

Edward J Durant
Flood of 1955, Unionville, CT
First Person Account

During the week of August 14-21, 1955, I was working the day shift (8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) at the Farmington firehouse as both Frank Cadwell, chief, and Henry Harris, (engineers) were on vacation. "Jimmy" Harris had the night shift as he lived in the firehouse apartment. For three days and nights it rained incessantly so I was not surprised on Friday around 5:30 p.m. when someone called to say that the Farmington River was rising threateningly by the restaurant across the road from the high school. I immediately notified "Snackie" Pannone, the assistant chief, before going off duty. At 6:30 p.m. "Jimmie" telephoned me at home saying that a group of firemen was heading for the "Meadows" to drive the cattle to high ground This was standard procedure when a flood was imminent. Irene and I were just getting ready to go to the movies in West Hartford; since I was not especially needed, we went through with our plan.

However, on returning to town after 11:00 pm. We found the firehouse brightly lighted and realized that some emergency must be demanding attention. I got out to check and learned that residents of "Tri-State Camp" were already evacuated as the water had risen steadily there. A call had just come in from the Round Hill area that the flood had reached the ground-floor level of the Carroll house and others near it. On checking we found that all occupants were safe. A car caught in the high water on Town Farm Road was pulled out by the fire truck. Details of rescue work in "Tri-State Camp" by "Al" Leone policeman Charles Yodkins, and others were already noted. There appeared to be nothing more we could do at the time, so the group dispersed to get some sleep.

At about 3:30 a.m. I was awakened by the mournful drone of the fire siren. The pouring rain and rushing wind made it sound more eerie than ever. Dressing in only trousers, sweat shirt, and shoes I was at the firehouse in a very few minutes. There I had just time to pull on a pair of rubber boots and jump into Haworths'

panel truck, “Art” was driving, and “Charlie” Cadwell was another passenger. Our destination was River Glen, Unionville, a settlement of about forty houses on the north bank of the Farmington River. We barely crept along flooded Route 4 as the water was already up to the floorboards. In other floods I had never seen the water move so rapidly

River Glen presented as scene of utter confusion. One of the fire trucks was parked on Wannewassa Street. In the darkness I could discern several men trying to haul out a stranded automobile. Shouts and curses belied their success as the rope broke. In another section people were removing furnishings from a house not yet flooded. My attention was drawn to a boy standing at the water’s edge holding onto an oarless boat and asking for someone to help in saving a stranded family. Eager to be of assistance in any way possible, I joined him, and together we pushed the boat into deeper water. I hear the desperate bleating of some unfortunate animal but in the darkness could not locate it after a determined effort. I learned from the boy that our objective was Mrs. Bartolomeo and her four children, Ann 15, Joseph 14, Robert 10, and Yolande 5. Awakening too late they had found all chance of escape cut off. I passed one deserted house after another; with no lights and with the water swirling around them they looked like hopeless shapes waiting to be carried downstream. As I approached the Bartolomeo house, I heard a motorboat labor by a short distance away. Shouts of alarm and then screams for help pierced the gloom. I attempted to cross Sequassen Street in hopes of being some help, but the current almost swept me off my feet. With the water up to my chin I kept my balance only by grabbing the edge of a house. I turned back to give full attention to the Bartolomeos who were huddled on their porch just above the water line. It took much persuasion to convince Mrs. Bartolomeo to get into the boat for which no one could blame her. To leave one’s home and belongings is not a easy thing to do. Finally, all five and even their pet beagle were aboard. I started pushing the boat with its precious load toward high ground.

About ninety yards from shore and safety, I realized that I was making no headway. The current had become so strong that I could go no farther. The Farmington River flows down from Otis, Mass. Where there is a large dam. I learned later that because of the force of the high water it had been decided to release pressure by removing flash boards on the dam. This, of course, had increased the intensity of the flowing water at just the wrong time for me and created my present predicament. A stranded truck offered a temporary solution so I climbed into the body. Here I was marooned and responsible for the lives of five people in a boat which I must control. A fearful thought came to me – perhaps their house would survive the deluge after all; the family might have gotten to the roof and safety. I had deemed it advisable and convinced them to get into the boat. I tried to appear calm and to talk reassuringly. Robert and little Yolande, huddled on one seat and trembling violently in the cold wind, hugged the dog between them. Ann and Joseph, with a sneaker in each hand, were frantically bailing the boat. Mrs. Bartolomeo sat as though in a daze but remarkably self-controlled. The young boy whose name I did not know tried to help me hold the boat. In spite of their realization of our perilous situation there was no crying or sign of hysteria. The moments dragged on; the water was rising higher and higher. The rushing of the wind and the oily smell of the water added to the dreary circumstances. Peering into the darkness I just hoped for some sign of help. Judging the amount of time was difficult, but it seemed interminable. The hum of a motor aroused my hopes; the sound came nearer and nearer. Miraculously, a boat pulled up beside me. In it was “Al” Leone, 27, a former pupil of mine. He had heard that I was out there somewhere in the darkness and had gambled against great odds of locating me. As he stopped, the motor stalled so we let his boat go downstream.

Standing on the front fender of the truck “Al” took a firm hold on our boat. As the water steadily rose, it moved faster and faster. We tried to figure some possible way to get to safety. “Al” even thought of trying to get to a nearby telephone pole with the idea to shimmy it and go hand over hand on the cable to firm ground. In our desperate situation even such a chance seemed almost feasible.

However, we would not solve the problem as there was still the difficulty of anyone getting back to us. There we were stranded as daylight came. On Farmington Avenue at the water's edge we could see many people gathered to watch. We shouted to the other firemen hoping they might figure a way of rescuing us. It was no use; the wind was too strong and the rushing water too noisy. We learned later that Charles Yodkins' son entered the water upstream with a rope and attempted to float down and reach us -to no avail. I glanced in the direction of the Bartolomeo house, almost with a feeling of relief I noted that it was completely flooded. Anyone left in it would have drowned. We talked to the boy who had entered the water with me; in desperation he decided to gamble on going along with the current toward the railroad trestle below. (He was successful and survived, but I have not seen him since.) Debris was beginning to assail us in large quantities to present a new hazard. A sudden creaking and wrenching sound drew our attention. An aluminum garage was breaking off a house above us; it would certainly sweep us all along with it. Down it came twisting and wheeling; it came up against a telephone and wavered. Our fates hung in the balance. Would it swing to the lower or upper side of the pole? To our great relief it swung to the lower side and went below us! During the whole ordeal our victims had remained surprisingly calm with no out-cries or outbursts of anxiety. Several hours had passed, and our situation had worsened. The water was now up to my chin, and I had lost my footing – just lying flat in the water hanging onto the boat. "Al" being taller and at the front end was still standing. We had Mrs. Bartolomeo move to the rear in order to raise the front. We knew that some move had to be made as we could never control the board in the strong current. Urging them all not to panic and grab us in desperation we explained our plan About two hundred feet below was a house with water to the eaves. Maybe—with luck—we figured some or all of us might reach it. The time had come Choosing to act on our own rather than to wait for the surging waters to do it we overturned the boat. Seven of us were struggling, carried along like bobbing corks. I kept close to Mrs. Bartolomeo; "Al" watched Robert and little Yolande Ann and

Joseph were on their own. Just as Yolande was sinking, I saw “Al” grab her by the back of her dress. All this happened in a matter of seconds. Mrs. Bartolomeo almost went by the house but succeeded in clutching the edge of the roof. I pulled up behind her and held her body with mine against the house. Ann and Joseph scrambled to the roof; “Al” boosted Robert and then pulled Yolande up with him. Coming to my aid he seized Mrs. Bartolemo by the arms. She is a large woman weighting almost two hundred pounds; as he lifted, I pushed from below. With difficulty we finally got her over the edge, and she rolled onto the roof to safety. A floating house almost pinned me between the two buildings; a helping hand from “Al” brought me out to the roof with only a skinned hip and shoulder. Even the dog was saved.

For a few moments everyone just sat looking at one another hardly believing that no one had been lost. It was still pouring and very dismal. The watchers from the road must have felt relief at seeing us on the housetop. I was almost relaxing a bit when a rocking motion gave me a sickening feeling. A chill went up and down my spine—it couldn’t be, but it was happening! The house was moving off its foundaiotn; we were floating toward the main part of the river now a mass of crushing debris. We didn’t stand a chance of survival there. Helplessly we just waited—a mircale occurred The house lodged between two trees and came to a bumping halt.

After a brief discussion “Al” and I felt that the over-handing bough of a tree could be more trusted than the housetop. “Al” spotted a closeline attached to the tree and pulled in a length of it. Frantically he tried to chew it in two, but we finally cut it by rubbing along the edge of the chimney. One at a time we placed the four children on a limb looping the rope around each one. Mrs. Bartolomeo was too heavy for this procedure. This having been done all we could do was sit down, wait, and hope!

Time dragged on A roar startled us as a section of the nearby trestle over Farmington Avenue crashed into the water-filled roadbed. Luckily, no one went with it. “Ted” Jones and Art Haworth

tried to reach us from the railroad bank with a rope but had no success. An increasing wind chilled us; our conversation seemed strange and artificial as we tried to encourage each other. The whirring sound of a helicopter drew our attention; three of them were flying just above us. They passed over and on out of sight. In a few moments one returned and circled our area. It was a small machine and had difficulties with the wind. Since it came directly over us, we felt sure that we were spotted. Two or three times it passed back and forth with a long rope dangling but not within reach. The trees bothered its approach; finally as it came closer, "Al" broke a small branch from the tree and snagged the rope. As quickly as possible we tied it under Mrs. Bartolomeo's arms with two warnings—to hang on to the rope and to keep her mouth shut—we pushed her into the water. The helicopter raised her to the surface and pulled her toward the shore. Willing helpers there offered her a hand as she hit solid ground. Twice more this same procedure was repeated first taking in Ann and then Robert. Our hopes were mounting now! The next trip would be for Yolande who was too small to go alone. We decided to tie her to me; we'd go together. Next trip "Al" would come in with Joseph. Yolande was now on the roof having been removed from the tree; the helicopter was again swinging toward us. Just moments were needed—we didn't get them; our luck had run out. A floating house bumped ours, and it was pushed from between the trees. We gathered speed rapidly in the main current—"Al", Yolande, the dog, and I. The house split at the ridgepole. We passed a large tree; clinging to a lower limb above the water line was policeman Yodkins who gave us a weak wave; we were the last to see him alive. On and on we sped gathering momentum all the while; we approached the collapsed railroad trestle. Could we make it under the tracks? Was the space high enough? Flattening ourselves on the rooftop we barely did clear. Now we hit faster rapids where the river had cut a new course. Up and down we went as though on the ocean. Debris hit on all sides. I'll never know what kept us from being pitched off. Both "Al" and I shed our clothes realizing that they would catch on debris if we were thrown into the water. A footlocker floated against the rooftop

which had by now been broken to the size of a small raft. We discussed the idea of tying Yolande to it in hopes that she might float downstream to be rescued at the bridge. It was a desperate chance! For the first time in the long ordeal she cried for which no one could blame her. We abandoned the idea as too much of a gamble. Far ahead I could see a large tree standing high in the water. I had to make a decision and decided to grab a limb if we came close enough. We approached it, and I seized it. The speed at which we were travelling yanked me off, and I went under. Hanging on with a tight grip I managed to pull myself onto the lower branches. Looking around I could see nothing of my companions. I sat on the limb thankful to be in the tree but filled with anxiety and remorse concerning their fate. What were my chances of survival now? It was easy to see that they lay in the question of whether the tree could stand for long the battering to which it was being subjected. I tried to make myself as comfortable as possible—if one can be so—stark naked, in a cool breeze and driving rain, sitting on a limb with death awaited every second. I hugged against the trunk on the opposite side from the wind. It was difficult to measure time, but I know an hour or two must have dragged by. The longer the time the more I felt that “Al” could not have survived. Had he been rescued, he’d certainly direct someone to me. Debris kept hitting the tree making it shudder; at times I was trembling so much it was difficult to tell if the tree were shaking. I thought of many things—Irene and Marlene, my whole family—how they would react. I could almost reconcile myself to drowning, but as I looked at the debris, I hated to think of my body being smashed by it and perhaps never found. A couple of times I shut my eyes and tried to think of the whole venture as a bad dream. In the distance I could see the Bailey house—so near and yet so far! A woodchuck climbed onto the debris closeby. I talked to him and warned him to keep off the lower branches. Not heeding, he was washed off and disappeared.

It was again the noise of the helicopter that brought hopes of rescue. It passed directly over me; I waved and shouted to no avail as it went on a westerly direction. Two more appeared circling very close; still I was not seen. Each time they came and went I felt more

and more desperate. Perhaps before another trip the tree would be uprooted; and I'd be drowned, and the pilots would never know how near they were to me. I even planned what to do if the tree started to fall. I'd have to run to the end of a limb and dive far out. Otherwise I'd be swept under by the branches. However, risking a dive with the water filled with debris didn't leave much of a choice. Four, five, six hours I was there. What had happened to "Al"? Far up the river I spotted a motorboat attempting to make progress into the main channel. The current was too strong, and it disappeared only to come back a short time later. This trip it crossed the main part of the river and sped out of sight toward Farmington Avenue. I shouted as loud as I could—needlessly! The rain had now stopped, and the sun appeared for brief periods. I turned my back toward it for warmth. Because it was so low in the west, I knew it must be later afternoon. The boat was making its return trip and turned in my direction. I had nothing to wave but standing in an open space among the limbs I made all gesticulations possible. One of the men returned my signal; he had spotted me! No one will ever know the relief and joy I experienced at that one gesture. I shook with excitement and hoped that the tree would stand just a few moments more. Under it came the boat with "Walt" Balazy directing. Carefully I swung down from limb to limb—what a relief when my feet hit the bottom of the boat: "Walt" said later that if he had a camera, as he saw me crouched on the limb, he'd have had the most realistic flood picture of record. He and his companion wrapped me in a field jacket, and we headed for terra firma. On the way we saw a cow blown up like a balloon floating on the water. I was landed on the high bank by the old grist mill off Garden Street where a large crowd was gathered. Martin McCann gave me a ride home. It was mighty pleasant to be welcomed to the house again! My first interests centered around "Al". My questions were readily answered as he appeared very soon having heard that I was safe. Our meeting was indeed a dramatic one! As "Al" related his experience, one must marvel at his survival! After I grabbed the tree limb, "Al" Yolande, and the dog continued their perilous way for a hundred yards. Finally the remains of the roof caught in the top of a small tree.

Chances of rescue seeming remote “Al” tried to figure his most logical move. Time dragged on; finally, he made a decision. Taking a piece of board from the debris he placed it between two branches and tied Yolande to it with the dog beside her. Telling her that help would be coming he slid into the water. Swept along at a terrific pace and battered by debris he had to muster all his strength and determination to keep from drowning. What may have saved his life was an inflated inner tube that he was able to grasp. For more than a mile he battled his way; at times he was sure he’d be crushed. His superhuman effort defied death. He used the Congregational Church steeple as a guide and finally reached land at the corner of Mill and Garden Streets. Exhausted and bruised he was barely able to pull himself up on shore. Fritz Pasler happened along at just this moment and gave him a ride to the firehouse. My wife had just come to make inquiries about me. No one had notified her that I was missing “Al” in a hysterical condition was sobbing out his story of tragedy; he was certain that Yolande and I had by now perished. Shocked at this development Irene returned home to wait and hope. Later a helicopter flew “Al” over the area where we were but with no success in locating us. There were many rumors going around so John Chirstensen came to the house to check if I were really safe. A doctor paid me a visit and told me to stay in bed.

Next morning I was up at seven o’clock and immediately located “Al”. We went to work to get someone to check on Yolande. We felt that by some miracle she might have survived the night. We hitched a ride on a “duck” to the high school where we were greeted by the Bartolomeo family. Joseph whom we were forced to leave in the tree had been saved. The helicopter had dropped a “Mae West”, and Joseph jumped down into it. All were grieving the loss of Yolande; as the youngest she was the “pet” of the family. We tried to console them as best we could, but mere words were inadequate. A stir of excitement led us to the police car parked in front of the school. A report had just come in over the car radio; a little girl had been picked up by three men in a canoe. She answered the description of Yolande. Scarcely daring to believe that it could be true we rushed back—as fast as a “duck” can travel—to

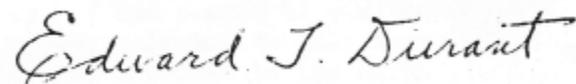
Farmington. With indescribable joy we found Yolande safe and sound. Through the day and then the long dark night—approximately twenty-eight hours in all—she had survived and come through unscathed. Two in the canoe who found her were John Christianson and “Dick” Bunnell. She had gotten down from the tree; a few days after her footsteps showed plainly where she had walked in the mud. The little dog had jumped off in the night and was lost. We were extremely grateful that through such an ordeal the Bartolomeo family was intact. Mr. Bartolomeo had been at his regular work in Hartford and was not aware of what had happened.

River Glen had been, however, an area of tragedy. The flood water had performed in a treacherous manner! Rising before midnight they subsided so that people returned to their homes and went to sleep. Soon after 2:30 a.m. they found themselves marooned. I learned that the occupants of the motorboat which I had heard were Charles Yodkins, the policeman, and Joseph Morin, a University of Connecticut student. They had evidently tried to rescue Mr. & Mrs. Robert Fry and their 16-year old daughter, Mildred. All had perished. Mr. & Mrs. Chadwick lived in the upstairs apartment of the William Davis house on Sequassen Street. As the water rose, the Chadwicks climbed onto the roof. The Davises tried to pass their three sons up to them. Glenn 7, James 5, and Laurence 4, all were swept away to a watery grave. The Chadwicks followed as the house capsized. Mr. Davis went with it; he told me later that his lungs were almost bursting, but he just got to the surface in time to survive. As “Al” and I were going down the river we had seen someone in the distance floating on debris; it turned out to be Mrs. Davis who also lived through the sorrowful, choking and harrowing experience.

Of twenty-one in the Glen at 3:00 a.m. only eleven came out alive. Parts of only three houses were left. Sometime afterward I learned also that we owed thanks to a Mr. Andersen in the Highlands. The pilot of the rescuing helicopter had received orders

to take off for Winsted, but Mr. Anderson convinced him that he should first check on our plight.

The following Memorial Day "Al" and I at the ceremonies held in the Riverside Cemetery received the American Legion Hero Medal. In July we were interviewed by a representative of the Carnegie Fund. In October, 1956, we received word that we had been awarded the coveted Carnegie Hero Medal It was also given posthumously to Charles Yodkins and James Morin, who made the supreme sacrifice to save others.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Edward J. Durant". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.