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Fast Action at Lock 24 Saves Boaters

Clarksville, Mo. – Two pleasure boaters narrowly escaped a serious situation Tuesday, June 17, when quick thinking and great cooperation by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel and Midwest Foundation, Inc., employees, working at the Lock and Dam 24, rescued them. The two, Mr. And Mrs. Jason Lemons, of Pleasant Hill, Ill., were boating in the Mississippi when their motor died and left them drifting helplessly toward the Corps of Engineers Lock & Dam at Clarksville.

The incident began when Corps of Engineers maintenance man, Buck Hagan, noticed the small boat some 300 feet from the dam and drifting closer. Mr. Lemons was waving a red shirt.

Hagan quickly raised the alarm on his radio, alerting lockmaster Chris Morgan, who was working out on the lock wall.

Lock 24 has been the scene of a major rehabilitation for the past two years, and Morgan asked the on-scene contractor, Midwest Foundation, Inc., to help. Midwest Job Site Supervisor, Ross Springer, immediately directed his boat operator, Dan Eilerman, to get underway. Two nearby union craftsmen working at the lock and dam, George Palmer and Mike Brangerberg, unhesitatingly joined Eilerman in the potentially dangerous rescue mission.

As the small craft drifted closer to the dam, the contractor vessel Midwest II, was quickly locked through from the downstream side of the lock and dam by assistant lockmaster Dave Nulsen. This enabled it to proceed into the pool above the dam to attempt the rescue.

Meanwhile, Morgan and Hagan raced to a position above the dam gate from where they were able to lower safety blocks on lines to the approaching terrified boaters below. They assured the boaters that their boat would not be swamped. Hagan climbed down onto the dam's concrete bullnose structure, from where he was able to toss a line to the Lemons.

As the Midwest Foundation boat approached carefully toward the dam, Buck Hagan was able to throw a monkey fist – a weight that enables a line to be thrown accurately – to its deckhand. Then Eilerman was able skillfully to ease the boat and its occupants away from the dam. From there he towed it upstream to the safe confines of the Dundee Slip.

Careful pre-planning with the contractor and quick response by all on scene resulted in two relieved boaters making it safely to shore.

Lockmaster Morgan emphasized that it was fortunate that the dam's fifteen, 80-foot wide gates, were open only three feet each.

Morgan described how higher settings result in water being sucked down in front of the dam gates before it exits under them in a fury of whirlpools, eddies and turbulence. "If that had been the case and they had capsized, it's extremely unlikely they would have survived. That's the reason people have to exercise extreme care around dams, either above or below them," Morgan stated.

The Pleasant Hill couple was reportedly on a day pleasure trip. Their five children were at home. Pleasant Hill probably looked a lot more pleasant when they returned that evening from their harrowing experience.