

Witness Statement

Russell Robert Von Nida

22 March 2011

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

I, Russell Robert Von Nida state: I am a [REDACTED] male who is employed as a Station Officer by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) in South East Region. I have been employed in the QFRS for 21 years and I am currently stationed at Beenleigh Fire and Rescue Station. During this period, I have attended numerous emergency incidents. I am trained to Level 2 in Technical Rescue which includes Swiftwater Rescue. Being Level 2 enables me to enter the water to perform rescues.

On 10 January 2011 I was rostered at Beenleigh Fire Station and when I came to work the Rescue vehicle was at Grantham and we were instructed to get in the Fire Service transport utility and make our way to Grantham taking all of our Swiftwater equipment. It took about 2 hours to get there and then firefighter Bretz and myself immediately took the keys to 645M (Ipswich Rescue Vehicle) and headed out to an address at Grantham. On arrival we were tasked to search farm houses and vehicles that were submerged in and around the highway and side street. There were people everywhere. From there we got the boats out of the rescue vehicle and then continued to systematically search houses and the surrounding area for people. There were some people around asking about the whereabouts of their relatives. During this time we assisted about 10 people from out of the dark in the water to higher ground. In addition there were other people in houses that we put in the boat and removed to high ground. There were a number of swift water crews in the area. We continued in this operative mode for about 3-4 hours and by then it was about 1.00 o'clock in the morning. There were a number of smaller jobs then given to us from the incident control that was now established at the Grantham station. This continued to about 4 or 5 in the morning and we returned to the station where we were able to get some rest period.

At about 6.30 we returned to the incident control and they sent us out to multiple other jobs. At about 9.00 o'clock we returned to the original position and Firefighter Bretz and I and others skuldragged two elderly people through about 2km of mud and then placed them in an end loader for the last few hundred metres. We were absolutely exhausted by this time as we had to drag them through all the mud. Whilst we were doing this we were told to hurry up and get out as there was another wall of water coming. It was extremely heavy rain at this time as well.

We then made our way back to the station. We were continually given other jobs but we could not get to any of these locations. As a result of the problems

with access, we went back to the command centre and [REDACTED] suggested that we may be able to use a chopper to access these areas. This was then organised by the Incident Controller [REDACTED] who made a phone call and then he told us that there would be a chopper down at the footy ground to take us out.

We went to the Gatton Showground with our gear and a helicopter winchman pointed to us from a Blackhawk (named Hercules) and we went over to him. We spoke to him to tell him that had been tasked to go the Lockrose area to assist people in houses that were being flooded. We had to get some further information for the chopper pilots regarding the coordinates of where we were going. We got that, gave it to the chopper crew and myself, [REDACTED], Shane Bretz and [REDACTED] entered the chopper. Inside the chopper were two pilots and two winchman. The conditions were horrendous. I asked the crewman about the conditions and he said that he "avoids conditions like this like the plaque." We then were flying to the location and when we got closer we saw the first of the people needing rescuing.

On the way out we liaised with the winchman as to how we were going to do the rescues and he indicated to us that he would prefer one of us to go down the line to do the rescues as he needed his off sider in the chopper as a look out because the conditions were that bad. There was powerlines everywhere and trees etc so because of the poor conditions and poor visibility he needed all assistance for a look out. He asked us if we were able to do this. We then had a quick chat and decided that we would go down. The winchman then started to give us some instruction on the harness and winch and some other points about putting on the gear and removing it. It was fairly brief and it was very difficult to hear him due to the noise in the chopper. I had never been in a chopper before nor had I ever been down a winch I felt at the time, this was a pretty big call.

[REDACTED] volunteered to go down was the first to go down. The first family consisted of [REDACTED] the [REDACTED] year old baby, the mother of [REDACTED] the grandmother, the husband and the father. [REDACTED] went up and down with all the people and also had to make an improvised arrangement for the kid because it was only a baby. The conditions were still very poor. We then went and dropped them off at Plainlands Woolworths where the Police met us and took them.

We then took off and went out again and on the way out [REDACTED] said it was your go next. The first one rescued was a young man about 24. The flood water was rising up around his house and this was able to be seen from the chopper. I got my gear on and [REDACTED] yelled a couple of things to me about what to look out for. I was connected up to the winch system, the chopper hovered above the person about 50m and then I was winched down to him. On contact with the water I received a significant static shock which I thought was a result of powerlines in the water but I now that this is a static charge from the rotor blades rotating through the air. I receive this shock about 5 times when I was going back to the line. I said to the young bloke we have to get you out of here but he could not take his belongings with you. I got the

harness and put it on him. Once I was confident that it was on him correctly I then gave a signal to the chopper that we were ready for reattachment. I then reattached ourselves to the winch and I gave the sign to the chopper. We were then winched up to the helicopter and pulled in the door and unattached. He was put in a seatbelt and he said that he had some neighbours that also needed rescuing.

We then flew to the next house where there was bloke out the front of a shed waving frantically. I was winched down and swam over to the front of the shed where a man was there. I spoke to him in the shed and he was on a wooden shelf out of the water and he said that his wife and two children were inside the shed. He then said that there was a king brown snake in the shed as well. I said we will have to get rid of that because the little girl would have to come out last because to reduce number of transfers I planned to take the boy first, then mum and dad together by themselves and then I would bring the girl up last with my gear pack. He then said that he had already got rid of the snake. I was feeling quite fatigued and I was still dizzy from turning around and around on the line. I then worked with the father to allot the personal floatation device (PFD) that fitted the family. Whilst he did this, I started to make improvised harnesses out of 25mm tubetape because the chopper harnesses were too big. Once they were complete, I told the family members the plan and I then took up the young boy fitted in the improvised harness I now know as [REDACTED]. I noticed that the mother was deeply distressed and I walked over to her and told her to give [REDACTED] a hug which she did. This made a huge difference as she seemed relieved after this. [REDACTED] and I then jumped back out into the water and I made my way through the water to access the line and we were hauled up. I then delivered him to the crew. I then went back and put the Mum and Dad in the harnesses and I connected them up to the winch and they were taken up. I then got the girl from the little shelf. I had told her to stay there so I could see her at all time. I then checked the harness on her and refitted and then me the girl and the red swiftwater bag was then winched up.

We then dropped them off to the Plainlands shopping centre and we got out too as the chopper pilot said they were going to get some fuel. We got out of the chopper and stayed the night at the Plainlands Tavern as all roads were cut. Before we left for the Tavern, [REDACTED] and his family returned and said thanks to all of us for the rescue. At this stage we had been working about 27 hours.

When I got into the chopper for the first time I thought that we were just being delivered to an area so we could begin operations. I certainly never thought that I would be going down a wire winch to rescue personnel. What made the job easy was watching the crew of the Blackhawk chopper and how professional they conducted themselves and I knew we were in good hands.

[REDACTED]
Signature
Name/ Rank

STATION OFFICER

[REDACTED]
Supervisor

Witness Signature _____
Name/Rank