

to transport the patient in their fire truck back to the fire department. The car was left on the road like a dead bug with its feet in the air.

Normally, “power lines down” is a priority call. They have a red background on my screen, and it was strange to start stacking these calls. My screen showed a column of these, with medical calls also in red, dropping randomly throughout.

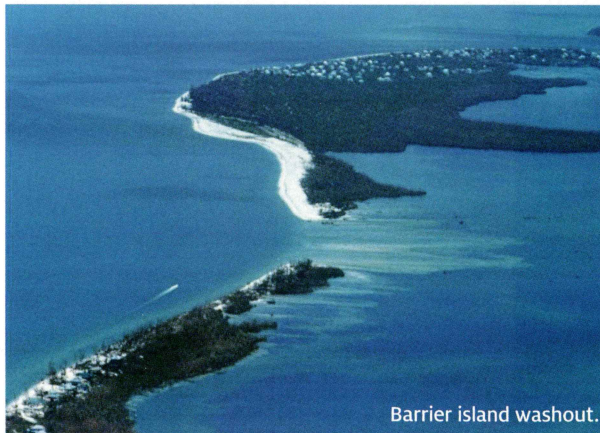
“Right now the storm is too bad for us to respond, but we will get someone to you as soon as we can,” uttered the call takers over and over again.

Everyone who resided on a barrier island was advised to evacuate. It was astonishing how many people did not. More calls for reported injuries started to come in, working their way from the south just as the hurricane did. As the storm died down enough to start dispatching my units again, the central part of the county was getting hit hard. It just so happened that was where our dispatch center was located.

Soon we were on generator, evidenced by the indicator lights just below the atomic clock. I thought, “No problem, we’ve been on backup power before.”

My fingers were flying across the keyboards, the wind was howling, the phones hadn’t stopped ringing and my radio traffic was full of static and very heavy. As the hurricane came closer to us my supervisor said it was now a category four. I was surprised because the forecast was for it to come in as a category one. Storm surge was supposed to be the main problem. I couldn’t stay surprised too long though — I was just too busy.

People were injured on the beach, but my beach fire department could not get even their largest trucks through the mountains



Barrier island washout.

of sand piled up in the road. We also had calls of propane leaks, and fires breaking out. You could say my crews were hiking “code on foot” through the sand to respond to these calls.

My supervisor came into the room and started shutting off every spare light, as well as the TV. With barely enough time to ask what was going on, we found out that the generator was about to go out. “Get a pen and paper!” We had about 20 minutes left on generator power. Apparently, the generator was not up to the capacity we needed it to be.

As the storm started to pass us and move north, the phones kept ringing, the radio traffic continued and we got our first report of a fatality in the north end of the county — hit by a falling tree and killed instantly. With people screaming on 9-1-1, it was a very

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surreal feeling not to be able to immediately send help.

When it was safe enough, I started dispatching my crews in the south, but weeding through the red priority-one power line calls to find the priority-one medical calls, also in red, was challenging. Later we vowed to reclassify the downed power line call for future hurricanes.

In the meantime, crews would roll up on a downed power line, and I’d create a call only to discover it was a duplicate and already on my screen. I dreaded the thought of trying to move

this to pen and paper. With just minutes to spare, the main power came on, and I believe the walls actually expanded with the collective sigh let out by everyone in the room.

By evening, technically the storm was over, but calls kept coming in. Injury- and death-related calls would still be attributed to the storm for a while. By a little after 21:30, I was relieved of the radio. Dispatchers were now walking the halls in pajamas and trying to find something to eat.

Word got around that it was a mess outside. Trees were down, and the sign directing traffic from the road to our center looked like it needed a chiropractic adjustment. When the EOC is activated, it doesn’t matter if the event is a manmade disaster or a natural disaster, certain protocols and procedures immediately go into place. Even though we had a security gate that you had to swipe a card to get open before you could drive through, protocol now was that we had to have a patrol officer guarding the gate.

As nighttime grew near we started to look for places to sleep. No one complained about the government-issued air mattresses, and people were starting to set up in different office areas. I dragged my mattress and

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