucky National Guard had called out every unit in the state with the exception of Company C of the 149th Infantry from Barbourville which was held in reserve because of anticipated labor unrest in Harlan County. Of the 2,960 members of the Kentucky National Guard at the time of the flood, 2,194 of them saw service in the flood. Setting aside the approximately fifty members held in reserve for Harlan County, 75% of the force was deployed. No documentation exists explaining the remaining 727 members. However one finds it difficult to believe that they stood by while all of their fellow Guard members were so desperately engaged across the state.

Those that were documented had lengths of service ranged from two days for some individuals to one hundred and thirty six days for one individual serving at the Frankfort Prison Camp. The average tour of flood duty for a Kentucky Guardsman was 42 days. The Adjutant General himself, Brigadier General G. Lee McClain served for 99 days.

Major Frank S. Lebkuecher spent 100 days on duty between Frankfort and Paducah. First Lieutenant Jason A. Smith of Frankfort's Troop A, 123rd Cavalry spent 114 days on duty. Major Joseph M. Kelly, the Assistant Adjutant General who was placed in charge of the prison camp to hold the prisoners evacuated from the Frankfort Penitentiary, spent 115 days on duty. Major Robert C. Graham of Headquarters, 1st Squadron of the 123rd Cavalry in Frankfort spent 136 days on duty.

In all fairness, it must be pointed out that the Kentucky Guard was not alone in its efforts to protect the lives and property of the citizens of the Commonwealth. Newspaper accounts of the period are filled with reports of efforts to bring aid and evacuate the stranded by Boy Scouts, members of the American Legion and active military forces to name just a few. Here we will focus on the role of the Kentucky National Guard.

The New Year Started Quietly At Least....

Prior to the flood, the year was unfolding rather routinely for the Kentucky National Guard. On January 4th Special Order No. 1 was issued detailing Captain Fred M. Warren, two officers and forty enlisted men of Troop F, 123rd Cavalry (Covington) as the "Guard of Honor" to his Excellency, Albert B. Chandler, Governor of the State of Kentucky during the Presidential Inaugural Parade to be held in Washington, D.C., January 20,

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1937. The call to duty ran from January 16th to January 22nd at no expense to the state.

Governor Chandler went to Washington to “lead the Kentucky delegation” during President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s second inauguration. Adjutant General G. Lee McClain and Louisville Mayor Nevile Miller were also taking part in presidential inauguration activities.¹⁸ Roosevelt was the first president to be inaugurated on the January 20th date, a change made by the 20th Amendment to the Constitution.



Governor A. B. Chandler



The crowd's umbrellas give testimony to the rain falling in Washington D.C. during the inauguration and all over the Ohio River Valley as well. - Image of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's second inauguration January 20, 1937 Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile back in Kentucky, an emergency was brewing. Special Orders No. 11 was issued on January 21, 1937.

“An emergency having been declared throughout the state of Kentucky by the Governor of the Commonwealth, due to heavy flood damage caused by the Ohio River and its tributaries, and there is an impending disaster causing thousands to become homeless, and whereas local relief agencies and police powers are inadequate to cope with the situation, all officers and enlisted men of the Kentucky National Guard, consisting of 226 officers, 3 warrant officers, and 2,731 enlisted men, are hereby ordered to report to their respective armories, subject to immediate call. All National Guard equipment will be made immediately ready for transporting to the effected towns and areas. This order is to be construed as a warning order and no pay will be involved until units are ordered into the field for actual performance of duty. However, all necessary transportation expense and subsistence necessary in carrying out this order is hereby authorized. Subsequent orders for active duty will be transmitted either by telephone, telegraph, or radio, to be certified later by written orders.”¹⁹

On January 21, 1937, Lieutenant Governor Keen Johnson, while Governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler was in Washington, D.C., telegraphed the U.S. Secretary of War as follows:

Disaster impending from floods various places in the state. Absolutely necessary to use National Guard equipment. Please grant authority by wire.

It was soon evident that even the entire Kentucky National Guard could not relieve such a widespread and massive calamity. On the twenty-fifth of January Adjutant General G. Lee McClain telegraphed General Malin Craig, chief of staff, U.S. War Department for help, as follows:

Conditions in Kentucky of which you are cognizant provoke this unusual request. The safety, peace, happiness, and health of several hundred thousand of our citizens in the Ohio Valley prompts this Department in breaking precedent. Particularly does this condition apply to the centers of population of Kentucky and on the Ohio River. Every resource of the National Guard in this State has been utilized to the fullest extent compatible with the safety of our people. We are at a standstill. Such centers of population as Louisville, our largest city, Paducah, Covington, Dayton, Newport, Hickman, Henderson and others will suffer an untold loss; and several hundred thousands of our population will feel the effects in the utmost degree. Consequently, I do not feel embarrassed, acting in the capacity that I do, in making the following request to alleviate the conditions that exist in different localities. In my opinion, and that of our closest observers and advisors, the use of Federal troops is absolutely necessary. Regardless of regulations and recognizing the fact that every resource has been utilized for the protection of our people, we request that two regiments of Infantry, two companies of engineers, medical officers with medical supplies, be ordered to report for duty to Louisville immediately. There is a possibility that conditions will necessitate help other than this. You may be assured that this request will not be made unless positively necessary.



*Adjutant
General G. Lee
McClain*

The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 (18 USC § 1385) is the "Regardless of regulations" most likely referenced above. Legal barriers to sending active duty armed forces into U.S. streets were imposed by the Posse Comitatus Act in 1878, which was prompted by President Ulysses Grant's use of federal troops to monitor elections in the former Confederate states. The act prohibits military personnel from searching, seizing or arresting people in the United States. Since that time some exceptions have been added.

By radio, on January 24, Captain Edward B. Blackwell, Staff Aide 38th Division Staff, notified Adjutant General McClain that: "County Judge Claude A. Walker, Hickman, Kentucky, asked Governor Chandler to send the Kentucky National Guard to guard the Reel Foot Lake Levee, some threats have been made to blow it up. Very urgent. 1,000 families will be made homeless and inundated. Troops will have to be brought out of Louisville by boat." Three days later Judge Walker informed Governor Chandler that:



*CPT Edward
B. Blackwell*

We have four thousand refugees, and impossible to feed and take care of them without assistance. What we need is army kitchen, blankets, cots, and provisions. Hickman being a town of only two thousand cannot take care of this many people as much as they would like to do so. People being fed once a day and sometimes not this often. There are more refugees coming all the time and if possible we would like to have you assist us in procuring some army kitchen and other material referred to above. It is absolutely necessary that we have some assistance. We also need badly forty additional troops for guard duty. Have just been informed that you have equipped army kitchen at Bowling Green and additional troops there. Troops can move to Hickman via Nashville. Road is open.

The distress message from Hickman brought many offers of assistance from out of the state. Among these are one made by the Chicago Herald and Examiner, for which the Adjutant General expressed the state's gratitude by the following reply:

Appreciate your offer by phone for a plane to carry a doctor and nurses and supplies to the flood stricken area at Hickman. You have permission of this office to report to the Director, Emergency Relief and the Director of the Red Cross at Hickman as soon as you possibly can make it. We are grateful to you for the assistance which you offer to give.

Never in the history of the state was jeopardy as far-flung as during the flood of 1937. The flood and distress extended across the state. Persons living in cities as far inland as Frankfort were soon in a desperate situation. Call after call for troops came from the flooded areas. Proclamations of martial law by Governor Chandler were issued as the troops responded.

On the twenty-fifth of January, Mayor Neville Miller of Louisville informed Governor Chandler that:

Have just sent the following telegram to Senators Alben W. Barkley, M. M. Logan and wish you to follow to assist us in getting immediate action: 'Flood situation here desperate. Imperative need for at least

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two Regiments of Infantry, two companies of engineers fully supplied with pontoon equipment and ample number of medical officers with supplies of vaccine, medicine, etc. Martial law being declared now by Governor for entire State of Kentucky. Our Health Department, Police Department, and Public Works and Engineering Departments have broken down physically and need every assistance at once. Any delay can have only the most serious consequences. Get to President Roosevelt and all other necessary officials at once. Eliminate all formality and give us action. Please follow through to see that action is given and people and supplies are dispatched here immediately. Have already lost twenty hours in trying to get action at Washington and do not know how many deaths have resulted. About two hundred thousand people in flood area in Louisville alone out of population of three hundred twenty thousand. All electrical service out of commission and darkness will continue at least a week or two weeks. Water being rationed. Serious shortage of coal. Transportation facilities impaired almost beyond use. What little telephone service remains is seriously threatened.

In compliance with Mayor Miller's request, troops were ordered on duty in Louisville and Governor Chandler issued the following proclamation with Mayor Miller as provost marshal:

WHEREAS, the Honorable Neville Miller is the duly elected, qualified and acting Mayor of the City of Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky, and the chief executive of said city; and,

WHEREAS, approximately two-thirds of the area of said city is now submerged in the greatest flood in the history of said city and approximately two hundred thousand residents of said city reside in the flooded area; and,

WHEREAS, the said Neville Miller, Mayor of the city of Louisville has advised the Government of the Commonwealth of Kentucky that the civil officers and agencies of the city of Louisville are unable to protect the health, lives, and property of the inhabitants and residents of said city during the emergency and that the aid of the military forces is necessary and imperative, and has requested the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky to declare martial law and request that Federal troops be sent to the city of Louisville to aid and assist in protecting the health, lives and property of the residents and citizens of said city; and,

WHEREAS, the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky is fully informed and knows of the imperative need of centralized direction of all forces, civil and military, to aid in rescuing the citizens and residents of the city of Louisville in the flooded area and in protecting the health; lives, and property of said citizens and residents:

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Now THEREFORE, the premises all considered, it is ordered and directed by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky that martial law be and the same hereby is proclaimed for the entire city of Louisville, and the Honorable Neville Miller, mayor of the city of Louisville, hereby is designated as Provost Marshal to be in supreme charge and direction of all civil and military authorities and agencies in the city of Louisville, and he is hereby vested with full power to command and direct said forces and all of them in rescuing people from the flood area and moving them to places of safety, in preserving peace, and in protecting the health, lives and property of the citizens and residents of the city of Louisville, and to issue and enforce such orders, commands, rules and regulations as may be proper, expedient and necessary to accomplish the ends aforesaid.

It is further ordered and directed by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky that Colonel Sidney R. Smith be the commanding officer of all companies and divisions of the National Guard and the military forces which are or may be, assigned to duty in the city of Louisville, and said Colonel Sidney R. Smith will work in coordination with and under the orders and directions of the said Neville Miller as provost marshal in directing all of said military forces.

This order and proclamation shall be, and remain in full force and effect until modified or terminated by further executive order and proclamation of the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Given under my hand as Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky at Frankfort, Kentucky, this January 25, 1937.

The following letter from Mayor Neville Miller to Adjutant General McClain, dated February 19, is in commendation of the service rendered by the Guard in Louisville:

It was certainly a great relief during the flood to know that you were standing ready to help us at all times and I want to thank you for your cooperation and for the splendid way in which you, and all the members of your organization, came to our assistance.

The people of Louisville realize now, as never before, what the Adjutant General's department means to the State of Kentucky and I want to congratulate you on the splendid service rendered and to thank you personally and on behalf of the citizens of Louisville for all which you have done for us.

In detailing troops an effort was made to send those stationed nearest to the point of duty. However, it was frequently necessary for a detail to make a lengthy detour because of inundated roads.

Protection of the sufferers was the chief duty of the soldiers. Police duty was required to prevent brigandage (looting) and enforce sanitary, fire prevention, and other emergency rules and regulations that became effective upon the advent of martial law. Evacuation of many communities and areas became necessary as the river rose. Such evacuation could not be accomplished speedily, and with limited facilities, except by some centralized authority, and this was delegated to the Kentucky National Guard by Governor Chandler. This authority, coupled with manpower, enabled the State Military Department to accomplish a stupendous task.

"All police were put on 24-hr, duty and companies of National Guardsmen were sent to help them keep the peace. With the water rising 2 ft. an hour and the rain still falling, Governor Albert Benjamin Chandler telephoned President Roosevelt that the emergency had reached such proportions that Federal troops were needed. For stricken Louisville he declared martial law. The whole nation was given front row seats at the Ohio valley's tragedy through Louisville radio station WHAS.

Hooked to a national circuit, WHAS was busy day and night directing local relief workers for miles up and down the river. Frankfort, where 1,500 families took to the hills when the Kentucky River flooded the State capital, was reported to be the scene of the catastrophe's most brutal and piteous event. As the water rose in the Frankfort Reformatory, 2,900 panic-stricken prisoners began fighting.

First everybody fought the guards, 25 swimming out into the river and 24 swimming back when shots were fired over their heads. Then the Negroes fought the whites. National Guardsmen withdrew outside the prison walls, announcing that twelve prisoners were dead and that all had "absolutely gone mad." Governor Chandler had previously putted through the gates in an outboard motorboat. "Get us out of here, Happy!" the inmates yelled. "We're gonna drown if yon don't!" "Happy" yelled back: "It's a hell of a mess, boys, but I'm going to get you out and take care of you!" He then telephoned Washington, for not only troops but also doctors from the U. S. Public Health Service to help set up a prison camp on the State Insane Asylum Grounds."²⁰

The State Reformatory in Frankfort housed 2,906 men and women, confined in a century old building on an uncertain foundation surrounded by an ever-rising tide. For days they had been without heat, light, or food. Among them were desperate characters, one sentenced to death. Occupants of lower tier cells had been moved up as the river rose, and a rumor began to circulate that the Dix River Dam had broken. A prison break seemed imminent when Governor Chandler returned from Washington, D.C. on January 21, entered the prison in a skiff and promised these wards of the state that they would be removed to safety. To fulfill that promise was no small task.



The State Reformatory at Frankfort during the flood courtesy Sharon Kouns, KY Dept of Corrections

Evacuation of the Reformatory was begun while a fifteen-acre prison camp was being built at Frankfort, beyond reach of the floodwaters. Guardsmen took the most hardened group of prisoners to Lexington where they were confined in the Fayette County Jail. Women prisoners were transferred to the old prison school building. Still others were moved to the Federal Narcotic Farm at Lexington, to the jails at Winchester, Mount Sterling, Georgetown, Owenton, Lawrenceburg, Lebanon, Harrodsburg, Danville, Williamstown, and Richmond. About 800 male prisoners were confined in the Frankfort Armory, on Maryland Avenue, until the prison camp was ready.



Governor Chandler and others with the skiff near the wall of prison. Courtesy Sharon Kouns, KY Dept of Corrections.

The erection of the Frankfort Reformatory prison camp was speedily accomplished under the direction of Governor Chandler, and by the joint efforts of the National Guard, under the direction of the office of the adjutant general, and other state agencies including portions of the personnel of the Highway Department. This camp, with full lighting, heating,



Maj Joseph Kelly

and sanitary facilities, was completed in less than one week, and in another week all prisoners were brought back from various jails and institutions in which they were temporarily confined during the flood. After the prisoners were installed in their new quarters, under the supervision of Warden James Hammond, the camp was placed under the patrol of some 300 officers and enlisted men of the Kentucky National Guard. Administrative details pertaining to the work of the National Guard at the prison camp had been assigned to Major Joseph M. Kelly, Assistant Adjutant General; with Superintendent E. O. Huey, of the State Police²¹, assisting. Several units of the National Guard continued on guard duty at the prison camp until June, 1937.

The prison camp was constructed adjacent to the Guard facilities at Maryland Avenue and occupied what is today the structure and parking lots for the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services located at 275 East Main Street. This site was on the grounds of what has been referred to by many names over the years as the State Insane Asylum or State School for Feeble Minded Children. The camp was apparently abandoned when the crisis was over but was not demolished. Some say the prison camp was again used during World War II to house some 4,000 German and Italian prisoners of war. There were indeed prisoners of war in the Frankfort vicinity but whether this site was used as a branch camp for work details has not been established in this research. The facility was reportedly torn down in the 1950s when the Kentucky Army National Guard built a new armory adjacent to the new Frankfort Airport.²²

Medical aid and sanitary measures were secondary only to the removal of sufferers from flood-imperiled zones. To assist in this work, the Kentucky National Guard units, trained for this duty, were assigned and medical and hospital facilities were provided.

In a report from Madisonville, dated January 27, Lieutenant James K. Ramsey, 149th Infantry, states in part that: "In conference with county authorities and American Red Cross it was thought supplies were sufficient for the present except serums and vaccines which, have been promised by the State Department of Health for delivery tonight. North and East end of the county almost entirely submerged. Almost all of the inhabitants have been evacuated to high points and are being removed to Madisonville, Kentucky, where there are ample accommodations and facilities."

Evacuated persons were transported to refugee camps at various points beyond danger. Subsistence then became a weighty problem, for these evacuated persons needed food and shelter. Churches, schools, armories, and other public and private buildings were made available. Food was contributed by the Red Cross, by firms, organizations of various types, and by individuals, but the Red Cross required help from the troops to guard and distribute provisions and in several cases required the army kitchen outfits of the Guard. A sheaf of brief messages to the War Department and to

several U. S. Army posts portray the efforts of Governor Chandler and Adjutant General McClain to obtain an adequate supply of cots, blankets, camp outfits, medical supplies, boats and various other supplies necessary to enable the Guard to perform its service under the ever increasing demands made upon it. While these requisitions were being made, communities and states, near and remote, were tendering every manner of assistance. Typical of these messages is one received from the adjutant general of Wisconsin as follows:

Wisconsin Contemplates sending into Kentucky food and other supplies. In order to function intelligently and effectively I have been directed by higher authority to determine the cities to which such supplies should be consigned or the Rail Head to which consigned. Whether truck facilities are available at Rail Head to convey supplies to destination. Whether medical personnel or supplies are needed and if so their nature. Wire by Western Union collect.

On January 29th, State Health Commissioner A. T. McCormack ordered evacuation of the entire city of Paducah. Dr. McCormack said Major Vego Barnes, Commanding the 125th Wagon Train, Kentucky National Guard and the McCracken County Board of Health had informed him that 8,000 of Paducah's 32,000 citizens were still in the flooded city without drinking water, lights and heat.²³

Answering the Call

Generally, the Guard was charged with the performance of any and all tasks that others could not do or were left undone. Few details as to the day to day work of the Guard members have been found. According to one source, troops from the National Guard patrolled the east end of Louisville in armored cars.²⁴ We can have no doubt the Guard was there doing what it could but it may not have been in armored cars. According to newspaper accounts on January 29, 1937 — Private Robert T. Mueller, Tell City, Indiana, an active duty soldier with Troop A of the 1st Mechanized Cavalry from Fort Knox, a member of the federal flood relieve forces, and Louisville Patrolman Lawrence W. Claycomb were drown when an "army combat car" went out of control and plunged into the flood waters of Beargrass Creek. Two other Fort Knox soldiers in the vehicle, Privates Harold B. Harington and Private Roy N. Davis were saved by civilian relief workers.²⁵

According to the 1938 Kentucky National Guard Yearbook, troops called during the flood first engaged in active duty on January 21. The last element so employed was relieved on June 8, 1937. During this period 172 officers and 2,022 enlisted men were called into service.

We know that 30 members of the Glasgow National Guard unit sheltered at St. Aloysius Church on Payne Street near Baxter in Louisville.²⁶

We also know that the National Guard and State Police maintained posts on every road leading into Louisville and only emergency vehicles with permits could enter.²⁷ We suspect they were performing similar missions across the Commonwealth.

The 1938 Kentucky National Guard yearbook gives us a few clues on what duties they performed.

"The flood services rendered by the Kentucky National Guard were widely varied, including general assistance to civil authority, patrol duty, guard duty, rescue work, evacuation of flooded areas, traffic duty, river patrol duty, the distribution of food and supplies, guarding convicts, supervising sanitation and numerous similar duties."²⁸

- The 113th Ordnance Company from Bardstown guarded prisoners at Frankfort in the 1938 Yearbook.
- The Medical Detachment from Bowling Green of the 149th Infantry served in Bowling Green and Paducah.
- Headquarters Company of the 149th Infantry from St. Matthews established a radio station at Frankfort and set up a state-wide radio network and later police duty after the waters receded.
- The Howitzer Company of the 149th Infantry from Carlisle served at Maysville and Augusta.
- Company A of the 1/149th from Harlan was sent to Paducah and was the second unit on the scene and served for 29 days.
- Company D of the 1/149th from Williamsburg served in Paducah.
- Company E of the 2/149th from Olive Hill had details in Vanceburg, Greenup, Winchester, Russell and Maysville during the flood duty.
- Company F of the 2/149th from Booneville served at Shelbyville and Frankfort during the flood duty.
- Company I of the 3/149th from Marion served at Paducah from 22 January to 10 March.
- Company K of the 3/149th from Livermore served at Livermore and Wickliffe during the flood response
- Company L of the 3/149th from Mayfield served at Paducah for the duration of the response.
- 138th Field Artillery from Louisville was on duty from January 22 to February 13th. According to the 1938 Yearbook the unit moved some 30,000 refugees, operated 58,000 truck-miles, moved large quantities of supplies, organized a system of ration supply, performed guard duty and other essential services.
- The Medical Detachment of the 138th Field Artillery from Louisville served in Louisville at the Armory for three weeks. The Armory was a central clearing point for flood refugees. According to the 1938 Yearbook over 30,000 refugees were 'handled' through this point. The Detachment took an active part in supervising sanitation work and operating first-aid stations.

- Headquarters Battery of the 138th Field Artillery from Louisville was on “continuous” duty for two weeks.
- Service Battery (Less Band) of the 138th Field Artillery from Louisville is credited in the 1938 Yearbook for having reported for duty during the flood even before the call was put out.
- Battery B of the 1/138th Field Artillery from Louisville served in Louisville during the flood.
- Battery D of the 2/138th Field Artillery from Louisville served valiantly²⁹, presumably in Louisville, during the “flood emergency”
- Battery E of the 2/138th Field Artillery served on flood relief duty from January 22nd to February 14th commanded by Captain Charles J. Cronan.
- Battery F of the 2/138th Field Artillery from Louisville had forty-five members on duty during the flood.
- The Medical Detachment of the 123rd Cavalry from Hopkinsville did relief work in the Ohio Valley.
- The Machine Gun Troop of the 123rd Cavalry from Hopkinsville served in Paducah
- Troop A, 1/123rd Cavalry from Frankfort, according to the 1938 Yearbook, assisted in moving all residents of low ground in the community were moved to safety without loss of life. They were also assigned to assist in the transportation of the prisoners from the Frankfort Reformatory.
- Troop B, 1/123rd Cavalry from Lexington served four and one half months on flood duty in Frankfort.
- Troop E, 2/123rd Cavalry from London served patrol duty at Louisville and Paducah during the Ohio River flood.
- Troop F, 2/123rd Cavalry from Covington were on duty in Kenton County.
- Company D of the 2/113th Quartermaster Regiment from Pikeville Kentucky were sent to Catlettsburg where Captain Vernon Sanders and Lieutenant Grant Phillips Jr. and twenty-five privates established first aid and dressing stations and took charge of re-housing after the waters receded.
- The 38th Tank Company from Harrodsburg was put on duty January 22nd when Captain Bacon Moore, Lieutenant Gritton and Lieutenant Rue and thirty-five enlisted men were called for prison riot and flood duty at Frankfort. Lieutenant Gritton as Mess Officer prepared food for 3,000 people per day. Lieutenant Rue was detailed to the Capitol for ten days. Eighteen of the men were on trucks for four days moving convicts to other prisons. From February 1st to February 8th, Captain Moore with seventy-five men maintained quarantine guard running from Louisville up River Road behind the city to the Dixie Highway. Fourteen men stayed on prison guard duty until June when the prison

camp was closed. In what can only be termed a cruel twist of fate, some five years later, many of these same Harrodsburg Tankers would be on active duty as Company D of the 192nd Tank Battalion and back at a prison camp. Unfortunately this time they would be on the inside looking out of a Japanese Prisoner of War Camp in the Philippines.

- Service Company of the 149th Infantry from Bowling Green did “flood duty” at Bowling Green, Hawesville and Bardstown.
- Headquarters Company, 1/149th Infantry from Lexington was one of the first units to be called to service. It remained on duty in the Frankfort Reformatory for three days until all prisoners were moved to safer quarters. Leaving Frankfort as an escort to three hundred prisoners at the old city jail at Lexington for four weeks until the prisoners were returned to Frankfort. The radio section, short-wave radio W9HDY, was in constant contact with Louisville and was one of the few means of communicating with the city.
- Headquarters Company, 2/149th Infantry from Maysville under the leadership of Lieutenant James A. Kehoe, a former Adjutant General, and Lieutenant John D. Keith patrolled the town and acted as guards at the refugee stations until after the waters receded.
- Headquarters Company, 3/149th Infantry from Madisonville Mobilized on January 22nd and remained in service until March 2nd.
- Headquarters Battery and Combat Train, 1/138th Field Artillery from Louisville was called to duty by Colonel Sidney Smith over the radio on January 2nd³⁰ and the unit’s first mission was to route traffic around submerged intersections. They were soon evacuating refugees from the flooded parts of the city. Lieutenant Leslie W. Boyer and the radio detail were cited for their “splendid” service to the city. They provided the only communication between the pumping station and the city reservoir. Lieutenant Norman T. Bierbaum was active in the delivery of anti-typhoid serum to isolated centers, and Captain Clarence L. Jones served as liaison officer between the Regiment and the Mayor’s committee.
- Headquarters Battery and Combat Train of the 2/138th Field Artillery from Louisville boasts that when it was called for duty during the flood, every officer and enlisted man reported for duty, despite the fact that their own homes were flooded and their families in distress.

The Guard’s influence on the relief efforts were felt in other ways as well. Many veterans of the Kentucky National Guard put their shoulders to the wheel including notables such as George Chescheir and Percy Haly. Chescheir was chairman of the Evacuation body of the Mayor’s Citizen Committees on January 26, 1937.³¹

Colonel George M. Chescheir, Sr. (1889 - 1971)

Colonel George M. Chescheir, born in Springfield, Kentucky, 23 August 1889, was a long-time resident of the Harrods Creek area of Jefferson County, Kentucky, and active in both civil and military affairs.

Former commander of the 138th Field Artillery of the Kentucky National Guard, Colonel Chescheir was an Army veteran of the Mexican border action of 1916 and World War I and II. During World War II he was in charge of prisoner-of-war camps in Georgia, northern Florida, and Alabama, with headquarters at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was commended for his humanity in dealing with the prisoners under his command.³²



Percy Haly

Former Adjutant General Percy Haly served as Deputy Provost Marshall under the Louisville Mayor Neville Miller who was appointed Provost Marshall by Governor Chandler.

William Purcell Dennis (Percy) Haly served as Adjutant General of Kentucky from 1903 – 1906. While Haly had no military service other than his term as Adjutant General, he was well respected as the preeminent political organizer of his day. In the 1890's, he became a close friend and confidante of William Goebel, and was a principal strategist in his run for the governor in 1899. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Haly built a powerful machine that often dominated Democratic politics in Kentucky.

In January 1937, at the request of the mayor, Haly worked around the clock for ten days directing flood relief efforts in Louisville. He became sick and he developed pneumonia. He died in Louisville on 16 February 1937. His death could easily be attributed to his efforts during the flood.³³



No doubt there were many other former Guard members working diligently behind the scenes to alleviate the suffering where they could.

Following are a representation of many messages expressing praise and gratitude for the work done by the Kentucky National Guard:

March 8, 1931

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

ADJUTANT GENERAL G. LEE McClain
Frankfort, Kentucky

Dear General McClain:

I wish to express the appreciation of the people of Maysville and Mason County for the gallant and heroic services of the State Guards during the recent flood here.

They started doing rescue work-moving people and their belongings from their homes and made many risky trips through the swift currents in boats that leaked, using sticks as oars. They accomplished jobs that looked impossible to accomplish.

They enforced all orders of the Health Department, transported all provisions to four thousand people in East Maysville, and also transported provisions, with the assistance of the Highway Department, to Vanceburg, Springdale, South Ripley, and Dover, kept telephone lines in operation, running new wires when necessary, and even went to Blue Licks and ran wires for the main long distance lines so we could have outside communication.

The Guards kept guard over all boats and prevented looting and thievery, and thanks to the commanding officers, we did not lose a life, and there was no sickness or looting and, considering what we went through, the work accomplished was marvelous.

Lieutenant Kehoe³⁴ was of great assistance to me as Provost Marshal; in fact I owe all military credit to him. Thanking you again for the assistance of the National Guards,



Kehoe

I am, Very truly yours,
GEORGE H. FITZGERALD
Sheriff of Mason County

GENERAL G. L. McClain, PADUCAH, KY., Mar. 8, 1931
Frankfort, Kentucky

My Dear General McClain:

We have notified Captain Johnson that we are agreeing to release the National Guards when they change shifts at five o'clock tomorrow morning, Tuesday, March 9th. I wish to take this means of expressing my sincere appreciation and gratitude to you for the assistance these boys have given us in preserving law and order in our city. The guardsmen have conducted themselves in a manner that reflects credit to the organization and the state. I wish also to take this opportunity to commend to you Major Orin Coin and Captain Johnson. They have been most cooperative and have made excellent officers.

Please, General, accept on behalf of the citizens of Paducah our sincerest appreciation for the services performed.

Most sincerely yours,
L. V. BEAN
City Manager

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

The flood emergency relief duty reports received from the commanders of the various details are also expressive of Kentucky's gratitude for services rendered by the National Guard. Among these and representative of them is the following excerpt from the report of Capt. Boone Pelfrey, 149th Infantry, reporting from Greenup:

I desire to especially commend the services and the spirit of cooperation manifested by all and especially the acting mayor, Chief of Police, and his staff of Deputies, Messrs. Curry, Callahan, Rice and Stanley Craft for their services and boats: Attorney Nickle and wife and Mr. W. O. Nickle, Mr. Sturgill, Mr. Bachelor and Glenn. Mr. Morton, Mr. Herald, and Weeks and last but not least the Colored boys who did the cooking.

In his report from Russell (County), Sgt. E. R. Kaiser, Company E, 149th Infantry, says in part: "Members of my detail were treated with every consideration and extended every courtesy while on duty in Russell, and were given every cooperation by the Mayor, Chief of Police and the Sheriff."

HEADQUARTERS SEVENTH CAVALRY BRIGADE
FORT KNOX, KENTUCKY

Subject: Commendation

February 12, 1937

To: HIS EXCELLENCY, THE GOVERNOR OF KENTUCKY

1. I desire officially to commend the commissioned and enlisted personnel of the 138th Field Artillery, Kentucky National Guard, and other units attached thereto, commanded by Colonel Sidney Smith, for the splendid service rendered by them in Louisville during the recent flood disaster.
2. The arduous duties performed by them, including guarding private as well as public property, safeguarding life, actual rescuing of endangered persons during the flood period, and enforcing the quarantine, all combine to justify the confidence of the American people in their military forces and to merit my particular admiration.
3. The good judgment displayed by all ranks under most difficult conditions, the fine cooperation with other units and untiring effort through long hours of exposure to render assistance to the distressed people of Louisville reflect great credit to this fine regiment.

DANIEL VAN VOORHIS
Brigadier General, U. S. A., Commanding

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

Name of Unit	Location	Where Sent	Officers	Men	Days Duty
38th M.P. Company	Jackson	Frankfort	1	30	56
38th Tank Company	Harrodsburg	Frankfort	3	45	69
113th Ordnance Company	Bardstown	Frankfort	2	21	66
Headquarters Company, 75th Brigade	Bowling Green	Paducah	2	32	32
Medical Department Detachment 149th Infantry	Bowling Green	Paducah	1	11	24
Headquarters Company, 149th Infantry	St. Matthews	Frankfort, Louisville	1	31	17
Service Company, 149th Infantry	Bowling Green	St. Matthews	1	7	25
		Bowling Green, Hawesville, Bardstown	3	54	29
Howitzer Company, 149th Infantry	Carlisle	Maysville, Augusta	3	54	14
Headquarters Company, 1 Battalion 149th Infantry	Lexington	Lexington	2	35	25
Company A, 149th Infantry	Harlan	Frankfort	1	0	97
		Paducah	3	60	30
Company B, 149th Infantry	Somerset	Frankfort, Shepherdsville	1	45	69
Company D, 149th Infantry	Williamsburg	Paducah, Williamsburg	3	52	30
Headquarters Company, 2/149th Infantry	Maysville	Maysville	2	34	21
Company E, 149th Infantry	Olive Hill	Ashland, Vanceburg, Greenup, Russell, Winchester	3	56	24
Company F, 149th Infantry	Booneville	Frankfort, Shelbyville	2	42	39
Company G, 149th Infantry	Ashland	Ashland, Catlettsburg, Greenup	3	46	13
Company H, 149th Infantry	Ravenna	Frankfort	3	46	69
Headquarters Company, 3/149th Infantry	Madisonville	Lexington	1	0	55
		Madisonville	2	30	40
Company I, 149th Infantry	Marion	Paducah	3	37	47
Company K, 149th Infantry	Livermore	Livermore, Barlow	3	47	39
Company L, 149th Infantry	Mayfield	Paducah, Barlow	3	46	47
Company M, 149th Infantry	Russellville	Hickman, Russellville	3	46	45

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 63rd Field Artillery Brigade and 138th Field Artillery	Louisville	Louisville, Jefferson County	60	600	24
Battery F, 138th Field Artillery	Louisville	Louisville, Jefferson County	1	20	27
Company G, 113 th Medical Regiment	Richmond	Lexington, Frankfort	2	10	65
Company H, 113 th Medical Regiment	Richmond	Lexington, Frankfort	3	11	55
125th Wagon Company	Hopkinsville	Paducah, Eddyville	3	43	14
125th Wagon Company	Pikeville	Catlettsburg	3	25	31
Medical Department Detachment 123rd Cavalry	Hopkinsville	Paducah	1	15	38
Headquarters Troop and Band, 123rd Cavalry	Glasgow	Louisville, Carrollton, Glasgow	4	63	47
Machine Gun Troop, 123rd Cavalry	Hopkinsville	Paducah, Eddyville, Frankfort	3	49	39
Troop A, 123rd Cavalry	Frankfort	Frankfort	3	50	121
Troop B, 123rd Cavalry	Lexington	Frankfort	2	50	69
Troop E, 123rd Cavalry	London	Frankfort	2	30	9
Troop F, 123rd Cavalry	Covington	Covington	3	59	17
Troop I, 123rd Cavalry	Springfield	Frankfort	2	45	69
Troop K, 123rd Cavalry	Monticello	Frankfort, Lexington Pewee Valley	3 1	43 13	31 10
Headquarters Detachment, Quartermaster Train	Frankfort	Frankfort	2	10	70
State Staff Detachment	Henderson	Frankfort Henderson	1 1		67 37

Name of Officer and Unit	Location	Where Sent	Days Duty
Brig. Gen. G. L. McClain, Adt. Gen. Kentucky National Guard	Frankfort	State-at-Large, and Adjutant General's Office	99
Col. W. S. Taylor, Hdq. 149th Infantry	Louisville	St. Matthews	14
Col. Henry J. Stites, Hdq. 123rd Cavalry	Louisville	Western Half of Kentucky	4
Col. Roy W. Easley, Hdq. 149th Infantry	Louisville	Eastern Half of Kentucky	4
Maj. Joseph M. Kelly, 123rd Cavalry	Frankfort	Frankfort Prison Camp	115
Maj. Oren Coin, Hdq. 3rd Bn, 149th Infantry	Livermore	Paducah, Livermore	40
Maj. Frank S. Lebkuecher, State Staff	Frankfort	Frankfort and Prison Camp	100

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

Capt. Robert C. Riggs, Med. Dept. Det., 123rd Cavalry	Lexington	Frankfort	71
First Lieut. Jason A. Smith, 123rd Cavalry	Frankfort	Frankfort and Prison Camp	114

In addition to the above service, on April 1, 1937, a composite unit was organized with picked men from various National Guard Units on duty at the Prison Camp, Frankfort, Ky., and detailed to duty at that station. The number of men and dates of active duty were as follows:

FROM	TO	Officers	Men	Days Duty
April 1	April 30	12	109	30
May 1	May 31	12	99	31
June 1	June 6	2	6	6

Name of Officer and Unit	Location	Where Sent	Days Duty
Brig. Gen. Ellerbe W. Carter, Hdq. 63rd F. A. Bde	Louisville	Frankfort, Lexington, Jefferson County	19
Lieut. Col. John A. Polin, Hdq. 123rd Cavalry	Springfield	Frankfort (Prison Camp)	28
Maj. Walter F. Wright, Hdq. 63rd F. A. Bde	Louisville	Louisville	19
Maj. George E. Nelson, Hdq. Second Squadron, 123rd Cavalry	Covington	Covington	17
Maj. John R. Settle, 38th Div. Staff	Louisville	Frankfort (Prison Camp)	18
Maj. Robert C. Graham, Hdq. First Squadron, 123rd Cavalry	Frankfort	Frankfort	136
Capt. Edw. F. Seiller, Hdq. 149th Infantry	Louisville	Louisville, Aide to Director State Health Board	17
Capt. Hugh B. Gregory, Hdq. 123rd Cavalry	Springfield	Frankfort	26
Capt. Gaylord S. Gilbert, Hdq. 123rd Cavalry	Louisville	Louisville, Frankfort	37
Capt. Edw. B. Blackwell, 38th Div. Staff	Bowling Green	Bowling Green	13
Lieut. Franklin L. Ullrich, 38th Div. Staff	Louisville	Bowman Field, Louisville	16
Lieut. Mortimer M. Benton, Hdq. Second Btn. 123rd Cavalry	Louisville	Louisville	14
Lieut. Jams R. Dorman, Hdq. 123rd Cavalry	Louisville	Louisville	2
Lieut. Thos. J. Hiatt, Hdq. 63rd F. A. Bde	Louisville	Louisville	13

Sensational Media Accounts

The Kentucky National Guard's efforts at the Frankfort Penitentiary and prison camp are perhaps one of the most interesting of the whole ordeal the Commonwealth endured.

While exact details have been hard to come by, there seems to be no shortage of sensational headlines and stories regarding the prison. The New York Times Associated Press stories provide delightful examples.

"Icy Waters Balk Break by Convicts

Twenty-four Turn Back in Swim for Liberty in Kentucky – One is Drowned

Shift of 2,900 Ordered

Felons Shout "Hello, Happy!" to Governor as He Hails Them From a Boat"

The Associated Press.

FRANKFORT, Ky., Jan. 23 [Saturday] — Evacuation of the 2,900 men and women prisoners in the State Reformatory here was planned late today after the flooded structure had been without heat and light for twenty-four hours and two dozen inmates had attempted to escape by swimming the icy waters of the Kentucky River.

Most of the fugitives turned back after one dip into the water, six feet or more deep, and others gave up as guards fired over their heads. Lieut. Gov. Keen Johnson said all except one had been accounted for. He either drowned or escaped.

"We could have shot them all down like rats in the water if we had wanted to," said Warden James Hammond. "But that was not necessary. The water had them cut off and we caught them as soon as they tried to crawl out of it. No shots were fired directly at them. The shots that were fired were intended to frighten them and they had the desired result."

Water stood a foot or more deep today in the prison yard and first-floor cells. The inmates were moved to the second floor.

Conditions Called "Horrible"

Frankfort, partly inundated and with some 1,200 of its residents forced from their homes by the swollen Kentucky River, was stirred all day by rumors of prison rioting. One report was that a number of men convicts had broken into the women's quarters.

The warden denied all riot stories and Lieut. Gov. Johnson and Mr. Hammond and Joe Kelly, Assistant Adjutant General, had reported to him late today that "the prison is as quiet as an old maid's home."

A detachment of National Guard is on hand.

Mr. Hammond described conditions in the prison as "horrible" due to lack of drinking water, heat, light and sanitation.

Work was being pushed to lay a new pipe line to carry drinking water to those who cannot be removed soon.

Food cooked at the State Armory was taken to the prison in rowboats as well as drums of oil to keep the stoves and lamps in the prison burning.

Convicts Hail "Happy"

Governor A. B. Chandler, hastily returning from a Virginia vacation, ordered the evacuation and instructed that all available boats be commandeered.

The Governor who is popularly known as "Happy" Chandler, sitting in the rear of a boat propelled by an outboard motor, toured the reformatory this afternoon.

"This is a hell of a mess," he shouted to the marooned prisoners. But I'm going to get you out and take care of you. Just sit tight and keep your chins up."

Convicts huddled on fire escapes, clinging to barred windows and poking their heads out of upper story windows, shouted greetings to the Governor as he stood in the boat and waved his hat.

"Hello Happy!" some of them shouted.

"Get us out of here," was the general chorus. "We're going to down if you don't."

Inside the cell houses water could be seen swirling over the tops of many cells. Coal-oil lamps afforded dim light and little heat. Shivering around them were groups of prisoners, beaten-looking and dejected, but smiling as the Governor peered in and spoke to them. Warden Hammond furnished cigarettes to all inmates.

Mr. Chandler ordered a twenty-five-acre field near the State Feeble Minded Institute here cleared and bedded with sawdust and straw to provide a temporary camp for the convict refugees. There the prisoners will be housed in 500 tents being sent here by the United States War Department.

Cots and blankets also were on the way. Field kitchens will supply warm food. Oil stoves will furnish heat and light. A wire fence will enclose the camp.

Arrangements were made to move all the women prisoners, less than 100, into a vacant school building tonight. Men prisoners will be moved as soon as the camp is set up."³⁵

A January 29th Associated Press report said that a "tented convict city was rapidly spreading over the slopes at the east limits of Frankfort near the Feeble-Minded Instituted. Colonel John A. Polin, commanding officer of the Prison Camp, said 100 National Guardsmen had been relieved of duty there, but that a detachment of some 240 would remain for the present. Near by was camped a unit of 250 federal troops from Fort Thomas, Kentucky. Seven

men are bunked in each wooden-platformed tent. More than 500 tents are being erected."³⁶

The following day's headlines only became more sensational.

"12 Reported Dead In Flooded Prison

Kentucky Guardsmen Tell of Mad Rioting of Negroes and Whites at Frankfort

Gas Blast Alarms City

Removal of Convicts From the Reformatory Begun – Slayers Are Among First to Go

By The Associated Press.

FRANKFORT, Ky., Jan. 24 [Sunday] — National Guardsmen reported tonight that Negro and white prisoners were battling each other at the water-logged Frankfort Reformatory and that twelve were dead in rioting.

One soldier estimated the dead at fifteen and another said that the inmates "have absolutely gone mad."

Warden James Hammond and Major Joseph Kelly, National Guard officer, asserted, however, that they "did not know that any prisoners had died or been killed and if any had been, did not know how many."

Adding to the confusion of this flood-stricken Kentucky capital, a gas main exploded tonight.

Late tonight emergency workmen repaired the break in the gas main leading across the St. Clair Street Bridge, but they said that they could not hope for the main to remain in working order long.

Din Lasts Into the Night

Wild disorder prevailed inside the prison walls at night. The din of rioting prisoners could be heard for several blocks. National Guardsmen, bristling with armament, patrolled outside the stockade, helpless to do anything about the reported "chaotic" conditions inside the reformatory.

The rioting in the prison started Friday (January 22nd) and the extent of it could only be guessed at by those outside the walls.

Earlier in the day the State Health Department had condemned the Frankfort Reformatory, Dr. A. T. McCormack, Health Commissioner, declaring that "it is cruel and inhuman to confine even the most hardened criminals in it." McCormack, a native of Nelson County, was Surgeon General of the Kentucky National Guard from 1900 to 1908.

State health officials announced that the United States Public Health Service was sending engineers, doctors and nurses here to aid in the establishment of a temporary prison on the property of the State Feeble Minded Institute here.

The area, which will be converted into an outdoor armed prison camp, was being fenced in with barbed wire tonight by emergency workers.

Governor Chandler visited the prison again tonight. He went through the main gates in a motorboat and again pleaded with the prisoners to cooperate with State officials.

The Governor also visited an old school building on high ground in East Frankfort to which the forty women prisoners have been moved.

About 100 male prisoners were taken from the reformatory tonight to jails at Lexington, Danville and Winchester.

Among them were John Montjoy, a Negro under sentence to die for attacking a white woman in Covington, and three men convicted of murder.

Governor Chandler said that tomorrow 300 convicts would be sent to Lexington and seventy-five to Winchester.

Intermittent sounds of shots came today from the prison, but officials gave no explanation. Earlier in the day it had been said that guards had fired into the ground at times during the night.

Rumors arose that the sinking of the water, now about six feet deep in the prison yards and covering the lower tier or cells, would disclose bodies of convicts drowned or shot in yesterday's attempted break-away.

The rain stopped at Cincinnati and Louisville. In Louisville 2.94 inches fell during the day. The outlook was for generally fair and colder weather. Further east along the tributaries of the Ohio, however rain continued.

The city water supply was cut off except for a few hours daily and water was being hauled from Lexington for the 2,900 convicts in the reformatory.

IN a radio appeal to the State, Governor Chandler urged citizens to "keep up their courage," and added:

"The people of Kentucky can lick this problem."

He requested that all relief agencies work through the American Red Cross.

Governor Chandler announced that he had been advised that the Federal Government had commandeered all river craft on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and directed them to proceed to the Ohio River Valley, with a base for their relief operations at Golconda, Ill.

The Governor added that a government boat carrying medicine was en route to Paducah, which after being reported 60 percent inundated last night, was completely isolated today."³⁷

"40 Convicts Gone In Flood Exodus

Kentucky Officials Are Unable to Check on Deaths, Reported 10 to 50, in Frankfort Riots

Governor Directs Moving

Inmates Cheer Him and He Shakes Hand of Last to Leave the Old Prison

Frankfort, KY., Jan. 25 [Monday] (AP). — Between forty and forty-five prisoners were reported missing when prison clerks made a check after evacuation of the flooded State Reformatory was completed here tonight.

Confusion prevented an accurate check on the fatalities. Some National Guardsmen estimated that from ten to fifty convicts were killed during the rioting that began on Friday (22 January). One prisoner died of natural causes in the prison hospital today (published Tuesday, 26 January).

One high State official said that instead of the original 2,906 prisoners reported in the institution, as many as 3,111 were accounted for. Of these, eight-two were women. Authorities called a conference for tomorrow to compare reports and complete their record.

800 Sent to Lexington

Governor A. B. Chandler, who took personal charge of the evacuation, said that 800 of the prisoners had been sent to Lexington and put in the city and county jails and the United States narcotic hospital. As many more were sent to other jails throughout the State and the remaining convicts were put in temporary concentration camps in and around Frankfort.

The Governor gave a graphic picture of how the inmates were taken out of the prison, the yard of which was under twenty feet of water.

He said that the convicts were taken from their cell blocks and ferried in boats to a ladder reaching to the second story of the building. They climbed this ladder, passed through the prison chair factory and were herded down another ladder, across a temporary pontoon bridge and up a hillside to waiting busses.

Inside the flooded building the Governor told the convicts to "hold a tight line until we get you out of here," and they cheered him. Later he shouted encouragement to each boatload reaching the temporary wharf. He fired three pistol shots as a signal when the exodus was finished.

Shakes Hand With Convict

The Governor Shook hands with the convict at the end of the line and told him that he would be the last prisoner in the old penitentiary as he announced its permanent abandonment.

Possibility of numerous pardons and commutations was seen when Governor Chandler expressed gratitude over the courage exhibited in the evacuation.

"You have done a good job, fellows," he said, "and I am going to reward you."

Meanwhile the Kentucky River dropped from a stage of forty-seven feet in the afternoon to forty-six at night. Four-fifths of Frankfort was still submerged, however, and speedboats manned by the National Guard were on patrol following reports of looting.

The Capitol, on high ground in South Frankfort, sheltered about 2,000 refugees. Gas and water service were suspended and the city had an acute shortage of milk.

County Judge L. Boone Hamilton estimated damage in Frankfort and Franklin County at about \$4,000,000.

"More than half of our little city now lies in ruins," he said. "Twenty-five hundred families have abandoned their homes and are penniless."³⁸

Chandler Very Involved in Prisoner Transfer

One particular newspaper account demonstrates fully just how involved Governor Chandler was in easing the plight of the prisoners in the Frankfort prison. (Transcribed in part below.)

"New Place for Prisoners At FMI Rises Rapidly As Gov. Chandler Looks On

The State Journal
January 27, 1937

Chandler Makes Appeal

In a nation-wide appeal yesterday, Governor Chandler urged the nation to come to the assistance of their fellow citizens of Kentucky in their hour of distress.

The Governor described the fright[ful] condition along the Ohio River valley. He expressed appreciation to Governors of many states who had sent him messages of sympathy and offer of assistance.

In his address, he urged particularly the citizens of St. Louis to send immediate aid to Paducah, explaining that they were closer to the scene than the State capitol.

He asked that vaccines be sent to Dr. A. T. McCormack at Louisville and that food and clothing be sent to Mayor Neville Miller, provost marshal in the city of Louisville.

More than two hundred convicts were quartered early last night in the tents erected within the barbed wire and heavily guarded stockade that has been erected on the eastern portion of the Feeble-Minded Institute ground. Governor Chandler personally directed the transfer of the convicts.

Springing up with mushroom-like growth, the tented city was made ready for the convicts quartered there days will be ready to accommodate the last night and within the next few remainder of the more than 2,900 inmates evacuated from the reformatory here due to flood conditions.

The 200 men were removed from the nearby National Guard armory where some 800 prisoners were quartered Monday and yesterday. A detachment of 34 National Guardsmen under command of Assistant Adjutant General Joseph Kelly and augmented by prison guards and members of the State police force convoyed the prisoners from the armory to the stockade adjoining.

The convicts were moved in rapid and orderly fashion, holding tight and silent ranks when the floodlights which illuminate the huge enclosure blinked out to leave the stockade in darkness for five minutes — a darkness relieved only by moonlight.

Corps of workmen, toiling for the past 36 hours, erected army squad tents into each of which went seven convicts. Each tent has a wooden floor and a tent stove. The tents are laid out in regular army fashion, with company streets, and straw-covered ground, adequate sanitation facilities and plenty of food and water.

Nearly 300 Federal troops arrived yesterday to augment State troops detailed to guard the enclosure.

The convicts appeared cheerful and content with the change from the flooded prison.

The remainder of the 2,900 convicts, quartered in jails in various central Kentucky cities will be moved to the stockade today and tomorrow and will remain there until a new prison is erected.

Governor Chandler followed the transfer procedure closely, inspecting each tent and seeing to it that each convict squad was quartered properly.

Kentucky's abandoned state prison here today unfolded part of its story as flood waters of the Kentucky river began falling.

It still was impossible to determine accurately how many, if any, of the 2,900 convicts inside the 135-year-old prison when flood water rose to a height of more than six feet in the cell blocks, were dead. Prison officials expected that some bodies would be found when the water finally flows out.

Governor Chandler, anxious to ascertain quickly the number of fatalities, visited the prison yesterday. He was accompanied by a small group of officers, Captain Leslie DeRossett, who was in command inside the prison during the period of the disorder and a newspaperman. ...³⁹

One Account of Duty at the Prison

Accounts of the National Guard's duty during the great flood have proven to be rare in research to date. To date the only substantive sources for personal accounts of the duty are from a series of articles written by Nettie Glenn, a local historian, and published in the Frankfort State Journal in March and April of 1971. Hopefully future research will reveal more first hand accounts and photographs from that time.

“During 1937 Flood National Guard Served Long Hours At Prison

State Journal 28 Mar 71
Part 2 of 3
By Nettie Glenn

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

On January 21st, Lieutenant Governor Keene Johnson, who was acting during A. B. Chandler's absence, during the 1937 flood emergency, telegraphed the U.S. Secretary of War: "Disaster impending from floods various places in state. Absolutely necessary to use National Guard equipment. Please grant authority by wire."

(The following account was told to me by Marion Longmire, Joseph "Buddy" Oether and Forrest Quire, who were members of the Kentucky National Guard in 1937.)

On January 21st, due to the flood emergency, all Kentucky National Guard units of the 123rd Cavalry, Troop A, and Headquarters Detachment 113th Quartermaster, were ordered to report to the Armory on Maryland Avenue. At 2:30 a.m. on January 21st, First Lieutenant Marion Longmire was awakened by a telephone call at his south Frankfort residence ordering him to report for duty at the prison warden's office across the street from the penitentiary.

Longmire stopped on his way in and picked up Buddy Oether, Clarence Oether and George Hanrahan, who had also been ordered to report. They were driving a 1936 Chevrolet and by the time they reached Bridge Street the water was seeping through the floorboard which stood approximately 18 inches from the ground. Here they were halted by officials who advised them the bridge had been judged unsafe for travel and was closed to all traffic.

"They let us go across, of course," recalled Buddy Oether. "And you talk about a creepy feeling. We didn't know if we'd make it or not. Ours was the last vehicle over."

The Plucky little car stood the test, however, and carried the men to the area just in front of the Old Governor's Mansion on High Street. From there on they were forced to travel by boat.

"When I reported for duty, I stepped into a boat on High Street – 18 hours later when we were finally relieved, we stepped from a boat onto the area near the Christian Church. The water had risen that much," said Longmire. "I remember the church had set up a soup kitchen and we ate for the first time in 18 and one half hours."

The warden's office was on the corner of High and Mero Streets opposite the prison towers and when the Guardsmen arrived there, they reported to Maj. Frank S. Lubkuecher and Maj. Joseph Kelly, assistants to Adjutant General G. Lee McClain. Captain DeRossett, the assistant warden, was also in the office.

Longmire and three enlisted men from Lexington were the first troops ordered to report to a pillbox on the north prison wall near the women's ward. Major Kelly advised them that some of the civilian guards had deserted their posts and that an estimated 18 prisoners had broken out and seized a pillbox in that area. They also had seized the arms that had been abandoned by the fleeing guards and were considered extremely dangerous. Three men had already escaped and were believed to be inside a building on Holmes Street, just across from the prison wall.

There were very few motorboats within the Frankfort area then and most water travel was done by rowboats. Clumsy at best, these craft were no match for the strong current that swirled through the swollen waters on High Street and the only way to maneuver the boats across the street towards the prison towers was by using a rope that had been secured to a telephone pole that stood on the corner by the warden's house and which was anchored to a spot inside the prison gates.

Across Mero from the warden's house stood the Hoge Montgomery, and as the National Guardsmen pulled their boat along the rope someone fired a shot at them through the window of the old building, sending particles of a shattered window pane flying into the tiny craft.

When Longmire and his three men finally reached their post, they discovered that Penn Haydon, the civilian guard on duty, had not left his pillbox. From that spot on the prison wall where they were stationed, the troops were able to control Holmes Street and the rear of the penitentiary.

By daybreak water traffic began to increase and occasionally someone would try to steer a rowboat up Holmes Street. Their efforts were wasted, for each time they reached the corner of the prison wall the strong river current would pull the boat back.

The grey dawn brought with it a clear view of the dismal prison buildings whose lower floors were completely inundated. And in the pillbox across the way, the would-be escapees were growing restless. From time to time, Penn Haydon fired at a piece of driftwood or some other known object in an effort to alert the men that he was still on duty.

Early in the day, prison guards manned a boat and rowed down Holmes Street towards the pillbox which sheltered the escaped prisoners.

"The only way the men could get out of the pillbox was to jump into that cold, dirty water and believe me, they didn't want to do that," recalled Buddy Oether. Finally, the prison guard began taking pot shots near the pillbox, trying to make the men believe they were firing on them. It worked. And one by one they leaped into the water. One big, strapping Negro man who was on death row tried to stay submerged long enough to hide himself and perhaps escape. But he was forced to come up for air and when he did, they caught him.

"As there was no room in the boat for the men, they were forced to hang onto the sides and be pulled to safety. They were taken to the warden's office where they huddled together in their wet clothing until all the prisoners were evacuated by the National Guard."

During this time the men who were confined in the cell block next to the women's ward had broken out of their cells. The first warning that something was wrong occurred when the men were seen emerging from the building through a large hole which they had dug in the wall. The opening was just above a steam pipe which connected

the men's cell block to the women's ward. One by one the inmates crawled across the pipe and entered the women's quarters.

(Later, when a new prison complex was constructed, this incident was the deciding factor in the separation of the women's institution from the men's.)

As the National Guards only duty was to contain the men within the walls, stopping the escapees was the responsibility of the civilian guard. Not wishing to wound the men, he fired intermittent shots at floating debris, but his efforts were ignored.

In the main cell block of the men's ward, the guards had unlocked the individual cells when the water began to rise and the lower floor was flooded. It was a token freedom, since the building itself was thoroughly secured before the prison guards abandoned their posts. The inmates had had no food, heat, water or lights since the flooding began and the situation was worsened by rumors that Dix dam was expected to break at any time.

"We did get somehardtack in to them later on," Forest Quire recalled. "I remember we looked at the tins and they were dated 1917. First World War. And it wasn't too bad. We were eating it ourselves. Everyone was supposed to get one tin, but I doubt if all received their shares."

As the long hours became days the trapped men began to build fires throughout the cell block.

"We couldn't figure out why," said Marion Longmire. "They burned everything they could lay their hand on. Mattresses, pillows, anything. If it was for warmth, it couldn't work, because they also kept breaking out windows."

During the time that Marion Longmire and his men were occupying the prison wall pillbox, Buddy Oether and some other National Guard members were sitting in a john-boat on Holmes Street.

"On the same day the prisoners were taken from the pillbox," Buddy recalled, "the escaped men who had disappeared the night before came walking down Fort Hill. There was a wooden fence along someone's yard on High Street, and they just walked across the water on that fence and got into our boat. No problem."⁴⁰

"After Two Hour's Rest, The Men Were Recalled

State Journal 4 April 71

Part 3 of 3

By Nettie Glenn

On the second night of the 1937 flood alert, some additional troops from the 123rd Cavalry, Troop A, were brought in. After the relieved men had been warmed and fed at the Christian church, they reported to the armory for some rest.

"When we walked in up there, the cooks had dug pits in the dirt floor of the drill hall and put army field ranges in them. The smoke was confined in the building, though, and there was only about two feet of

clearance below the ceiling where you see. They were cooking for the troops and no one had thought to cut a hole in the ceiling. We soon remedied that."

After two hour's rest, the men were recalled to duty and Longmire was assigned to accompany Captain DeRossett, the assistant warden, to the women's quarters.

"The place was a shambles, but the matron had held up remarkably well. Remember, they had been trapped there for days, now, and the water was still rising.

They did have some food. But no lights, water or heat. If they did take a drink, it had to be the floodwater and there was no typhoid vaccine available. At least we could break the icicles off the pillbox roof for water when we were outside."

On the morning of January 23rd, Walter Todd, Pat Riley and 25 other men began to build a bridge to evacuate the prisoners.

The ramp was constructed of 2x4's, and rested on wooden boxes that were 4 feet wide and about 5 feet deep and were filled with rocks. It ran from the southeast corner of the prison wall across Clinton onto the railroad next to the freight depot. From there they climbed the hill on east Broadway emerging just opposite the arsenal.

There were two National Guard search teams stationed along the ramp and as the prisoners passed the troops confiscated all the weapons they could find. When the search was completed, the Guard had filled several baskets with an assortment of ice picks, knives and other potential arms.

The women prisoners were evacuated by boat and quartered in the old prison school building on east Clinton.

When the men reached East Main Street, they were loaded onto every kind of available vehicle, including the old 1933 Model Chevrolet army trucks and Greyhound buses. During the first few days, only prison trustees and model prisoners remained in Frankfort and the more hardened men were taken to jails in Winchester, Georgetown, Williamstown, Richmond and Harrodsburg, Lawrenceburg, Lebanon and the narcotics farm in Lexington.

"After all the men had been evacuated, we went back into the flooded area to see if there was any truth in the rumors that several men had been killed during the emergency," Longmire recalled. "Governor Chandler was there, along with members of the press, and although there was almost every other object floating in the water, including dead fish, cats and dogs, we found no prisoners."

The stockade, or "tent city" that had been prepared for the men, lay sprawled on a 15-acre plot of ground just behind the Kentucky Training Home and was built by WPA workers and a company of the 10th Infantry stationed at Ft. Mitchell. Its construction was supervised by Capt. Bacon Moore of the Harrodsburg tank company, the same outfit that was destined to be captured during the World War II while serving on Bataan.

But on the first night of the evacuation, the only shelter available for the 800 remaining prisoners was a small section of the National Guard garage.

"The men were so packed in there that many were forced to stand all night," said Buddy Oether. "Only a few could sit down."

In less than a week, however, the camp was completed with full heating, lighting, and sanitary facilities, and prison ward James Hammond supervised the return of all prisoners to the control of 300 officers and enlisted men of the Kentucky National Guard.

The nightmare was over.

The inmates settled down to the routine of the prison camp and eventually they were allowed to do their own cooking.

"They were pretty model prisoners," said Forrest Quire. "One or two escaped long enough to check on their families, but they soon came back."

The administrative details of running the prison camp were performed by Maj. Joseph J. Kelly, with Supt. E. O. Huey, of the State Police, assisting. The Kentucky National Guard units remained on duty until June of 1937 when they moved the prisoners out and into the new reformatory at LaGrange. Only four of the enlisted men who were assigned the cleanup detail are still living: John Pardi, Alex Gravitt, Johnny McDonald and Forrest Quire.

When at last, the prisoners were moved into the new reformatory at LaGrange, their families and the people of Frankfort breathed sighs of relief. "

GUARDSMAN IS DROWNED WHEN BOAT IS SUNK

Tom Brown, Madisonville, Loses Life on Flood Rescue Mission

THREE OTHERS LIVE

Madisonville Messenger

January 25, 1937

Courtesy Linda Qualls, Hopkins County Genealogical Society

"Sergeant Tom Brown, 33, of the Madisonville National Guard company drowned about 2:30 o'clock Saturday afternoon when a boat collapsed in nine feet of flood water half a mile west of Jewel City.

Members of the military company have been searching for the body continuously, using hooks, but at noon Monday the search remained unsuccessful. Water at the point where Brown went down was eighteen feet deep today.

Two other guardsmen, Second Lieutenant Lawrence Moore and Private C. W. Anthony and Emmett Ashby, teacher in Friendship school, were in the boat, with Brown. After swimming sixty feet in icy water to the Slaughters Road, they were rescued in another boat.

SURVIVORS TREATED

The survivors were taken to the Joe Sandefur home, two miles from Jewel City, where they were stripped before a roaring fire and treated with stimulants by Dr. James Wilson Slaughters. Beyond

suffering from exposure and shock, the three withstood the ordeal well.

The Madisonville Guard company had been ordered out Friday night by Adjutant General G. Lee McClain, Frankfort, to assist in flood rescue in the Ashbyburg-Jewel City Region.

According to Lieut. Moore, he, Brown and Anthony were going from high ground to Jewel City and Ashbyburg to make a survey of flood conditions. Ashby asked to go along, hoping to catch another boat at Ashbyburg to take him to his home.

BOAT DISINTEGRATES

The boat, which had been taken from Spring Lake here, had been equipped with an outboard motor, the vibrations from which caused boards in the stern to part. The boat ended into the water almost without warning, throwing out its occupants.

The guardsmen were weighted down with equipment. Each was wearing a storm coat, gum boots and other regulation equipment, including, it is said, cartridge belts fully loaded. Brown was seen last clinging to the up-ended boat. As the three others struggled toward the road, Brown was told to hold on. He nodded affirmatively.

While swimming toward the road, Lieut. Moore looked back, saw Brown shake his head and sink. He did not come again to the surface.

AWAIT RESCUE BOAT

Moore, Anthony and Ashby stood on the road in eighteen inches of water for fifteen minutes before help in a following boat arrived. "We could not have stood it much longer," Anthony said later, "we were just about numb from the cold."

Guardsmen, farmers living near the scene and people from Madisonville worked feverishly through out Saturday night and Sunday.

The boat was recovered and searchers believed Brown's body could not be far away. However, he sank over a ditch and it is help possible, his body may have been carried up or down the stream.

Brown, an employee of the Red Front Grocery, West Center street, is survived by his widow, Mrs. Mary Utley Brown; his son, Herbert, of Madisonville, and by his father, Martin Brown, of Sebree. Mrs. Brown is the daughter of A. Utley for many years a member of the Hopkins Fiscal County.

RECOVER BODY

Madisonville Messenger

January 30, 1937

Courtesy Linda Qualls, Hopkins County Genealogical Society

The body of Sergeant Tom Brown, 33, who drowned at 2:30 o'clock last Saturday afternoon in flood waters near Jewel City, was found today floating near the point where the guardsman was seen last clinging to a boat. It was to be brought to Madisonville this afternoon.

Brown and C. W. Anthony, of Madisonville National Guard under command of Second Lieutenant Lawrence Moore, with Emmett Ashby,

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

school teacher, were enroute from the flood edge to survey conditions in Jewel City and Ashbyburg. Vibrations from an outboard motor proved too much for the worn rowboat to which it had been attached and the stern simply fell out, throwing the four men into icy water.

All but Brown swam sixty feet to a road, where they waited 15 minutes in eighteen inches of water before being rescued in another boat. The military company and others have searched continuously for Brown's body, It came to the surface almost a week, to the hour after sinking.

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

Letter by Brown's battalion commander to the General Assembly seeking financial relief for Brown's family.

December 28 1937

Hon. John Kirtley
Legislative Committee, Kentucky Legislature
Frankfort Ky.

Dear John:

The thing that I meant to talk to you about during the recent visit to your office was the case of Sgt. Brown, of Bn. Hq Co., Madisonville Ky., concerning whom, the facts are as follows:

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Thomas J. Brown, Sergeant Hq. Co. 3rd. Bn. 149th. Infantry, Madisonville Ky., while on active duty under call of the Adjutant General of Kentucky on January 23 1937, was drowned. He was survived by a wife and one child, 10 years of age. Had only a small amount of insurance and a part of this went for necessary funeral expenses. His wife's father Aepasia Utley, who, by the way, served 20 years in the Ky. Guard from 1898 to 1918. died further complicating the case and increasing the need of this family.

With these facts and since no provision is now in effect covering such cases, we are respectfully asking your committee to include in your recommendations to the coming session of the Legislature such pay or allowance as will compensate to, at least, some extent for their loss and for the care of this child.

Any additional information on this case will be gladly given by the Adj. Gen., to whom a copy of this letter is addressed, Lieut James K. Ramsey or myself.

Now, John, I realize that this is only messing up the detail for you but this man died in line of duty and while he was doing what he could to care for the flood sufferers in the recent flood and it just seems that it is our duty to make some provision for this family. For the state to not even be able to pay funeral expenses seems to me to leave a great gap and that some amends should be made. Further, we feel that any measures taken in this direction will be appreciated by this family and all who are acquainted with the case.

Thanking you for any effort you may make, we are

Very truly yours

Oren Cain

Conclusion

We may never know the full and true story of what happened at the prison on those long days and nights before it was evacuated or at the prison camp. Nor will we ever know of all the daring rescues or long days and nights of duty for the Kentucky National Guard across the Commonwealth during this disaster but it is fair to say that it was an extraordinary time. The members of the Kentucky Guard showed their character and courage and apparently never faltered from doing their duty as best they could under the circumstances.

At this distance of more than 70 years we can be confident that the Kentucky Guard took part in tremendous efforts that saved many lives and often in harrowing situations. They protected lives and property across the state and no doubt brought hope wherever they went.

Had those same events happened individually at another time, the Guardsmen would be celebrated as heroes. As it is their deeds have evaporated into the mists of time and merged into the fabric of the thousands of heroic deeds done by citizens and soldiers from every walk of life that rushed to aid of the citizens of Kentucky and their neighbors throughout the Ohio Valley.

The story of the great flood in Kentucky, second only to Noah's flood, truly embodied the Commonwealth's motto — "United We Stand."

Annex 1 - Documents of interest

HEADQUARTERS, 138th F.A.
Louisville, Ky.

March, 4, 1937.

Subject: Expenditures during Flood Duty, 1937.

To: The Adjutant General of Kentucky, Frankfort, Ky.

1. The following expenditures were made, or incurred, incident to active duty during the period January, 22 - February 14, 1937.

a. Rations and fuel for a consolidated mess established in the Drill Hall, total \$10,249.79. As the mess fed, in addition to National Guard personnel, regular army, police, firemen and city and county employees, and, as \$3,750.16 was incurred for rations supplied direct to certain negro organizations, the American Red Cross has taken over all bills, except \$582.31, properly chargeable to 138th Field Artillery Exchange, and \$2,881.38 chargeable to the State of Kentucky. This last amount was arrived at by multiplying the number of National Guard personnel as shown on morning reports, by 30 cents, the assumed ration allowance.

b. Gasoline, oil, kerosene and anti-freeze - total \$1,268.94, all assumed by the American Red Cross.

c. Property, such as hotel ranges, stoves, kitchen equipment, automobile and truck batteries and repair parts, flash lights and batteries, straw, lumber for latrines, radio batteries, etc., total \$1,435.67, all of which has been assumed by the American Red Cross, with the understanding that all property which can be salvaged will be delivered to it.

2. When the Red Cross has finally audited and paid the accounts assumed by it, vouchers will be prepared for the balance due from the State, \$2,881.38, and forwarded for payment.

Sidney Smith.
Colonel, 138th F.A.
Commanding.

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue

THE LOUISVILLE PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARY
BROADWAY AT FIRST STREET
LOUISVILLE, KY.

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

February 9, 1937.

Col. Geo. M. Chescheir,
Marion E. Taylor Building,
Louisville, Kentucky.

Dear Col. Chescheir:

I am aware that it is quite impossible for anyone who was not physically with you all the time really to understand what you and your unit of the National Guard suffered and accomplished during our recent disastrous flood.

Nevertheless, I saw enough with my own eyes to enable my imagination to form a picture of your work which leads me to write a brief note to express, on behalf of thousands of flood-stricken citizens of Louisville, gratitude for the courageous, efficient, persevering service which you rendered in a time of great distress.

The officers and men whom you sent to evacuate our refugees from the seminary did their job, not only as good soldiers, but also as high-minded gentlemen. Especially would I like to commend your Lieut. James for the courtesy and patience he displayed in a circumstance which might easily have provoked profanity in a man of lesser calibre.

Please accept my grateful appreciation, not only of what you did during this crisis, but also of how you did it.

Sincerely yours,

Frank H. Caldwell
Frank H. Caldwell,
President.

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue



COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY
EXECUTIVE CHAMBER
FRANKFORT

ALBERT BENJAMIN CHANDLER
GOVERNOR

March 19, 1937

My dear Colonel Chescheir:

The National Guard of Kentucky has proven its worth as a public benefactor in time of peace. By their services to the stricken people of Kentucky in the recent disaster the officers and enlisted men of the Guard have shown that they possess ingenuity, self reliance and above all common sense.

You have written a splendid chapter into our record of citizen soldiery. I want to take this opportunity to commend you and the men of your command.

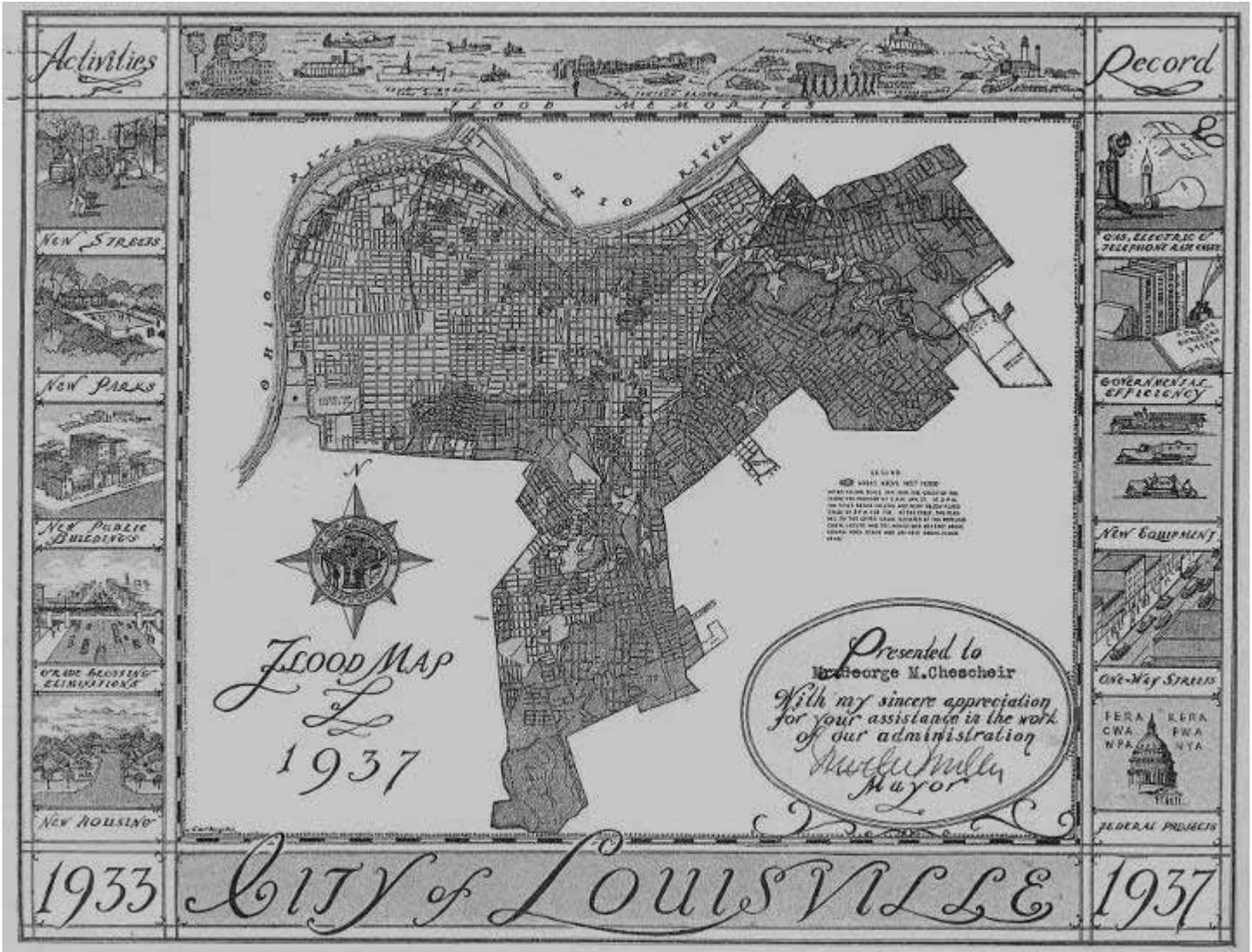
With best wishes, I am

Sincerely yours,

A. B. Chandler,
Governor

Lt. Col. George M. Chescheir,
Armory,
Louisville, Kentucky

The Kentucky National Guard to the Rescue



Courtesy Kentucky Historical Society Special Collections, Cheschoir Collection

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The American Guide Series, Military History of Kentucky Written by Workers of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Kentucky and Sponsored by The Military Department of Kentucky. This publication was the 1938 Kentucky National Guard Annual Report dated 1 January 1939.

Historical Annual National Guard of the Commonwealth of Kentucky 1938 Copyright, 1938 Army and Navy Publishing Company, Baton Rouge, Louisiana unless otherwise noted.

The Great Flood of 1937 – Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits – Louisville, KY by Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives 2007 Butler Books

The Great Flood of 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky by Willard Rouse Jillson Standard Printing Company, 1937

End Notes

- ¹ The State Journal, Frankfort Kentucky January 23, 1937 Page 1
- ² Page 9 - The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky By Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.
- ³ Page 9 - The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky By Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.
- ⁴ P 81 - The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky by Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.
- ⁵ The State Journal January 29 1937. Page 1. Photo caption: “Associated Press Photo –Here is a general view of the mammoth Louisville armory where more than 6,000 homeless victims of the greatest flood in the history of the city are being cared for. This remarkable picture shows refugees resting on army cots while other receive necessary supplies in the background.”
- ⁶ Kentucky Precipitation Monthly Observations, Kentucky Climate Center, Western Kentucky University
- ⁷ The Kentucky Encyclopedia “Flood of 1937” Page 327 column b.
- ⁸ Fact Sheet: Record Greatest Monthly Precipitation in Kentucky by Glen Conner State Climatologist Emeritus for Kentucky Courtesy Kentucky Climate Center
- ⁹ Kentucky Encyclopedia “Rivers” Page 744 col b.
- ¹⁰ U. S. Army Corps of Engineers Website <http://outreach.lrh.usace.army.mil/Locks/McAlpine/Default.htm>
- ¹¹ The Great Flood of 1937 Deepest Ohio River Flood on Record at Many Locations by NOAA’s National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office Louisville, KY http://www.crh.noaa.gov/lmk/?n=flood_37
- ¹² Fact Sheet: Record Greatest Monthly Precipitation in Kentucky by Glen Conner State Climatologist Emeritus for Kentucky Courtesy Kentucky Climate Center
- ¹³ Hell & High Water Monday, Feb. 01, 1937 Time Magazine
- ¹⁴ Hell & High Water Monday, Feb. 01, 1937 Time Magazine
- ¹⁵ Yellow Waters, February 8, 1937 Time Magazine
- ¹⁶ New York Times January 30, 1937 Page 10 by Luther S. Horne
- ¹⁷ Louisville Remembers ’37 Flood, Press Release dated 22 January 2007 courtesy Louisville Metro <http://www.louisvilleky.gov/Mayor/News/2007/01-22-07-flood.htm>
- ¹⁸ The State Journal Frankfort, Kentucky Thursday January 21, 1937 Page 1.
- ¹⁹ Special Orders No. 11 Kentucky Department of Military Affairs dated January 21, 1937 courtesy Kathy Gortney, Military Records and Research Branch.
- ²⁰ Hell & High Water Monday, Feb. 01, 1937 Time Magazine
- ²¹ According to the Kentucky State Police website <http://www.kentucky.statepolice.org/history.htm> what we know today as the Kentucky State Police began as the Kentucky Highway Patrol in 1936 with only 40 officers and reaching 200 officers by 1948. Given the widespread nature of the flooding they would have not been able to assist the Kentucky Guard with many troopers at the prison camp. It is worth noting that the The Officer Down Memorial Page list two Kentucky Highway Patrol fatalities in December 1935. With one having some five months with the agency and the other three months which would mean that the Kentucky Highway Patrol would have had to have begun some time prior to the date above. Further research will be needed to ascertain the Kentucky Highway Patrol’s involvement in the Flood of 1937. <http://www.odmp.org/agency.php?agencyid=1964>
- ²² Tom Fugate discussion
- ²³ New York Times, Jan 30, 1937 Page 8 ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2004)
- ²⁴ Page 85 - The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky By Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.
- ²⁵ The State Journal Page 1 January 29, 1937 – Associated Press report dated 28 January.
- ²⁶ Page 92 - The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky By Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.
- ²⁷ Page 101 - The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky By Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.
- ²⁸ 1938 Kentucky National Guard Yearbook, 1938, Army and Navy Publishing Company, Baton Rouge, Louisiana Page 38 column b.
- ²⁹ 1938 Kentucky National Guard Yearbook, 1938, Army and Navy Publishing Company, Baton Rouge, Louisiana Page 153 column b

³⁰ This is significantly earlier than the full-scale mobilization of the 22nd when most other units are indicated as beginning duty. It is possible it is a typographical error as well.

³¹ Page 88 - *The Great Flood of 1937, Rising Waters – Soaring Spirits, Louisville, Kentucky* By Rick Bell in Association with the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Butler Books, 2007.

³² Reprinted from article: "In Memoriam," *Filson Club History Quarterly*, 46 (1972) courtesy John Trowbridge.

³³ From an article by Thomas H. Appleton, Jr. provided by John M. Trowbridge.

³⁴ The Sheriff is referring to James Arthur Kehoe who served as the 31st Adjutant General of Kentucky from 1924 – 1927 under Governor William J. Fields. Kehoe came back and served in the Kentucky Guard after his tour as Adjutant General. Kehoe was a well known native of Mason County.

³⁵ *New York Times* January 24, 1937 Page 1

³⁶ *New York Times*, January 30, 1937; ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times* (1851-2004) Page 8

³⁷ *New York Times*, January 25, 1937 Page 1

³⁸ *New York Times*, January 26, 1937 Page 14

³⁹ *The State Journal* , January 27, 1937 Page 1 Chandler Makes Appeal

⁴⁰ *Frankfort Kentucky State Journal Newspaper* “During 1937 Flood National Guard Served Long Hours At Prison” 28 Mar 71 By Nettie Glenn