

Witness Statement

Mills, Bradley Peter.

21 March 2011

C/- Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, GPO Box 1425, Brisbane, QLD, 4001.

I, Bradley Peter MILLS state: I am a [REDACTED] year old male employed as a Firefighter with the Queensland Fire and Rescue service. I have been employed with them for 13 and a half years and am a Station Officer in rank. I am currently stationed at the Special Operations unit operating out of Cannon Hill. I am trained to level 2 in technical rescue which includes swift water rescue. Being Level 2 it enables me to enter the water to conduct rescues.

On the 10th of March 2011 I was on a normal C shift roster working from 0800 to 1800hrs in the company of Fire Fighter Andrew NEIL (separate statement). We were operating under the call sign 850L.

At 1432 hrs we were responded to a call to attend at an incident at Withcott which related to persons stuck on the roof of a car with flood water. At that time we were responding from the Acacia Ridge area. At 1510 hrs I overheard via fire comm radio that an Auxiliary unit which was 676A from Forrest Hill had arrived at the Lockyer Creek bridge at Helidon and reported that there was a car washed off the bridge with occupants, extremely fast flowing water and they were requesting energex.

I contacted 676A at about 1513 hrs to find out more detail relating to the incident. They told me that there were three people in the vehicle and it had been washed off the bridge and it was floating downstream. They told me they had set up on the eastern side of the bridge. I informed them that we would be attending to that incident as we could not proceed any further to the original incident and I informed fire comm. We then arrived at 1531 hrs.

When I arrived I saw that the Lockyer creek was like a raging torrent, it was meters over the bridge height and approximately 200 meters wide at that location. There were massive amounts of debris in the water. I could see that the water was extremely fast flowing. It was too dangerous for anyone to enter at that location.

Upon arrival I was able to see the vehicle myself and I could see that the vehicle was approximately 150 meters from us and downstream from the bridge. I could see three occupants on the roof. At that time I could not make out who they were but had been informed it was two adults and a child.

The river had split in two in its current state, the side we were on was the raging torrent and where the vehicle was the water had spread out and it was calmer but it contained a large amount of floating debris. At that stage Andrew and myself were discussing options as to what our next step and strategy was going to be. As we were discussing our options I saw the Channel 7 helicopter in the area.

I assessed that the only viable option of actually accessing them was to place us on the helicopter which would then drop us at a point closer to the stranded people and allow us to work their position. It was not possible either via swimming or boat. We were also trying to get other personnel downstream of this vehicle to be in a position to assist in operations.

I spoke to the helicopter via radio and I requested them to land on our side of the river in order to pick up myself and Andrew. We then prepared by kitting up in wet suits and preparing our gear, Andrew and I discussed our plan which was to bring with us ropes and life jackets and to be dropped from the helicopter into a position just upstream of the vehicle and to swim to the vehicle and kit the people up with life jackets and swim them to safety.

We also had a contingency plan in place in case we could not execute the original plan and that was to position ourselves downstream of the vehicle for a situation where a rescue could be attempted as the vehicle went past using rope and rescue techniques.

At 1542 hrs Andrew and I boarded the channel 7 helicopter and proceeded to the location of where the vehicle had been last seen. Once we were in the air we flew to the location but the vehicle and the occupants could not be seen. We then conducted a search pattern of the area and after about 10 to 15 minutes Andrew located a person in the trees. I could see a clump of trees out on its own and all I could see was one hand waving out from the trees. I now know that this was the female adult from the vehicle.

We then assessed the situation and deemed it too dangerous to enter the water upstream of the woman due to helicopter downwash and debris in the water. We were worried that the downwash would knock her from her position in the tree. At this stage we noticed a small island about 50 meters to the east and about 30 meters downstream from the woman's location and we assessed that location and established that if we located ourselves at that point and the woman let go of the tree we could conduct a rescue from there. We landed on this small island and we got out, the helicopter then had to leave to refuel.

I then tried to make contact with the woman to check on her condition and to try to establish the whereabouts of the rest of her family. That was very difficult due to the distances and the noise. At that stage Andrew was checking the area we had landed on and trees to see if the man or child could be seen.

After a short time I got information from the woman regarding her son and husband and the clothing they were wearing. I then relayed this message back to the incident control point.

We tried to enter the water across to the woman's location the currents were too strong and the debris hampered us at that stage. At this stage there was a couple of trees downstream from her location and Andrew swam out to one of the trees to set up position in case the woman let go. This enabled us to attempt to grab her as she came in our direction. I continued talking to the woman to ascertain her condition and she relayed to me that she was ok and she continued to talk about her husband and her son and asking if we had found them yet. While we were doing all this reports were coming over the radio that there may be more water coming which made operating in this location more of a risk so we continually scanned for fast floating debris which posed a risk to us such as logs as well as another wall of water.

We had placed some items on the ground to use as markers with the water levels and noticed that the water levels were in fact starting to recede. At that point Andrew came back from the tree where he was, and after encountering snakes and rats, and the both of us made our way back up to the closest point on the little island and swam upstream to a tree which was about mid way between us and her and we then swam across to where the woman was. Andrew climbed onto the tree and brought the woman back to the area behind where the water had receded.

We then checked her condition and put her in a life jacket and then tried to gain as much information from her as we could regarding where they had gone off the vehicle and to try to establish where her husband and son may be. The woman told us that she was unsure as to the location and she was disorientated as to where they were. She told us that the vehicle was approaching powerlines which were low over the water and they moved on the vehicle and were all tossed into the water. We then relayed the information on the woman's condition and our location to the incident control point and waited for another rescue helicopter to collect us from this point.

As we waited and as the waters receded we continued to search the area as far as we could in an attempt to locate the husband and the son. After a

period of about forty five minutes rescue helicopter Helitak 220 arrived. In my opinion, trying to console this lady who did not know the fate of her husband or son was the most difficult aspect of the entire rescue. The time at this stage was 1700 hrs. The helicopter landed and myself, Andrew and the lady entered the helicopter and proceeded back to the western side of the bridge. We then escorted the lady from the helicopter to the control point. Helitak 220 departed and continued searching. After a period of time the helicopter returned with the boy and returned him to the incident control area.

After the boy had been brought to the location myself and Andrew then got back on that helicopter and we continued searching the area for the father. The time we got on the helicopter was 1752hrs. We searched the area until about 1810pm which included doing a systematic search of downstream of the river from where the vehicle had been last seen and from where the boy had been found.

We then had to travel to Toowoomba so that the helicopter could refuel. This trip was extremely rough due to the weather on the mountain range and it took some effort not to be ill. We left at approx 1835hrs to a report of persons located on a house floating down the river.

Coming back down from Toowoomba we followed the creek back and it was devastation. It was clear where the creek had carved a much wider channel and there was vast amounts of debris along the creek. As we arrived into the township, which I now know to be Grantham we could see multiple people on the roofs of houses. There was a vast amount of water flowing through the town itself and at that stage it was still flowing extremely fast.

We located this house which was in the stages of breaking up and the water was up to the gutters with people on the roof. The house was positioned in what would have been a farm paddock and far removed from other housing. I could see there was people hanging onto the side of that house.

Andrew and I had to get out of the helicopter in order to make room for winching and we got off at the school on the higher side of town. At that point of time we met with a group of locals who bombarded us with information about people missing and others stuck on roofs. At that point in time we didn't even know where we were so we quickly established our orientation which included speaking to a woman from the local rural fire service who assisted me with communications and information that I required.

We received information regarding specific persons location and concerns held for them and with persons help we were able to get a map together and from that we made assessments as to whether those persons could be accessed. We could see persons on roofs ourselves and trying to talk to them and reassure them as best we could but access to them was not possible with what we had.

During the next period of time for a number of hours myself and Andrew tried multiple locations to enter the water to access person stuck on roofs and the conditions were such that it was too dangerous due to the speed of the water and that the area was unknown and there remained a large amount of debris in the water. We did the best we could in searching the railway lines, vehicles and debris piles in order to look for persons.

Sometime around about 2030 hrs we were able to enter the water and approach and get to persons in houses and buildings in the Railway street, Anzac Avenue and Williams street area. In this we had to enter the water that was still chest deep in places in order to wade out and take people to safety. We were walking over and through innumerable obstacles but of most risk was the chance of being struck by floating debris. During daylight hours we had a reasonable chance of seeing it however we were extremely limited with the vision of the headlamps. The water was still flowing swiftly in areas at this point in time which creating considerable noise. There was no lighting and we were operating in the dark with only headlamp torches. There was also a

storm that night with some lightning so the flashes of light helped us with navigating around.

Whilst the locals were able to give us street addresses of people they were concerned about or were missing, there were no streets, so this made the task of location difficult. When we did locate people we would tuck them in behind us and use our bodies to shield them from the current and walk them out to a point where they could be walked on dry land to the school. Again there were reports of more water coming so once again we were constantly scanning. Andrew and I were constantly discussing our courses of action and then contingency plans should something go wrong. Under ideal circumstances we would have a spotter upstream to call hazards and safety personnel downstream if we came adrift. Throughout this entire operation we did not have the personnel nor the time to do this in order to effect the rescues in a timely manner. In the Grantham area we assisted approximately 15 people to safety in this manner.

Sometime around 2100 hrs I began to notice headlamps and strobes of other rescue officers operating in the area but they were coming from the other side of town on the western approaches. We continued to operate that night until leaving at about 0230 hrs on the 11th.


Signature STATION OFFICER
Name/ Rank 


Witness Signature 
Name/ Rank

<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/lifesaver-andrew-neil-goes-with-the-flow-in-rescuing-people-from-floods/story-fn7knuy7-1225990178207>
<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2011/s3117602.htm>
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