

Storm of '62 Vented Nature's Fury on Island

200 plus

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The events of March 6 and 7, 1962, in Southern Ocean County can only be compared to a war. Taken completely by surprise, area residents battled the overwhelming forces of nature gone wild. To the survivors, each hour was filled with little dramas, new fears and always the unknown. There were acts of courage, self-sacrifice and charity as one of New Jersey's worst natural disasters unfolded. Finally there was victory. Not of man over nature but spirit over adversity. When people said, "I survived the '62 storm," you knew what they meant.

The Island's defenses were totally down. Just hours before, the forecast for March 6 predicted northeast winds at 15 to 17 mph with a chance of light snow and a low of around 30 degrees. The United States Weather Bureau later explained what had happened to change the weather conditions so dramatically. "To start, with, a pair of weak storm centers joined forces to make a single big storm. North Atlantic storms normally move northeastward but...[this one] paused, instead, off the Middle Atlantic coast, in just the right spot to vent its fury landward. Then it took an erratic lobe to the south-east...The storm's position gave it a 1,000 mile "fetch," as weathermen describe the distance over which a wind can sweep unimpeded in a

single direction. Winds that begin to build waves so far at sea can pile up a lot of water before reaching shore...Finally, the storm struck at precisely that period in the 28-day lunar cycle when the gravitational forces of sun and moon are pulling together to produce the highest tides of the month...."

But as shore residents rose early that Tuesday morning for work and school, all this was still unknown. They knew there was a nor'easter blowing, not that the drama was well under way.

Off the Island, the tug *Penobscot* was towing the destroyer *USS Monssen*. In the building seas, the tow line parted. The *Penobscot* radioed Norfolk, Va., that she was in distress and the destroyer was adrift, heading for Long Beach Island.

By 6:30 a.m. Long Beach Township police had the first hint that this was going to be an all-out storm.

"0630: (Ocean) broke through at Caroline Ave.

"0640: Get Chief."

"There's a beautiful sight down at the inlet," local resident Robert Kenney told a friend. "There's a destroyer in your front yard. Come on out."

Few still knew the extent of the storm as Southern Regional High School buses rolled up and down the boulevard and over the bridge. Once in Manahawkin, students could tell from the stories of friends and the trip over the Causeway that this was no ordinary storm. Classes were cancelled and the students sent back over the bridge. It would be a long time before the doors opened for school again.

Robert Van Meter Jr., a 17-year-old high school student from Harvey Cedars, said, "We rode up to the end of the Island on the school bus Tuesday morning. The tops of the waves were 25 feet high. We didn't go to school."

Holgate seemed to be taking the worst of the storm, and just hours after the break at Caroline Avenue, evacuations began. In one of the rescue trucks were Long Beach Township Police Chief Angelo J. Leonetti, Township Committeeman Kenneth Chipman, and Robert Osborne, a member of the Beach Haven First Aid Squad.

Somewhere along the flooded boulevard the three rescuers met with disaster. The Coast Guard reported it lost radio contact with the truck at about 10 a.m. Two hours later Coast Guard and Civil Defense authorities discovered the overturned truck, half buried in sand, and the bodies of Osborne and Leonetti.

By mid-day the ocean was at low tide and the bay on its way down. The boulevard was still flooded in many spots but officials realized they must act now. A nor'easter is no mere hurricane. A hurricane lasts from six to 12 hours. If you make it through one bad tide, it is pretty much over. But by now most realized the Island would get hit once or possibly with two more tides. With most of the dunes gone already, the next tide could destroy property. And worst of all, this high tide would come after dark.

Most Islanders were aware of the situation and throughout the afternoon they made their decisions. Some were evacuated to firehouses and schools on the Island and others left the Island for Southern Regional High School. Some gathered at secure houses and some chose to brave it alone.

The tide started back before all the residents were safe. Said Patrolman William Beisel, who evacuated North Beach residents in a six-by-six army truck: "I had 21 lives on the truck behind me and two more getting on. Then we saw a whole house coming at us, and I said, 'Grab the women and get out,' and that house didn't miss us by six inches."

Fred Groslinger, Deputy Civil Defense Director, who helped with rescue efforts in Barnegat Light, said: "I was checking the houses up front when I saw (patrolman) Sam Crossley trapped in

his car with two elderly people he had just picked up. A power line had fallen on the car and was sparking. I radioed Sam to stay put and called the light company but they didn't have a unit available just then. About that time, a wave washed the road right out from under the front of Sam's car. They'd all be gone with the next one. Then, like a miracle, the next wave pulled down the old folks' house and washed it right out to sea and pulled the live wire off with it."

In Holgate, residents took shelter in the Bond's Life Saving Station, among them Navy journalist Robert W. Bliss, sent to keep an eye on the beached destroyer. They had arrived during the afternoon in an amphibious vehicle known as a "duck."

"On the way down to the station," Bliss said, "we found big chunks of the macadam gone from the road. We had to speed up to get across them to keep from getting stuck. We passed the truck where three men were killed that morning."

Ducks were then used to get residents north to Beach Haven and safety. "One of the ducks made four trips to Beach Haven," Bliss said. "We got the photographer out on the last run because Third Naval District Headquarters in New York was hollering for pictures of the ship. He took the film, and I kept his camera to save space on the duck.

"There wasn't a heck of a lot that could be done...They needed deep water vehicles to move around. We knew by then we'd have to stay the night."

Bliss said approximately 35 people in the old building could only see outside by poking a flashlight out the window, and "we spotted electrical wires shorting out in the distance. It was a real haunting feeling, I can tell you."

Then came strange noises from outside.

"The duck's overturned."

"One of the kids in the duck got back inside the building," Bliss recalled. "He was in shock, and he had tremendous tremors.

He was half frozen from the water and the 30-degree temperature outside...Then we heard more shouts for help outside and we found another man lying on top of a truck, exhausted."

The rescued driver told of the ill-fated trip. "The duck had rescued seven people from the nearby trailer camp owned by Gus Lindell. Included in the party were Mrs. Lindell and Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kenney. The duck bogged down in a sand bank with a punctured tire. As Coast Guardsmen attempted to free the craft, it was broached by a 10-foot wave. Realizing the vehicle was useless, Chief Buxton made sure that the entire party wore life jackets, and ordered them to link elbows, forming a human chain. However, they were knocked into holes, and jarred apart by heavy seas, and scattered apart. When they reached the station, the Lindells and Kenneys were missing.

"Chief Buxton found himself being dragged under by a heavy, water-soaked jacket. He was at first unable to remove it, but he got it off as far as his elbows, faced the floodwaters, and let the current pull it off. He then spotted the disabled truck a short distance away and climbed on its roof, exhausted."

In the station the survivors rode out the storm by the one 60-watt bulb the generator operated and Bliss, like most on the Island, recalled thinking, "I'd give anything if it would hurry up and get daylight...Then we could at least see what was going on. If we had to get out at night, I wouldn't have known which way to go."

To the north on Centre Street, Beach Haven, Betty Stare kept a journal showing the utter isolation of the Island.

"WOND [a radio station in Pleasantville] signed off to evacuate station at 4:30 p.m. Lights out 7:40...surrounded by water...flashes of electricity at house south of us. (The Beach Haven plumbing station burned.)...No water after 9:30...No telephone outgoing, but we are receiving calls...Tuttle's house

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burning...fire equipment can't reach blaze no lights, no water, some phones...."

In Brighton Beach, John Brill, his wife Betty, a neighbor, Mary Lawrence, and her two young sons watched and waited. After dinner Betty looked out the window and screamed.

"John! It's gone!"

On their street, the home closest to the sea, a large 2 story structure, had vanished.

"That night," according to an account of their ordeal, "as they sat around wondering what would happen next, two of the four remaining houses in that line, fell into the sea. Waves smashed still another.

"Once, when the winds dropped, they heard an Army loudspeaker truck, blaring an offer to evacuate residents. Mrs. Lawrence and her children left. The Brills stayed.

"At 6:30 a.m. Brill walked out to watch an abandoned home turn slowly off its foundation and slide noiselessly off on the surging tide. In futile rage, he shook his fist.

"Water was running through their attached garage. The rabbit-ears antenna, like the pictures on the wall, was trembling. Their dog, usually noisy, hid under the bed."

In the darkness fallen electric lines, fires and bottomless puddles hampered all efforts to keep in touch and to rescue those in danger. An electric company truck with a crew of seven reported, "We are being swamped...there go two houses floating by." The radio went dead.

According to Robert Van Meter, "My buddy and I started walking down the highway. We suddenly came to water and realized that the sea had cut across the Island. We swam and waded about 75 feet across. On the other side we found the electric company truck overturned. The seven men were okay."

Finally, dawn arrived. Blessed and cursed at the same time, for now one could see and know how bad it really was. Barnegat Light was a separate island and remained so for several days. A channel had cut through Harvey Cedars. But help was on the way - troops from Fort Dix and, most valuable of all, Navy helicopters from Lakehurst. Among the rescuers were Navy Lt. Commander John Simon and crewman Thomas "Smitty" Smith. What follows is an account of their efforts.

"Hampered by 80 mile an hour winds, help was on the way. In the days that followed the veteran Navy pilot repeatedly landed his craft on the Island, delivering medical supplies, gasoline, food, and fresh water to the rescue teams.

"Then loading his helicopter with storm victims, LCDR Simon shuttled to the mainland to discharge his passengers at the evacuation center.

"Weary, sad, and even frightened evacuees; were seen to smile as they entered the 'copter and read a makeshift poster put up by Crewman Smith that said: 'Welcome Aboard...Your Pilot's Name is Simon...Your Crewman is Smitty...Enjoy Your Flight and See the Sights.' Below the greeting was a scorecard showing the number of persons flown in their 'copter as well as the amounts of gasoline, water, etc. that they had delivered.

"Four days after they had started, the score-card indicated that they had rescued 214 persons, 3 dogs, 3 cats and 1 parakeet. This total did not include the crew of another Navy helicopter that crashed in the surf and was rescued by the team of Simon and Smitty."

One last attack by the sea came on Wednesday. More houses were lost, but the worst was now over as help, both governmental and private arrived. The Island looked as though it had been through a surprise air raid. Many returned not knowing what they would find.

John Boots of North Beach said: "I came to America in 1945 and we had a business down here importing exotic foods and spices which we sell by mail order...That pile of junk over there was our house. Fourteen rooms. Cost \$40,000. We left Tuesday night after the bulkheads gave. When we came back today the house was in pieces. That's my television tube across the road over there."

Many suffered a similar fate. "I think we're going to find a hill somewhere and live on top of it," said one Islander.

But few did. The Islanders came back and built anew. Today, a drive from one end of the Island to the other shows virtually no signs of the storm. It's in the people that you can see the legacy. When reports of a hurricane or coastal storm hit, news people tend to laugh and make jokes, or feel disappointed when the storm misses the area. It's the survivors of '62 who keep quiet and listen and say to themselves, "If those fools only knew what they were talking about." They lived through the worst nature could throw at them, and they have a respect for the wind and sea that only firsthand knowledge can give. □