

TESTIMONY
ESCAPE OF NORMAN JOHNSTON
FROM SCI-HUNTINGDON
HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE HEARING
OCTOBER 14, 1999

Presented by:

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Good morning. I am Captain Henry D. Oleyniczak, Commanding Officer, Troop J, Lancaster, Pennsylvania State Police. I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the efforts of the Norman Johnston Fugitive Task Force before the Committee.

On August 2, 1999, four-time convicted killer, Norman Johnston escaped from the Restricted Housing Unit at the State Correctional Institution in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. The escape had a particular impact on the residents living in Chester County, Pennsylvania; Cecil County, Maryland; and New Castle County, Delaware. Extraordinary community concern arose due to the well remembered and significant criminal exploits of the Johnston Gang in the 1970's, the obvious planning and assistance involved in the escape, and the large number of family members who still lived in the area.

The Pennsylvania State Police at the Avondale Station, responsible for southern Chester County, immediately reacted to this escape with the assistance of the Pennsylvania State Police Fugitive Unit, Bureau of Criminal Investigation and investigators from Troop G, Hollidaysburg. Specific family members, former victims, prosecutors, and retired police officers that were involved in the original investigation were notified of the escape. Intelligence information was gathered regarding safe havens and individuals that may provide assistance to Johnston. Wanted flyers and photographs of Johnston and the stolen vehicle he was to be operating were produced and distributed. The media interest was immediate

and liaison was established in order to keep the public informed. As the investigation progressed, requests for security details were received and granted for specific individuals who feared retaliation by Johnston.

On August 6, 1999 at approximately 8:30 P.M., Johnston was approached by a Park Ranger in Nottingham County Park, West Nottingham Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. As the Park Ranger approached, he recognized Johnston from a wanted flyer photograph. After a short conversation, a struggle ensued and Johnston was able to flee into the park on foot.

A large scale manhunt was initiated in the area of the park (600 acres) involving approximately 100 officers from the Pennsylvania State Police, 17 Chester County Municipal Departments and several New Castle County, Delaware K-9 Units. Air support was provided by the Pennsylvania State Police Aviation Unit and additional logistical support was provided by Chester County Communications and the Oxford Fire Company. A stolen vehicle was reported near the area of the park that next morning. It was recovered quickly, but a second vehicle was reported stolen near the recovery location. A phone call made at the scene by Johnston was traced to a nearby residence of a relative. Contact with that relative confirmed it was Johnston. The search continued through noon of the following day without success.

In the late afternoon of August 7, 1999, the second stolen vehicle was recovered at Nottingham Towers, an apartment complex where Johnston used to live. The apartment complex is located on the Maryland State line in East Nottingham Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania and is close to the Nottingham County Park.

At approximately 1030 P.M. on August 7, 1999, Johnston was reported to be sighted by a resident of the Nottingham Towers Apartments. A second large-scale manhunt was initiated involving approximately 75 officers. In addition to the Pennsylvania State Police, 12 Chester County Municipal Police Departments and several New Castle County, Delaware K-9 units; the search team now included the Maryland State Police and Cecil County Maryland Sheriff's Office due to the location being on the Pennsylvania/Maryland state line. Air support was provided by the Maryland State Police and Pennsylvania State Police Aviation Units. The search was halted at 9 A.M. on August 8, 1999 when no additional leads were uncovered.

On August 8, 1999 at approximately 1230 P.M., Johnston was reported to have been sighted in Fair Hill, Maryland just south of the Pennsylvania State Line. Pennsylvania State Police and one Chester County Municipal Police Department assisted the Maryland State Police, Cecil County Sheriff's Office, and the Maryland Natural Resource Police in a search of the area. Logistical support was provided by the Maryland State Forrest and Parks Service and air

support was provided by the Maryland State Police. This search was terminated after a few hours as the sighting could not be confirmed and Johnston was not located or observed by other individuals in the area.

Media attention had grown tremendously as a result of the first confirmed sighting in Nottingham Park and the two subsequent searches in the same geographic area. Citizens were advised to keep their doors locked, keys kept out of their vehicles, to keep an eye on their neighbors and to contact the police if they observed any suspicious activity.

Because of the geographical area involved, the reported sightings, the location of friends, family, and associates of Johnston living in the three state area, and the need to maintain a focused investigation; a full-time multi-agency, multi-state forty (40) member fugitive task force was formed. Formal task force operations began on August 10, 1999. The Norman Johnston Fugitive Task Force operated out of the Avondale Station and I had the privilege to be the Task Force Commander. The Task Force consisted of Pennsylvania State Police personnel from Troop J, Lancaster, Troop K Philadelphia, Troop M, Bethlehem, Troop G, Hollidaysburg, and the Bureau of Criminal Investigation Fugitive Unit. Members from outside the Department included the Chester County Detectives, Maryland State Police, Cecil County Maryland Sheriff's Office, Delaware State Police, New Castle County Delaware Police Department, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation from the Wilmington, Newtown Square and Philadelphia offices.

The task force focused its efforts on organization of intelligence information, following up on the hundreds of reported sightings and multiple leads that were being reported to the police in the three-state area. Efforts were placed on keeping both overt and covert pressure on those individuals who were identified as most likely to assist Johnston or those individuals who Johnston might contact. Daily briefings were held at the Avondale Station so information gathered by task force members was shared and new assignments could be given.

On August 12, 1999, at approximately 12 P.M., task force members observed an individual believed to be Johnston at one of the target residences under surveillance in Cherry Hill, Maryland. Another large-scale search was initiated involving approximately 100 police officers from the three-state area and included all of the task force members. Additional personnel were provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Cecil County Sheriff's Office pulled its cadets from their police academy to assist in the ground search. The Pennsylvania State Police, Delaware State Police and Maryland State Police Aviation Units provided air support. Logistical Support was provided by Cecil County Communications, Maryland State Police Communications Unit, Cherry Hill School District and the Singerly Fire Company. Bloodhounds were provided on a volunteer basis by Red Rose Search & Rescue of Strasburg, PA. Four members of the Pennsylvania State Police Mounted Unit arrived the next

morning to assist in searching the area. The search was called off on Friday, August 13, 1999 at approximately 5 P.M., after an extensive search of the area and the service of a search warrant at the target residence found no further evidence regarding Johnston's whereabouts.

Johnston's escape was featured as the lead story on America's Most Wanted on Saturday evening, August 14, 1999. Approximately sixty (60) leads were received; however, no significant information was provided regarding Johnston's current location. Concurrently with the broadcast of America's Most Wanted, the media was advised that the reward for the return of Johnston to prison had been increased to \$ 40,000.

On August 16, 1999 at approximately 10 PM, Johnston was sighted in Newark, Delaware and scuffled with an unarmed University of Delaware Police Officer. Although receiving three blows from the officer's baton, Johnston managed to escape. A search of the area by the Delaware State Police, New Castle County, Delaware Police, University of Delaware Police and the Newark, Delaware Police Department proved negative. Fingerprint evidence confirmed Johnston's presence at that location. Johnston's knapsack was also recovered near the site of the scuffle and provided information as to his pattern of behavior in the area. A member of the Newark Police Department was requested and was added to the task force.

On August 17, 1999 the task force focused its investigation in the Newark area. Based on the confirmed sightings and intelligence information gathered, including the recovered knapsack, it appeared that Johnston was travelling late at night, using railroad tracks and dry or low creek beds to travel. The weather had been excellent for staying outdoors and the drought conditions made travelling along the creeks much easier but made it very difficult for tracking dogs to follow a scent.

On the night of August 17, 1999 and into the early morning hours of August 18, 1999; one portion of the task force searched the Fair Hill Natural Resources Management Area (5,613 acres in Fair Hill, Maryland) while the second portion of the task force used bloodhounds to retrace the potential escape route used by Johnston from Newark, Delaware. The Natural Resource Management Area was a logical and easy place for Johnston to hide as it connected Cherry Hill, Maryland and Newark, Delaware by creek bed and railroad tracks. Blue Mountain and Ryan Twp Search and Rescue provided bloodhounds on a volunteer basis from Northern Pennsylvania. An additional search dog was provided by the Chester County Sheriff's Office. Hand held night vision and infrared equipment had been acquired from other police departments or the military. Assistance and logistical support were provided by the Maryland State Forrest and Parks Service, the Maryland Natural Resource Police and Cecil County Communications. This search was proactive in nature but also yielded negative results.

On August 18, 1999 the investigation focused on a vehicle reported stolen from a residence on Delaware Route 896 just south of the Pennsylvania State line. This vehicle and an individual reported to fit Johnston's description was observed at a mini-mart on Pennsylvania Route 896 just north of the Pennsylvania State line. A video surveillance tape at the mini-mart appeared to confirm this individual as Johnston. Unfortunately, this information was not provided to police until almost 24 hours had passed. The stolen vehicle information had been immediately reported to the media.

On August 19, 1999 at approximately 9:30 P.M., the stolen vehicle was reported sighted by a resident near Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Troopers were dispatched to the area but did not initially locate the vehicle. A trooper who remained in the area observed Johnston and the stolen vehicle, near the initial reported location, at approximately 10:30 P.M. Johnston observed the police vehicle and fled. The trooper initiated a pursuit that eventually ended in a dead-end development just off of Pennsylvania Route 52. Johnston lost control of his vehicle, went over a slight embankment and almost crashed into a house. Johnston abandoned his vehicle and fled on foot. This action took place in Mendenhall, Pennsbury Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Within an hour, a nine square mile perimeter had been established and over 100 police officers responded from the three-state area and now included

additional Pennsylvania State Police officers from Troop K, Media and several Delaware County Municipal Departments. Delaware State Police officers maintained a strong presence along the Pennsylvania/Delaware border. The Pennsylvania State Police provided air support and bloodhounds were provided by Red Rose Search & Rescue. An additional dog team was provided by Darby Township Police Department, Delaware County. Logistical support was provided by Chester County Communications and the Kennett Square Fire Company. A detailed search pattern was established involving stationary patrols, roving patrols by quadrant, creek teams with K-9 support, railroad track teams with night vision equipment, Longwood Gardens fixed teams with night vision equipment, vehicle searches, and three dog teams.

At approximately 4 A.M. on August 20, 1999 it was determined that Johnston could not have escaped from the area and arrangements were made for replacement personnel to be on site by 6 AM. These individuals would be doing a focused door to door search. However, at approximately 5:30 AM residents of Hickory Hill Road, just north of the crash site, reported suspicious noises to the Chester County 911 Center. Troopers responded to the residence and subsequently observed and apprehended Johnston without incident at approximately 5:45 AM.

The level of inter-agency cooperation exhibited by the many involved police departments and officers was phenomenal. Even though many of the

incidents took members of the Pennsylvania State Police into Maryland and Delaware, every courtesy was provided by officials and citizenry alike. No request went unmet and time after time, assistance was provided before an official request was made. I am proud to be part of a profession where the common good was immediately recognized and every effort was made to return Norman Johnston to prison as quickly as possible. I believe the triad of media, citizens and police was instrumental in the successful resolution of this matter without any injuries to the public or to law enforcement personnel.

This concludes my testimony. I appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation regarding the activities of the Norman Johnston Fugitive Task Force in Chester County. I will be glad to answer any questions the Committee may have regarding my testimony.