

How The Blackout Really Happened **by Power Distribution Maintainer Martin Sierra**

A lot of people know the blackout started in Ohio, but what no one knows is exactly what caused the biggest blackout in this country’s history. My name is Martin Sierra and I’m a Power Distribution Maintainer with MTA NYC Transit. I’ve lived in New York most of my life, but I’m originally from Cleveland, so I try to make it back to Ohio at least once a year during vacation just to visit friends, family... you know, see how the old neighborhood’s changed, stuff like that.

One of my favorite things to do while I’m there is to visit my friend Wendell. Wendell is a manager for the Ohio Power Authority and since we both kind of work in electricity, we never run out of things to talk about.

So it was that on August 14, I was on vacation and I decided to drop in on Wendell. He was really excited about a new program his organization was working on and convinced me to join him at the work site.

The work site turned out to be a huge tunnel at least ten stories underground. We rode an elevator to the bottom of this tunnel where we then climbed aboard a small electrical rail car that took us to a large open area that would have resembled a cavern if it weren’t for all the high-tech equipment and workers all over the place.

“Check this out,” Wendell said as we climbed out of the rail car. He led me over to a bank of consoles criss-crossed with processors, cables, interrupters, multiplexors, and other gear that allowed for computer, electrical and electronic interface. All of these were in turn connected to another bank of 16 surveillance cameras set up with the latest Closed Circuit Twisted Pair cabling system and platforms capable of supporting the

integration of all that technology. There were enough buttons, switches, dials, and blinking lights to put a jet’s control panel to shame. I loved it!

“Believe it or not,” Wendell said as he chuckled at my wide-eyed stare at his organizations new toys. “All of this technology has been put into place to monitor and exploit one of nature’s oldest energy sources.”

Wendell then led me to an enormous crater in the center of the “room”. The crater, he explained, was actually the mouth of another tunnel, this one vertical.

“This baby goes down about another ten stories,” he said leaning precariously over the edge. “Listen.”

Stepping as close as I dared, I strained my ears to catch whatever sound or sounds Wendell was asking me to hear. Finally, there it was. I looked at Wendell in question.

“An aquifer,” he said triumphantly. “It’s an underwater river that runs downward at this point at an almost 45-degree angle. The current is constant and powerful, making it almost like an underground waterfall... and a steady and cheap source of energy to power our grid.

“Amazing,” was all I could say.

“And it was MY idea!” Wendell added with a smile.

I looked up at my old friend, Wendell wasn’t well known in our circle as the kind of guy who comes up with ideas... particularly any good ones. This apparently was a pretty good one. Wendell must have read the expression on my face because then he proceeded to explain.

“I was going over some old blueprints of the state’s water tunnel system and I came across the plans for this tunnel. The tunnel had already been dug, but for some

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reason it was closed up and never used. The blueprints clearly listed the existence of the aquifer. Why they never used it, I don't know, but I figured we could harness the river's current to make electricity. I was right too, even with the system only partially set up, we're generating enough power here to feed a third of the state.”

Wendell beamed at me, and I couldn't blame him. It was a tremendous coup for the state and his organization. I knew what was coming next.

“And I'm getting a promotion and a fat raise, buddy!”

Wendell laughed and slapped me on the back. I wanted to laugh with him and congratulate him further, but a funny feeling in my gut kept me from joining in the moment's merriment. At the time I thought it may have been jealousy, but looking back at it now I started feeling weird about the whole thing when I looked into that pit. It wasn't just water that I thought I may have heard, there was another sound...something unearthly that made the hair stand on the back of my neck.

Wendell gave me the tour and introduced me to some of the other guys. Everyone seemed excited to be working there and so I soon forgot my feelings of unease and got caught up in the excitement too.

“Wendie!”

I turned toward the worker in the hard hat that had called Wendell by his nickname. He was pointing at one of the screens hooked up to the CCTP. Wendell and I walked over, as did several of the other men and women in the room.

“What's up?” Wendell asked.

“Something funny just showed up on eight screen,” the worker said.

Wendell squinted up at the screen. “Show me,” he said.

The worker pointed at an image on the screen. “This just showed up all of a sudden.”

Wendell, as well as myself and the others who’d also gathered at the screen, stared at the image and offered suggestions as to what the image could be.

“Maybe it’s a rock or tree, or something that got swept into the river,” I offered helpfully.

“Nah,” Wendell said after taking a long, hard look at the image on the screen. “Whatever it is, there’s no reason for it to be there. We’re going to have to send someone down in the bucket to check it out though, it’s too close to the equipment.”

The employees whose duty it was to check and maintain the equipment readied themselves for the trip, I asked Wendell if I could tag along. He thought about for a moment before answering.

“Well, okay but don’t touch anything. If anything goes wrong and you’re involved somehow, it’ll be my hide.”

I assured Wendell that I’d keep my hands to myself, but there was no way I’d pass up a trip like this if I could help it. A short while later I was outfitted with a hard hat, safety harness and a safety vest. Soon after the work crew and myself were in the basket and being lowered into the pit via a stout cable.

Lights had been installed at regular intervals along the walls of the pit, and the walls were far enough away from each other for an R142 to fit, yet with each foot we descended my feeling of unease and claustrophobia grew. Just as the feeling was about to evolve into near panic, the radio which I’d been given crackled to life.

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“How’s it going down there, Marty?” It was Wendell. Hearing his familiar voice helped ease these feelings which I’d never experienced before.

“Uh, everything’s okay Wendie,” I lied. I was sweating a lot more profusely than I should have been and my feeling of not wanting to be there was growing worse. Still, I was determined to see this new/old system of obtaining power. Plus, I didn’t want to give Wendell any ammunition to rag me about.

The worker next to me spoke into his radio. “Wendie, we’re coming up on the bogey. It’s kind of big, at least six-feet across. I don’t think it’s a rock, it might be some kind of wood or something. We have to get closer.”

“10-4,” Wendell replied. “Just be careful, remember our safety numbers.”

The other workers in the basket laughed at what was probably some inside joke. I didn’t get it and at that moment was too queasy even try.

A few moments later and worker spoke into his radio again. “Okay Wendie, we’re practically on top of it,” he said. “We’re all harnessed in and we’re going to use our pry-bars to try to move it away from the equipment and see if we can drop it into the water.”

“10-4,” came the reply. “Be careful.”

There was no laughter from the men that time. Two of the men assembled their pry-bars and hoisted them over the edge of the basket. The ends of the bars consisted of rubber coated stainless-steel hooks and the men used these to try and grab at whatever it was that threatened to damage their equipment.

“Holy cow,” one of the men exclaimed. “It moved!”

The object, whatever it was, did look like it moved, sort of like it turned in on itself. We all really stared in earnest at the object now, convinced that maybe it wasn't anything near as innocent as a tree or a rock. The men with the pry-bars poked at it carefully a few times and after several minutes with no change in the object or its location, they jabbed at it more confidently in an attempt to shake it loose from the cleft in the rock in which it apparently was lodged.

Then it *flexed*. Yes, flexed was the word for what it did since now that we could see it more clearly, the object resembled nothing more than a huge four-fingered fist! What would be the four short, thick fingers slowly opened and closed spasmodically. Each “finger” ended in a wickedly hooked claw.

“What is that?” One of the workers asked in a whisper. No one had an answer. I realized however that my feelings of earlier were directly connected to that thing, whatever it was. In the stunned quiet of the cavern, the sound I'd heard earlier when I'd listened for the water became amplified. It was a scratchy, breathing sound...unlike any other sound I'd ever heard before. The sound of Wendell's voice coming over the radio made all of us jump.

“What is that thing,” he asked. “I can see it on the monitor.”

“I have no idea Wendell,” I answered, my voice shakier than I care to admit.

“But maybe it's a good idea to get us out of here now.”

As soon as I said that, one of the men with the pry-bar decided he'd give the object one last hard jab.

A roar, louder and more frightening than any other sound I ever heard before exploded from the cleft behind the object with the claws. The sound echoed off the rock

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all around us and seemed to get louder and louder with each passing second until it ended in a shriek that made me clap my hands over my ears.

“Pull us up, pull us up!” I screamed into the radio. I couldn’t hear Wendell’s answer over the din of whatever was producing that horrible roar, but a couple of seconds later the basket started its slow ascent to the top of the pit.

“Oh my gosh, look, look!” One of the other men yelled.

We all looked over the side of the basket just in time to see the wall of rock around the object disintegrate and drop into the current of the underground river. Then, with another horrendous roar, a creature of myth, of countless nightmares, scrambled from its tear in the rock wall and glared up at us with eyes that glowed red with fury.

One of the men fainted dead away. Half of the others stood mute with awe and fear and the other half (myself included) screamed for more speed from Wendell and the basket. The creature, it was a dragon; that was the only way I could describe it, pulled itself from its hole and began climbing up towards us. I wanted to look away but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from this monster that had been the subject of countless stories and fairy tales. As it climbed toward us, I could see its claws bite into the rock wall for purchase and the leathery sound its wings made as they brushed against the walls of the pit. I looked up and I could see Wendell’s face in the distance, leaning over the edge of the pit. He looked a million miles away whereas the creature below me appeared to be getting closer and closer.

“Wendell, get us out of here!” My yell could have come from outer space for all the good it did. Nevertheless, the other men in the basket joined me in a futile chorus for our lives. Our yells seemed to enrage the creature which roared again and swatted at our

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basket like a cat would swat at a ball of yarn. The basket swung crazily from the impact and one of the men fell from it, his yell diminishing and finally cutting off when he hit the black waters far below.

Even as the basket was swinging, it kept up its inexorably slow climb to the top of the pit. I could hear the cable mechanism whine in protest and I knew that it could snap at any minute. One of the men with the pry-bars threw his at the creature harpoon-style, but it bounced harmlessly off the monster’s scaly hide. The throw however left the worker off-balance and he too went over the side of the basket and disappeared into the river.

Another swat at the basket sent it spinning and crashing repeatedly against the wall, breaking lights and yanking wiring from the complicated electrical rigging. When the spinning slowed, I braved a look down at the monster and saw that it was almost on top of us. If by some chance it didn’t get us outright, its assault on the basket would snap the cable and we’d all fall to our deaths. It was lose-lose, we were doomed.

“Marty! Marty, are you guys okay?” Wendell’s voice came over the radio that I held in a death grip.

“We lost two guys Wendie, I think they’re dead. I’m sure they are. What are we going to do?”

There was a pause and then:

“I’ve been watching on the monitors, I need you guys to keep your hands off the sides of the basket, don’t touch any metal. There’s something I’m going to try.”

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I peered over the edge of the basket, the creature’s head seemed to almost fill the entire width of the pit. Its breath came in deep huffs that smelled of smoke and rot, its long, forked tongue snaked over its scaled lips with a harsh rasping sound.

“Whatever you’re going to try, it better be soon,” I said into the radio, trying unsuccessfully to keep the panic out of my voice.

There was another pause before Wendell spoke again, his words coming in a rush.

“In another couple of seconds that thing’s going to be right on top of junction web number 33, that junction gets its power from a city substation instead of the aquifer hook-up,” he said.

“And?” I asked shakily.

“And I’m going to shut down the breakers and cause an overload, it’ll push an electrical surge right out onto the rigging at that junction. It’ll fry that thing.”

“But if that junction’s connected to city and you overload it, you could cause a surge that’ll take out the whole city’s grid, maybe the whole state!”

“Listen to yourself Marty,” Wendell said. “It’s the only chance you and other guys have. If that thing gets out of here, we’re only three miles from town, who knows how many people it’ll hurt then. We’ve got to stop it here!”

I shook my head. “You’re right Wendie, do what you have to do, I’ll tell the others.”

“10-4.”

I told those who hadn’t heard about Wendell’s plan and they all heartily approved, but only after pointing out that one false move and we could be fried as well. After

everyone had secured themselves and made sure they weren't touching anything conductive, I let Wendell know over the radio.

“Good,” he said. “Because it's now or never.”

The other men and I hunkered down into the basket and prepared for the worst. Suddenly, there was a loud hum followed by and even louder series of crackling and popping sounds. Against my better judgment (not to mention fear), I stood up for a better look and once again peered over the edge of the basket. The dragon was poised over the web of wiring and cables seemingly confused by the arcs of electricity that now played over its immense body. It opened its huge maw and snapped at them as if they were living things.

“More,” I yelled into the radio. “Give him more!”

The hum grew in intensity and the arcs of electricity grew larger, brighter and more frequent. The air in the pit crackled with power, making the hair on my head and arms stand on end. The dragon, apparently finally sensing the danger it was in tried to escape the web of conduits and cables, but by then it was too late. The monster roared as great jolts of current knifed into its body. The lights flickered as it lashed out at its semi-invisible tormentor, clawing the air and gnashing its great teeth. The roars that came from its throat shook the crumbling walls of the pit.

Finally, a great ball of bluish-white energy burst from the already smoking junction and exploded. Nearly blinded by the glare of the explosion, I was still able to make out the creature as it broke loose from the tangle of wires and fell into the raging waters far below. After a moment, when I found myself able to breathe again, I let out a huge sigh of relief. Then the lights went out...

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With the power gone, it took nearly six hours to get us all out of there, and no one wanted to believe our story. That’s also when we found out that Wendell’s desperate act to save our lives had not only affected the local area, but had knocked out the grid for a large part of the East coast and parts of eastern Canada. Commissions have been assembled in several states in order to investigate the cause of the largest blackout in North American history, but I have a feeling that the truth will never really be known. At a meeting with various government officials we were strongly advised not to repeat our dragon story, and we found out shortly after that the aquifer project was being abandoned and the tunnel resealed.

“So Mr. Lopez,” Martin Sierra finished. “What do you believe?”

The End