

The Star-Ledger Archive
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Date: 2012/11/04 Sunday Page: 001 Section: News Edition: State/ROP
Size: 2745 words

48 HOURS THAT FOREVER CHANGED NEW JERSEY

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Sandy's devastation was widespread, but perhaps it resonated most along the Jersey Shore, where seemingly every family has made memories, where every kid has played Skee-Ball in a boardwalk arcade and where the sausage-and-pepper sandwiches tasted unlike anything we ever put in our mouths. This morning, there are only splinters where towns stood and there is a roller coaster in the Atlantic. The owners vow to rebuild, the residents to return. The resolve is the same everywhere you go, even as people struggle to understand what happened last week.

With that in mind, this is the blow-by-blow account of Sandy's deadly path into New Jersey. It was based on eyewitness accounts from Shore residents and officials, including many who rode out the storm on the barrier islands. Also included are meteorological data and interviews with officials who describe how the storm stalked the state for days before turning on New Jersey and unleashing a double-fisted fury beyond all imagining.

Ancient mariners believed the tides were the angry breathing of a sea creature chained to the ocean floor.

In Cape May on Sunday morning, Oct. 28, with Hurricane Sandy still 300 miles from shore, the tides, instead, beckon surfers, riding wind-driven swells off the Ocean Street beach.

Just inland, residents and business owners take the usual precautions against an impending storm. At the Congress Hall, where Abraham Lincoln once stayed, workers nail plywood over the ground-floor windows and doors.

Down Perry Street at the Bayberry Inn, a Victorian bed-and-breakfast, owners Andy and Toby Fontaine shuffle the patio furniture inside.

"We're staying, basically, because I can't think of any place to go," Andy Fontaine says.

The forecast has hovered like a Sword of Damocles over the state for days. Plenty of time to get ready -- shore up windows, move possessions to second floors, purchase batteries and water. That's what New Jersey did last year, right before Irene hit. But this is different -- a hurricane buddying with a nor'easter. Almost everyone believes the

damage will be substantial and the pain, perhaps unprecedented. But few are prepared for the meteorological time bomb set to explode over New Jersey's coast, or the suddenness of a tidal surge that in the time it takes to watch a movie, will forever change the geography of the state.

While the Fontaines prepare for the storm, at Cape May Point Sister Mary Ann Mulzet moves briskly along the empty halls of St. Mary by-the-Sea, a massive Victorian structure built more than 120 years ago as a resort hotel. For the past 100 years, however, the Sisters of St. Joseph have called the 130-room hotel their retreat house. It stands sentinel on the southern-most piece of land in New Jersey -- the last spit of earth where the toe of the Garden State meets the Atlantic.

From the windows of this Tuscan-red-roofed retreat, an observer can take double delight in watching the sun rise and set.

By 11:30 a.m., Sister Mary has checked all the windows and heads for the convent house in Wildwood, where she will join her fellow sisters in evacuating before the storm.

"We're relying on the prayers of all the sisters who made retreats here," Sister Mary says, as sirens whine in the background. "We believe the power of prayer will keep it safe."

In Seaside Heights, Police Chief Thomas J. Boyd studies the forecast on the computer in his office, zeroing in on the radar predicting the storm's path.

"Follow the map, follow the map," he repeats to himself.

At this moment, with Sandy still only a swirl of color on a meteorologist's computer screen, few up and down New Jersey's 127-mile-long shore could mistake the Atlantic for a monster.

Twenty-four-hours later, they will.

Although meteorologists record the first tropical storm-force winds in Cape May at 7 a.m. Sunday, by early afternoon, with Sandy still moving slowly north, there remains a slim possibility it still might skirt New Jersey and turn eastward. That's what Chief Boyd is counting on. But that door out to the east, away from land, is rapidly closing.

COME THE RAINS

At exactly 12:37 p.m., according to meteorological reports, the storm's first rain falls on Cape May Point. Outside the volunteer fire department, Joe Nietubicz takes down the American flag. The department's 16-foot flat johnboat and Carolina skiff are hauled out and readied, while a crew preps the fire engines to be moved to higher ground.

On Sunday evening, as more coastal residents seek inland shelter, the hotels and motels along state Highways 35, 36, 1 and 9, flash red "No

Vacancy" signs. Wind and rain continue to whip the ocean. Even the inlets and marshes seethe with surly whitecaps.

Most people on the barrier islands take the evacuation orders seriously as experts track Sandy's massive 1,000-mile-wide arms swirling and churning just off the Carolinas. What they are also watching is a stubborn, low-pressure system hugging the Appalachians, pulling Sandy to the west. It's a game of tug of war, and by 2 a.m. Monday, with wind gusts reaching 60 mph inland and a high tide washing water over miles of dunes, that door to the east -- New Jersey's only escape hatch -- slams shut.

When Chief Boyd sees the hurricane make an abrupt left-hand turn on the computer screen, he says to himself, "We're screwed." Immediately he begins calling in more officers and making arrangements to pull cruisers off the island -- cars will be useless, and worse, 1-ton missiles in a flood.

The unthinkable is now the inevitable. A storm of historic proportions and intensity is rushing headlong toward one of the most densely populated coastlines in the world. Sixty-five million Americans, 9 million of them in New Jersey, are in her path. And those remaining on the barrier islands are in the bull's-eye.

Chief Boyd wakes up Monday morning at police headquarters, where he has spent the night. By 8 a.m. his phone is ringing nonstop. Boyd has lived nearly his entire 51 years on the island. In 1991, married and with three young children, he moved inland, to Toms River. Sitting at his desk, he takes one call after another from Seaside Heights residents who have evacuated. They've seen or heard the forecast by now, and they want to come back for their possessions. Boyd will have none of it. No, he tells them. The bridges are closed, the evacuation mandatory.

Outside, it is gray, humid and chilly. Gusting winds and driving rain challenge the balancing skills of pedestrians. In nearby Lavallette, Jim McCann watches the first high tide surge split the dunes and wash down the street. The water is no more than ankle-deep, but it's fast-moving and in a matter of minutes swallows the dune at the end of the block. Water spews across the boardwalk and spits upward between the planks.

At Joey Harrison's Surf Club in Ortley Beach, the surge rushes through windows and doors. Furniture, freezers --anything not bolted down -- is swept out, but the building remains intact. Not so a nearby outdoor restaurant, which crumples and shreds.

As Sandy stalks the coast, thundering northward, Karen Ludwig, in Raritan Bay, decides she's not taking any chances. She's lived on Union Beach, on a street that runs up against the bay, for 52 years and she's fled every storm since the Ash Wednesday Hurricane of 1962.

"There was Donna, or maybe Gloria," Ludwig says. "(Then) Floyd . . . Oh, and Irene. We left last year for Irene."

Ludwig and her husband, Richard Kuti, decide to check into the Best Western in Hazlet.

At the police station in Seaside Heights, Boyd gets up from his desk. The silver-haired chief leans on a cane. Three weeks ago, he underwent knee replacement surgery. He meets with Seaside Heights Mayor Bill Akers to make final preparations, and by noon hits the road in his police truck with an officer, driving up and down Ocean Boulevard, keeping an eye on the boardwalk and Casino Pier.

He wants to get a good look at the ocean, so Boyd directs the officer to drive up onto the sea-swept boardwalk. When a huge wave flies over the railing and rushes under the truck, it lifts it for a moment, rocking it back and forth. For the first time, Boyd is genuinely frightened about the coming storm.

By 3 p.m. Monday, Sandy's cloud cover reaches as far north as Canada and as far west as Iowa. The low pressure from the west and a high pressure system from the Northeast fence the storm in over the Mid-Atlantic. Alarmingly, even at low tide along the New Jersey coast the water remains abnormally high -- for a high tide, that is. Like stacking Mount McKinley atop Mount Kilimanjaro, Monday's two high tides will essentially form an enormous column of water, poised to deliver misery and mayhem to millions.

Boyd spends the afternoon trying to convince residents who have remained behind, to leave. When they refuse, he can only shake his head in disbelief.

"They think they're gonna be able to sit there and stop Mother Nature from pouring millions of gallons of water down the street? To save their house?!"

Anyone who doesn't have a second floor or attic to retreat to, Boyd orders out of town.

Around 3 p.m., on the bridge between Toms River and Seaside Heights, Toms River Police Chief Michael Mastronardy swerves violently, hitting his brakes, to avoid being creamed by several utility poles that crash thunderously to the ground, a mere hundred feet in front of him. Shaken, he calls Boyd.

"Tommy," Mastronady says, trying to laugh. "I almost got crushed by telephone poles."

The most important route between the island and mainland is now impassable.

A full moon officially arrives a bit before 4 p.m., helping to turn Sandy's high tide surge into a tsunami-like wave of floodwater up and down the East Coast. In New York harbor, instruments will later record a peak wave of 32 feet.

What's coming, no one, not even Boyd or his officers, can foresee -- a calamitous rush of water is about spring on the shore. For two terrifying hours it will spin and punch its way inland.

The power is out all along the coast by 7 p.m. and swells from both the bay and ocean begin to pool in some sections of Seaside Heights. Heavy flooding in Ortley Beach and Lavallette has made Mantaloking Bridge inaccessible. The barrier island is now entirely cut off.

Fewer than 20 miles from the coast, Sandy weakens slightly and the National Hurricane Center says it is now a nor'easter with 85 mph winds. The classification is meaningless for residents of New Jersey's barrier island. When Sandy makes landfall around 8 p.m., she smacks the state at hurricane strength.

BRAVING THE STORM

Boyd is in his truck with Fire Chief James Samarelli, who is at the wheel. They turn right onto Sampson Avenue and are nearly hit by a wooden lifeguard boat slicing through the floodwater. A wall of water is headed directly for them, bringing a second lifeguard boat. Samarelli jerks the truck to the right. A large piece of the boardwalk, ripped away by the waves, slams into the front of the flatbed truck. Boyd looks down at his suddenly cold feet. Seawater is rushing into the cab and a 6-foot-tall swell lifts the truck and begins pushing it sideways, into a telephone pole.

Boyd knows if they get pinned and flip, they'll drown. He thinks about how he and the other officers are out here just trying to save people's lives. Instead, it looks like he's going to die. Another swell hits the windshield. Samarelli desperately throws the car into reverse trying to back up and get traction. Another wave, and the truck is sent swirling down Sampson Avenue. The piece of boardwalk that was clinging to the grill of the truck shakes loose. Somehow Samarelli maneuvers the truck onto firmer ground.

"Time to go to headquarters," Boyd says.

Waves 10, 20 feet-high pound up, over and through the dunes and rush with marauding intensity down streets and across boulevards violently wrapping around motels, ice cream parlors and cozy breakfast nooks. Houses are ripped from foundations, cars tumble like bathtub toys and boats become ghost ships sailing through flooded, amputated towns.

When the water reaches 13.3 feet above normal, Sandy Hook tidal station breaks its all time record by more than 3 feet -- then washes away, the water still rising.

A man in Seaside Heights grips a low-hanging tree branch, clinging on to it for dear life, as water rises to his chest.

"Please save me!" he calls to Boyd. "Please save me! I'm scared for my life!"

Boyd and Samarelli grab the man and drag him through the water to the truck.

All over Seaside, Boyd and his 18 officers scoop up residents from attics, roofs and trees and deliver them to dry land. If it's possible, the storm seems to be even more treacherous. The chief decides it's too dangerous to be out and pulls his team back into the station. By Boyd's count, they've saved 36 lives.

Jack Buzzi from Normandy Beach in Toms River is talking on the phone with a neighbor who lives across the street. It's about 9 p.m., an hour since the high tide surge and the water has chased the woman to her second floor. Buzzi can also see out his window that she's stranded. The next moment a wave blasts the woman's house off its foundation, shattering it into three sections. The second floor, where the woman is speaking to Buzzi, falls 10 feet and begins to slide away. Buzzi is already out the door with a large florescent lantern, struggling through the water, following the piece of house with his neighbor inside. Twenty minutes later, he returns to his own home and his frightened fiancée, Melissa Griffith, with the drenched woman in tow.

In Seaside Heights the surge swamps Heiring Avenue, Carteret, Sampson, Sheridan and Sherman virtually simultaneously. At police headquarters, the floodwaters breach the first floor of the two-story building. Everyone, including roughly 60 residents of Seaside Heights who have taken shelter there, scramble up to the second floor. Boyd worries about the generator washing away. It's the only thing powering his department. Hunkered down, the officers and homeowners spend a sleepless night listening to the screeching wind as it claws at the roof trying to pry it off.

A CRUEL DAWN

By midnight, however, the worst is over. By dawn, unfortunately, it is visible.

Splintered homes have floated out to sea. Others have come to rest on other streets and at crazy angles, like so many Monopoly houses and hotels.

Far to the north, water has filled the downtown area of Hoboken like it's a bathtub. Trees and utility poles all over the state snap and crack through the night, sending live wires, sparking and sizzling, across sidewalks, streets and lawns. Brief, arcing flames from severed power lines and blown transformers mimic lightning in the night sky, confusing some residents. Fractured gas mains spew clouds of the stuff into the swirling surge waters, which bubble ominously, and natural gas fires burn from Bayhead to Brick and Long Beach Island, some for as many as three days.

By Tuesday afternoon, Sandy is escorted out of the state by a slew of gray clouds stumbling drunkenly across the Northeast. Not until Wednesday does the sun make a welcome appearance.

Chief Boyd remains trapped at police headquarters in Seaside, until the floodwaters recede enough on Tuesday morning. It's 9 p.m. before he goes home for the first time in 48 hours.

Before he does, though, he tours his broken borough and the island where his family has lived since 1933.

Casino Pier, which he calls the anchor of town, is shattered. Debris is everywhere. Yet all across the state, the heavy equipment that will help rebuild New Jersey rumbles forward.

At the boardwalk, though -- or what's left of it -- it's quiet, except for the wind whipping the shredded fabric of Funtown, the ever-present pounding of the waves and the cawing of seabirds as they dip and dive and soar, reeling across the sky as if on some invisible ride.

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NOTES: *The story was written by Amy Ellis Nutt and primarily reported by James Queally, Mark Di Ionno, Stephen Stirling, Erin O'Neill, Ryan Hutchins, Tom Haydon, Jarrett Renshaw, Julia Terruso and Eric Sagara. It includes contributions and details from more than 30 other reporters.*