

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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NORFOLK SOUTHERN TRAIN DERAILMENT  
IN ELLISTON, VIRGINIA  
ON JULY 6, 2023

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Accident No.: RRD23FR013

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Interview of: JASON LITTLE, Dispatcher  
Norfolk Southern

Roanoke, Virginia

Sunday,  
July 9, 2023

APPEARANCES:

MICHAEL BACHMEIER, Operations Group Chairman  
National Transportation Safety Board

JIM SOUTHWORTH, Investigator in Charge/Mechanical  
Group Chairman  
National Transportation Safety Board

ANNE GARCIA, Ph.D., Human Performance and System Safety  
Group Chair  
National Transportation Safety Board

TIM LYNCH, Investigator in Charge  
Federal Railroad Administration

JOHN RANSCHAERT, Inspector, Operating Practices  
Federal Railroad Administration

ROBERT LEWIS, Regional Superintendent, Blue Ridge  
Norfolk Southern

SCOTT BUNTEN, Investigator  
BLET National Safety Task Force

RON SABOL, National Safety Task Force  
SMART Transportation Division

DENNIS WILSON, Assistant National Representative  
Brotherhood of Railway Carmen/TCU

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I N T E R V I E W

(5:40 p.m.)

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2  
3 MR. BACHMEIER: My name is Michael Bachmeier and I am the  
4 NTSB operations group chairman for this accident. We are here  
5 today on July 9th at 5:40 p.m. in the Hampton Inn, Roanoke,  
6 Virginia, to conduct an interview with Jason Little, who works for  
7 NS. This interview is in conjunction with NTSB's investigation  
8 near Elliston, Virginia. NTSB accident reference number is  
9 RRD23FR013. The purpose of the investigation is to increase  
10 safety, not to assign fault, blame, or liability.

11 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around  
12 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,  
13 who you are representing, and your title. I'd like to remind  
14 everyone to speak clearly so we can get an accurate recording.  
15 I'll start off and then pass it off to my right.

16 Again, my name is Mike Bachmeier, the spelling of my last  
17 name is B-a-c-h-m-e-i-e-r, and I am the NTSB ops group chairman  
18 for this accident.

19 MR. LYNCH:: Tim Lynch, IIC, FRA, Mechanical Department.

20 MR. RANSCHAERT: John Ranschaert, R-a-n-s-c-h-a-e-r-t, I work  
21 for the Federal Railroad Administration, Operating Practices  
22 inspector.

23 MR. LEWIS: Robert Lewis, L-e-w-i-s, I work for Norfolk  
24 Southern, Division Superintendent of the Blue Ridge.

25 MR. WILSON: Dennis Wilson, W-i-l-s-o-n, TCU representative.

1 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, S-a-b-o-l, Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and  
2 Transportation Workers, Transportation Division, on the National  
3 Safety Team.

4 MR. BUNTEN: Scott Bunten, B-u-n-t-e-n, BLET National Safety  
5 Task Force.

6 MS. GARCIA: Anne Garcia, I'm the Human Performance and  
7 System Safety Group Chair for this investigation for NTSB.

8 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Oh. Again, I'm Jim Southworth,  
9 S-o-u-t-h-w-o-r-t-h, I'm the investigator in charge for this  
10 accident, as well as the mechanical group chairman.

11 MR. BACHMEIER: And then, Jason, if you can state your name,  
12 title, and spell your last name.

13 MR. LITTLE: Jason Little, I'm a Norfolk Southern train  
14 dispatcher, and my last name is L-i-t-t-l-e.

15 MR. BACHMEIER: Thank you. Do we have your permission to  
16 record our discussion with you today, Jason?

17 MR. LITTLE: Yes.

18 MR. BACHMEIER: Do you understand the transcripts will be  
19 part of the public docket and as such, we cannot guarantee any  
20 confidentiality?

21 MR. LITTLE: Yes.

22 MR. BACHMEIER: As we discussed, you have an opportunity to  
23 have a representative with you today, is that correct?

24 MR. LITTLE: Yes.

25 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay, I'd like to ask everyone to clearly

1 announce your name and title before questioning. With that, let's  
2 proceed.

3 INTERVIEW OF JASON LITTLE

4 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

5 Q. Jason, can you give a little synopsis of your work  
6 experience, taking us up to your present job?

7 A. I worked as a conductor out of Conway for about a year and  
8 then after that, I've been a train dispatcher for about 7 years,  
9 starting on the Pittsburgh Division, and I -- I forget how many  
10 years that was after consolidation happened, but I came down to  
11 Georgia whenever the consolidation happened and I ended up moving  
12 over to the Blue Ridge Division and I've been working over there  
13 for about 2 years on the New River desk.

14 Q. So the 2 years, that's the accident site, that's where it  
15 was?

16 A. On the Blue Ridge Division, New River desk.

17 Q. Okay. So let's just go back to Thursday, July 9th (sic),  
18 814's out and running, they experience a hot box detector, can you  
19 just take us through -- kind of give us a summary of what took  
20 place up and to the derailment?

21 A. The crew got hit by the hot box detector, they called me on  
22 the radio and I informed them let me know what they find. They  
23 found that the journal was hot, it did melt the temp stick, and I  
24 spoke with Poletti about the train and relayed information to him  
25 as to what they saw as far as grease coming out, temp stick

1 melting. Tried calling Mike Weaver and he didn't answer, but he  
2 was going to call Sweeney, talk to him. After he was check,  
3 checking up, he said he would let me know what we were going to do  
4 with it and he came back and he told me we're going to take it to  
5 the siding at Fagg to set off the car, and we ended up talking to  
6 the crew and they were not sure if they would be able to shove up  
7 the hill based on placement as to where the car was, to get it  
8 into the siding up there.

9 And so I talked to Poletti again and relayed back to him and  
10 he informed me he'd check back and see if we can move it down to  
11 Riverside. After a bit, he called me back and said we'd be moving  
12 it down to Riverside, I went and let Charlotte know what was going  
13 on, about them setting off at Riverside. She ended up talking to  
14 Poletti and they determined to set off at Riverside and then they  
15 moved down to east, towards that direction, and they ended up  
16 derailling around V29 -- or 262.0, I do believe it was.

17 And the crew called me and said they were in emergency and  
18 moments later, the assistant chief came and told me there were  
19 reports that they had cars leaning, he informed me the air was not  
20 restoring, I informed them of the leaning cars and to be careful  
21 when inspecting their train. And then that's when they told me  
22 they were derailed (ph.).

23 Q. Okay. Thanks, Jason. Once that train was ready to leave  
24 after they went over the hot box detector, did you -- do you  
25 remember giving them a track speed, did you give them a speed?

1 A. When Poletti called me, he said no restrictions down the  
2 track, just set them off.

3 Q. So Poletti told you no speed restrictions and then you just  
4 relayed to the crew?

5 A. Correct, it was my understanding he was working with  
6 mechanical.

7 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. Okay, that's all I've got. I'll pass  
8 it off to Tim.

9 BY MR. LYNCH:

10 Q. Good afternoon, Mr. Little. Tim Lynch, L-y-n-c-h. So the  
11 decision to set the car out, did it come -- who was the initial  
12 one to tell about setting the car out? Did Poletti advise your  
13 team that that's what the plan was going to be, is to set the car  
14 out at Fagg first and then after the tonnage grade issue come into  
15 play, they retold you that they were wanting the car to be set out  
16 at Riverside, is that what I'm getting, that it was dictated by  
17 Poletti and mechanical of what to do with the car and you were to  
18 be able to try to get that to happen?

19 A. Yes, that was my understanding.

20 Q. And at that point when they set the car, they were getting  
21 ready to leave and they were setting the car or going -- getting  
22 ready to leave to go, did Poletti tell you that there would be no  
23 restrictions on the speed, so you told the crew again that they  
24 were free to go at track speed? Did we run out of time?

25 (Laughter.)



1 MR. LITTLE: No, I'm here.

2 MR. LYNCH: Just waiting --

3 p

4 DR. GARCIA: Wave your arms.

5 (Laughter.)

6 MR. LITTLE: I'm sorry, what was that? One more time.

7 BY MR. LYNCH:

8 Q. Sorry about that, Mr. Little, I can see that. So when  
9 Poletti talked to you the second time, just to be clear, he talked  
10 to you the second time, he told you that there would be no speed  
11 restrictions on that particular car to go from there to the  
12 Riverside siding and that's what you proceeded to inform the crew  
13 to be able to do, is to take that train, the 814, to Riverside and  
14 set the car out with no speed restrictions?

15 A. That's correct.

16 MR. LYNCH: Thank you. No further questions for now.

17 MR. BACHMEIER: John.

18 BY MR. RANSCHAERT:

19 Q. Mr. Little, John Ranschaert with the FRA, Operating Practices  
20 inspector, thanks for being with us. Can you describe what the  
21 process is for when you -- a train on your territory gets a  
22 detector reading, you know, a hot box or in this case, can you  
23 describe the process of what you do?

24 A. I'm sorry, just from a dispatcher standpoint or --

25 Q. Yes.

1 A. -- the crew?

2 Q. No, what -- is there a process that you normally do?

3 A. Yeah, I call mechanical and inform the trainmaster and inform  
4 the chief.

5 Q. So you call the trainmaster, mechanical, and the chief?

6 A. Correct.

7 Q. Okay. You mentioned earlier that you weren't able to get a  
8 hold of Mr. Weaver. Did you ever at any time talk to Mr. Sweeney?

9 A. I did not, no.

10 Q. So all the mechanical discussions were done via somebody else  
11 relaying to you, is that correct?

12 A. It was my understanding Poletti was talking to Mr. Sweeney.

13 Q. So via the trainmaster?

14 A. Yes.

15 Q. Okay. Do you know if the chief or the assistant chief or any  
16 of your supervisors in Atlanta ever talked to mechanical?

17 A. Not that I'm aware of.

18 Q. Okay. Did you have any discussions with your chief about the  
19 -- what was going on?

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. Can you describe those a little bit?

22 A. After it was decided where we were going to be setting them  
23 off, I went and discussed with Charlotte that is what they were  
24 looking to do and initially, she did not want them setting it off  
25 at Riverside and she ended up talking to Poletti, having a job

1 briefing with him, and then afterwards it was decided to go down  
2 to Riverside.

3 Q. Okay. Are you aware of where she wanted to set the car off?

4 A. No, she -- I know she didn't want to set it off in Riverside,  
5 but I think that's why she called Poletti, to have a job briefing  
6 to see what the options were.

7 Q. Okay, but you don't know -- but you don't know why she wanted  
8 to set it off somewhere -- or not set it off at Riverside?

9 A. I know that the blocking the siding was a concern because  
10 there were still cars in the siding at Fagg and it would've been  
11 one less siding.

12 Q. Oh.

13 A. But beyond that, I'm not sure.

14 Q. Okay. At the moment that's -- oh. Is there a decision tree  
15 or anything that you -- a check-off list, what you do when there's  
16 a detector reading?

17 A. I don't know about a specific list, I know that depending on  
18 the reading, it determines what needs to be done.

19 Q. So you don't have a specific checklist that gives you Step 1,  
20 Step 2, Step 3?

21 A. I don't have a physical list, no, but I mean, I know now what  
22 I'm supposed to do, I don't know if you'd call it a list.

23 Q. Okay. Is that --

24 A. But you inform mechanical and inform the trainmaster.

25 Q. And is that just an understood rule or is there something in

1 writing that tells you to contact the chief and contact mechanical  
2 and contact the trainmaster?

3 A. It's just my understanding, for any issues that we have on  
4 the radio, that that's the route you go through.

5 MR. RANSCHAERT: Okay. No further questions at this time,  
6 thank you.

7 MR. LEWIS: Robert Lewis, L-e-w-i-s, NS Blue Ridge Division,  
8 no questions.

9 MR. WILSON: Mr. Little, I'm Dennis Wilson, a TCU national  
10 rep. I've got no questions at this time.

11 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, Transportation Division of SMART, no  
12 questions at this time.

13 MR. BUNTEN: Scott Buntten, BLET, I have no questions at this  
14 time.

15 BY DR. GARCIA:

16 Q. Anne Garcia, NTSB, I have a few questions for you, Jason. So  
17 you mentioned a little bit about this, but can you give us more  
18 details on what your specific duties are on any given day when you  
19 come in to work?

20 A. The safe movement of trains across the railroad.

21 Q. Okay. Do you work independently or are there other  
22 dispatchers that you work with and swap off with or how does that  
23 work?

24 A. Well, you work with the dispatchers, you work with the  
25 chiefs, anybody who's connected to your desk. I relieve the

1 previous person on the shift, you work with adjoining people on  
2 your territory to move trains across and work together, in that  
3 sense.

4 Q. Okay. So all those people are located there in Atlanta with  
5 you?

6 A. Yes, all the dispatchers and the chiefs are all located here.  
7 Mechanical field personnel are not, they would be out in Roanoke  
8 and in Bluefield.

9 Q. Right. So when you say you work, you hand off the train when  
10 it goes from your territory to someone else's territory, would you  
11 say that's similar to like the air traffic control system, where  
12 they hand off planes when it goes from one area to another?

13 A. I don't -- I'm not sure on how air traffic control works.  
14 (Laughter.)

15 BY DR. GARCIA:

16 Q. Okay, okay. But do you hand it off to the next dispatcher on  
17 the train's route?

18 A. Yeah, it's the adjoining territories, my track joins with  
19 another dispatcher desk, I will discuss with the dispatcher before  
20 sending that train, making sure there's a route and ensuring that  
21 they can handle the train or if I need to hold it back somewhere.

22 Q. Okay. And for your territory, are you the only dispatcher  
23 working your territory?

24 A. I work a certain portion of the Blue Ridge Division, it's  
25 about six dispatchers that work all of the Blue Ridge Division, I

1 do believe.

2 Q. But each individual, they have individual areas of the  
3 division.

4 A. Yeah, we have our own area of the territory that we're in  
5 charge of.

6 Q. Okay. And what's your typical work schedule?

7 A. I'm second shift, I come in at 2:00 and leave at 10:15.

8 Q. You come in when?

9 A. Two p.m.

10 Q. And leave when?

11 A. Ten fifteen.

12 Q. And what days do you work?

13 A. I work Wednesday through Sunday.

14 Q. And do you have a handoff when you come in, when you're  
15 replacing the dispatcher who's working, do you have a handoff  
16 procedure?

17 A. Yeah, we do turn over verbal and there's a written turnover  
18 that we go over everything that's gone on, on the territory.

19 Q. Okay. And then do you get a regular lunch break or a meal  
20 break?

21 A. Nothing regular, regulated, no.

22 Q. Okay. So what do you do -- before you come in at 2:00 p.m.,  
23 what do you do for dinner?

24 A. Well, I unfortunately order out too much, I'll eat too much  
25 pizza.

1 (Laughter.)

2 MR. LITTLE: But usually, I'll order food whenever I'm here.

3 DR. GARCIA: Okay.

4 MR. LITTLE: There's multiple people who order food and then  
5 we'll have it delivered here.

6 BY DR. GARCIA:

7 Q. So when you're eating, are you eating at your desk or do you  
8 get to go -- like there's a cafeteria in the building and you get  
9 to go someplace else to eat?

10 A. No, I'm eating at my desk whenever I'm eating.

11 Q. Okay. So when you get up for breaks, is there someone who is  
12 taking over for you?

13 A. No. Usually what we'll do if we're going to get up and go  
14 grab something, we'll tell a neighboring dispatcher hey, keep an  
15 eye on this thing, like if you see an alert or anything pop like  
16 that, that way if somebody's sitting there watching in case  
17 something does happen while you're away.

18 Q. Okay. So that's, you know, for any fluid adjustment,  
19 restroom breaks and that, you just tell another dispatcher to  
20 watch my screen for a while?

21 A. Usually it's Christine and I'll say hey, Christine, keep an  
22 eye out for anything lights up with that.

23 Q. Okay. And who's Christine?

24 A. She works across from me.

25 Q. Okay, another -- same position, another dispatcher?

1 A. Yes, someone who's close by, a dispatcher who's close to me.

2 Q. Okay. And talking about this particular day, you mentioned  
3 that you informed your chief. Did you have a conversation with  
4 your chief about what was going on?

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. What was that conversation like?

7 A. I went over and told her that they had the hot bearing and  
8 that they were looking to set it off at Riverside, that they  
9 couldn't set it off there because of the siding and the hill and  
10 that's when she talked to Poletti.

11 Q. Okay. And then did she inform you of her discussion with  
12 Poletti?

13 A. She didn't tell me what they spoke of, but she said it's fine  
14 to set off at Riverside.

15 Q. Okay. So is all of this done over -- how was this  
16 communicated, over the radio or do you walk over to her or --

17 A. I walk over to her whenever I usually talk to her if it's  
18 something important.

19 Q. Okay. How far away is her area?

20 A. She's not far, it's just a couple steps.

21 DR. GARCIA: Okay. Okay, that's all I have for this time.  
22 Thank you.

23 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Jim Southworth, IIC, I have no questions  
24 right now.

25 MR. BACHMEIER: I have no further questions.



1 Tim?

2 MR. LYNCH: No further questions.

3 MR. BACHMEIER: John?

4 BY MR. RANSCHAERT:

5 Q. John Ranschaert with the FRA. How much territory do you  
6 cover in miles, per se?

7 A. I would have to look at my screen, I couldn't tell you in  
8 actual miles, I'm bad with numbers like that.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. I'm trying to think. My starting post is Milepost N260  
11 something to N3 -- I really couldn't tell you, I'm bad at  
12 remembering numbers.

13 Q. Okay. In your territory, were you busy with any other  
14 trains, did you have any other issues going on at the same time  
15 this was going on?

16 A. I'm busy with other trains, but no out-of-the-ordinary issues  
17 or anything like that.

18 Q. Okay, so while this was going on, you had -- you were also  
19 coordinating or moving other trains within the district?

20 A. Yes, helping other trains.

21 MR. RANSCHAERT: Okay. I believe that's all I have, thank  
22 you.

23 MR. LEWIS: Robert Lewis, Blue Ridge, no further questions.

24 MR. WILSON: Dennis Wilson, TCU, I have no further questions.

25 BY MR. SABOL:

1 Q. Ron Sabol, Transportation Division of SMART, I have a  
2 question for you. When you spoke to trainmaster Poletti, was that  
3 on the phone or was that by radio?

4 A. The first time I spoke to him, I usually am contacting with  
5 Teams and then he did call me on the phone after it was decided  
6 that it was going to move down to Fagg.

7 Q. Okay. When you spoke to the mechanical department, when you  
8 were calling, you said you called them, that was on the phone,  
9 right?

10 A. Yeah, that was on the phone when I attempted to call.

11 MR. SABOL: Okay. No further questions, thank you.

12 MR. BUNTEN: Scott Buntten, BLET, I have no questions.

13 BY DR. GARCIA:

14 Q. Anne Garcia, NTSB, I have a couple more questions. How many  
15 dispatchers are working at any one time?

16 A. Oh, I couldn't tell you. A lot.

17 Q. Okay. More than a dozen?

18 A. Oh, yeah, there's quite a few of us in that room.

19 Q. Okay. And how many supervisors are there?

20 A. There's, have to think, there's one for each division, but I  
21 can't think of how many divisions there are. And then there's  
22 that whole bit (ph.), I wouldn't be able to tell you an actual  
23 number.

24 Q. Okay. And so when you go on vacation or take leave, is there  
25 another dispatcher who is called in to take your shift?

1 A. Yeah, there's an extra board with dispatchers who cover  
2 vacancies.

3 Q. Okay. And my last question is about a general process. So  
4 in this instance, the train derailed and it derailed upright, I  
5 believe, correct? Do you know?

6 A. I don't know.

7 Q. Yeah, okay. It derailed upright, so there was no spill. But  
8 if there's an instance where there is a spill and it's a hazardous  
9 material spill and you're notified of that, what process do you  
10 use to pass that information along? Who do you notify?

11 A. I would notify the chief and then the chief would notify  
12 hazmat, but depending on what was released would depend ultimately  
13 what we'd have to do with it. As far as hazmat materials are  
14 concerned.

15 Q. Okay. So that's the only person you would relay the  
16 information to is your chief?

17 A. Yeah, I'd relay to my chief, but depending on what it is, I'd  
18 talk to M&W, who's maintenance, I'd talk to the train crew, anyone  
19 who's in the area that would be affected by that, I'd call PCCU,  
20 which is our police line for Norfolk Southern and let them know.

21 DR. GARCIA: Okay. Thank you very much, that's all I have.

22 BY MR. SOUTHWORTH:

23 Q. So, Jason, I'm just going to go on the record with a little  
24 clarification. He was asking you earlier about how large your  
25 territory was, let's see if we can break it down a little bit. Is

1 it between a hundred and 200 miles?

2 A. I think it's somewhere, it's -- my milepost starts at 300 and  
3 the other one's at TU (ph.), so it's about a hundred miles, I  
4 think, on the Christiansburg side I control. And then from the  
5 Elmore side, it's from ER0, I want to say 24, maybe, but something  
6 tells me it's more than that.

7 Q. Okay. All right. Well, that's good.

8 A. And I cover the Whitethorne side, which is another about a  
9 hundred miles, I think.

10 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Okay, I thought it was going to be a little  
11 closer to a hundred, that's good. We told you before you're going  
12 to have a chance to send in an errata and if you find out by then  
13 what the actual territory is, you can go ahead and comment on the  
14 errata that you've got those numbers. It's not changing your  
15 testimony, it's just based on -- it's just updating the factual  
16 information and I appreciate that. I just want to get that going.  
17 So thank you. I have nothing else.

18 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

19 Q. Okay, Jason, we're about done. I just got another question,  
20 I just have one question for you. That night, the communication,  
21 did you -- do you interact with the mechanical desk? You know, we  
22 had the hot box and the mechanical desk down there, do you guys  
23 deal with them or is that just the train crew?

24 A. By mechanical desk, do you mean the wayside?

25 Q. Yes. Yeah.

1 A. I don't interact with wayside, the crew does, I don't  
2 personally interact with them.

3 Q. Okay. Does the chief dispatcher interact with them, do you  
4 know? You may not know.

5 A. I'm not sure.

6 Q. Okay. So most of your communication was with Eric Poletti  
7 and basically, your interaction with the chief was just kind of  
8 letting her know what -- what your decisions were.

9 A. Yeah.

10 Q. Yeah. That is pretty much all I've got. Jason, do you have  
11 anything you'd like to add?

12 A. Not that I can think of.

13 Q. Okay. If we have any follow-up questions, would you mind if  
14 we contacted you?

15 A. Yeah, that's fine.

16 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. On behalf of the NTSB, I'd like to  
17 thank you for taking the time and cooperation sitting with us  
18 today, thank you. Appreciate it. And that concludes our  
19 interview.

20 (Whereupon, at 6:08 p.m., the interview concluded.)

21

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24

25

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the  
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

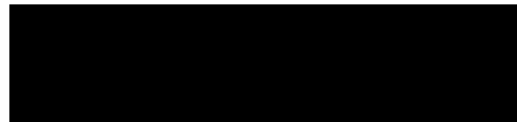
IN THE MATTER OF:           NORFOLK SOUTHERN TRAIN DERAILMENT  
                                  IN ELLISTON, VIRGINIA  
                                  ON JULY 6, 2023  
                                  Interview of Jason Little

ACCIDENT NO.:               RRD23FR013

PLACE:                        Roanoke, Virginia

DATE:                         July 9, 2023

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,  
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed  
to the best of my skill and ability.



\_\_\_\_\_  
David A. Martini  
Transcriber