

Largest mutual aid response in history of Fairfield County

By MICHAEL WATIKER
ESN Editor

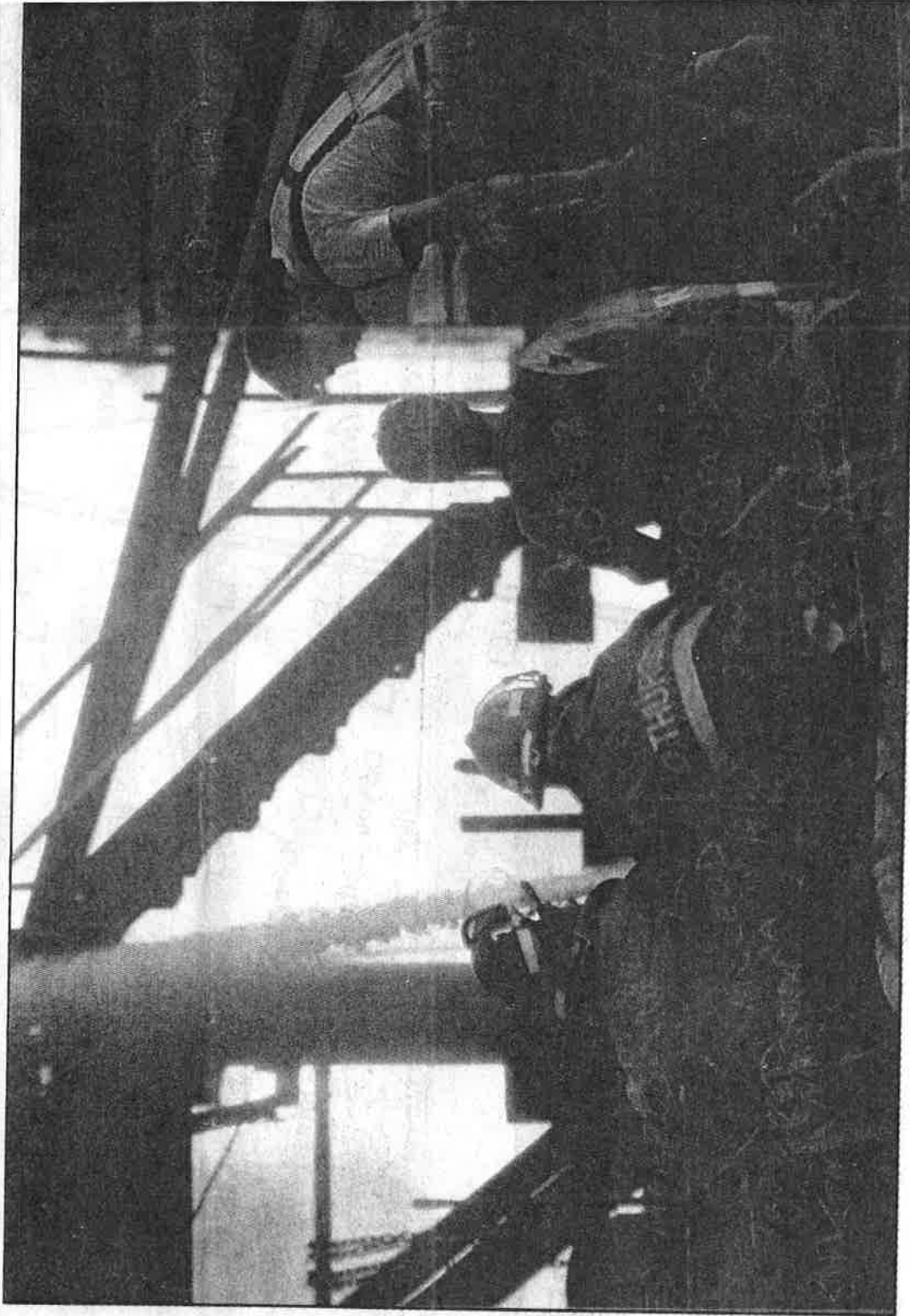
On June 30th, the Fairfield County sheriff's radio room/911 center was notified that a drilling company was going to "burn off" a gas well in Walnut Township, northeast of the city of Lancaster, OH. When they later received a report of a fire in the same area, they figured it was someone who had seen the fire from a distance. Little did they know that there was indeed a major fire, one that would become the largest mutual aid response in the history of the county.

Bobby Price, a firefighter/EMT-P with the Berne Township and Columbus Fire Departments, had been working next door to the drilling site at his brother's farm all day. At 2:44 p.m., Price felt the ground shake and then witnessed a powerful explosion that sent a huge fireball into the afternoon sky.

The well-diggers had been trying for several hours to ignite the gas, but the pressure was so great it kept blowing out the flame. When they were finally successful, they got more than they bargained for.

Price notified Fairfield County Fire Control that the well had exploded and was burning. The fire was shooting out horizontally through a well drain and was approximately 60 feet wide and 200 feet long, rising 100 feet into the air. Price requested that a full assignment be sent to his location.

Firefighters from the Thurston/Walnut Township Fire Department were dispatched and could see the fire in the sky not long after leaving their quarters. Firefighter Mike Jackson was in charge of the first engine, and would remain the incident commander for the next 12 hours, working with other department officers. Based on the amount of fire he saw, he requested mutual aid from



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BURNING GAS - Four of the 185 firefighters from 31 departments battle the plume of fire that erupted from a gas pipeline on June 30th in Walnut Township. Firefighters were forced to wait while well experts headed to the scene from four hours away.

Jackson realized he was going to need a huge water supply and more personnel. A north and south sector command system was set up, and Price was put in charge of water.

After a discussion with the digging crew, it was decided to let the fire burn until well experts could arrive from Wooster, OH, four hours away. As the fire continued to burn with great fury, Jackson realized a fire department presence was going to be needed on

scene for several hours. Firefighters were positioned to protect the house, the derrick, and the tank and trees. Two-five inch supply lines were laid from the road to the drilling site and two different dump tank farms were established. At the highpoint of the fire, one dump operation was using seven drop tanks and the other two firefighters settled in for the long haul as a continuous stream of water had to be put on the well and diesel tank. There

was a concern that if the derrick or the well head was damaged, there would be no way to extinguish the fire.

Price began calling tankers two or three at a time. Some tankers were specially requested because of their 3,000 gallon or more capacity. There were also numerous 2,000 gallon tankers operating as well, and the concern arose that the area might grow short of resources should another fire

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Firefighters battle intense gas well blaze in Walnut Twp.

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occur.

The plan was to place several 750 GPM monitors and handlines into operation. This would require having a massive amount of water shuttled to the scene. To compound the problem, the radiant temperature of the fire was approximately 1000 degrees Fahrenheit, forcing the implementation of a rotating schedule for firefighters on the hoses.

While Price worked on the water, command came upon other logistic problems. The Thurston/Walnut Fire Department is an all-volunteer unit that had never experienced such a massive call. Firefighter Jackson was a bit overwhelmed at first, but was able to quickly adjust his thinking to look at the big picture.

The command post ordered the following actions be taken; to notify two area water departments to start booster pumps to increase water pressure, order food and drink for the rehab center, contact the township trustees for long term road blocks, and get a long-term commitment from the sheriff's office for crowd control. Even members of the community got involved as someone ordered food and payed for it themselves and had it delivered to the

fire scene.

Around 4:30 p.m., a thunderstorm moved into the area, providing some scary moments for firefighters on the south side, in the direct path of the blaze. The storm passed over them and lasted about a minute, but the 50 mph. winds that accompanied it blew the fire on top of the personnel to the south. Firefighters were forced to lay on their backs and spray their hoselines straight up as the wind blew the fire. No personnel were injured and the storm quickly passed.

Two hours into the operation, firefighters from five counties had been called, with two of those, Fairfield and Licking, being county all calls. Perry, Pickaway and Muskingum counties sent crews as well.

Around 6 p.m., the well experts arrived at the scene. They brought their own high pressure pump and hoped to use it to pump a "mud" solution down into the well. When the amount of mixture exceeded three times the capacity of the well, it was discovered there was a leak in the well head.

An expanding gel was pumped into the well in a "stop-leak" fashion and then the well was again pumped full of the extinguishing agent. At 8:20 p.m., the well was successfully plugged and



KEEPING LOW - Firefighters stay behind cover as they douse a June 30th. For more information, see story on Page 1.

the fire was extinguished.

Fire department personnel remained at the scene for another 11 hours before a signal zero was declared at 7:30 a.m. There were no injuries, but

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31 departments responded with 20 tankers, 14 engines, four rescues, 11 EMS vehicles, and the Johnstown Fire air wagon.

burgh store suffers \$500,000 fire damage