

# When a

# HURRICANE HITS

A firsthand account of working dispatch during one of nature's worst storms

By Sandra Gorsuch

**M**y supervisor called me at about 4:30 in the morning advising me to come in: “Feeder bands are developing.” In my stupor I asked, “What are feeder bands?”

I would find out soon enough when I got to work. She told me to get there as soon as possible, before the bridges shut down.

*Cone of uncertainty* is a meteorological term to show where a hurricane may make landfall. Hurricanes are unpredictable in that they change speed and paths throughout their journey, but unlike earthquakes or tornadoes,

with today's technology we have fair warning. So in the public safety arena we, of course, prepare. We knew the day it would land, so I was not too surprised at the phone call, and I was expected to bring a change of clothes and an overnight bag.

By ten hundred hours, I was twiddling my thumbs. It was the calm before the storm,

and the phones were silent; the radio traffic, minimal. I was working a fire channel, dispatching for seven different fire districts in the south half of the county.

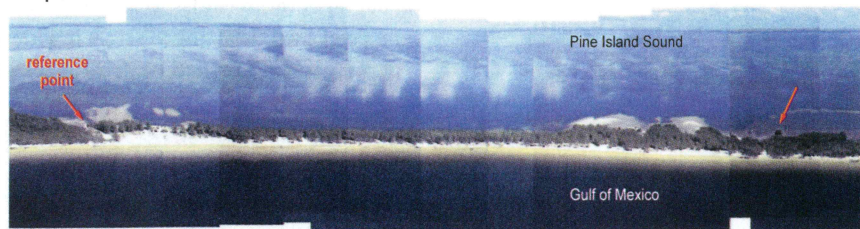
“Okay boys and girls, clean your consoles and get ready for guests,” said my supervisor.

The next thing I knew, about five VIPs from the commissioner's office and one reporter were standing behind me asking questions. I showed them my computer screens and gave the usual pat answers, but I couldn't wait for them to leave the room so I could relax, drink more coffee and slouch.

Lee County is 1,212 square miles, and from one end to the other approximately 50 miles long. At this time, the agency dispatched 33 ambulances for the entire county and 19 fire departments. This particular hurricane was coming in from the south, so being the south fire dispatcher, I was the first to get busy. The phones started ringing, the radios seemed to suddenly get hectic — I was no longer slouching.

Before the hurricane actually hit, I had dispatched the fire department, and the EMS dispatcher sent an ambulance to a report of a vehicle rollover occupied by one male driver. About the time fire got on scene, EMS was called back by their duty officer. The winds were getting too bad, and they were ordered to head back to station. I gave the fire department this update, and they had no choice but

North Captiva Island, FL  
September 29, 1999



August 15, 2004



Barrier island before and after the hurricane.