

Running From Rita

Thursday, September 22, 2005

By Freeman Mendell

Background

I work For Galveston County on Galveston Island. I live in League City, Texas about 28 miles northwest from Galveston Island. Because of the size of Galveston County, population-wise, and because of my employment, I know virtually all of the elected officials of the County. I have worked with the Emergency Management personnel in past emergencies and have participated in drills that have occurred in the past trying to prepare for an emergency.

This year, the Texas Legislature passed a mandatory evacuation law, the first of its kind in Texas. A Mayor or County Judge can call for a mandatory evacuation of their jurisdiction. Texas is divided into 5 disaster districts, each under the command of a Department of Public Safety (State Troopers) official. It is the job of the Disaster District commander to formulate an evacuation plan. I am sure that the State Emergency Management Office has input to this plan. It has been difficult to formulate a plan for the Houston-Galveston area because it is so vast and populous. Just this year, a plan was announced that called for a staged evacuation. The Coastal areas were to be evacuated first over specific routes for each area, followed by other areas. Voluntary evacuations could begin anytime that an individual felt the need to go. In an area of 3.5 to 4 million people you do not want everyone on the road at the same time. Unfortunately that is what happened.

The National Weather Service office for the upper Texas Coast is co-located with the Galveston County Emergency Management office. I know the head of the NWS office. I had met him at other briefings for past events and have invited him to speak before our InfraGard membership prior to previous hurricane seasons. He is also a nearby neighbor. I have often asked him when to evacuate as the problem with everyone hitting the road simultaneously was a well known possibility. He suggested that I place a webcam across the street from his house and watch for his wife to leave. It has been a running joke for several years between us, but one with a serious question attached to it. When I was at our Emergency Management Office on Tuesday the 20th to get some reentry cards so that my boss and I could get back into the island in case there was limited access after this storm, the NWS fellow saw me and said his wife was leaving before 5 AM on the 21st. At the same time the County Judge told me that a mandatory evacuation for our County would be called the evening of the 20th starting on the 21st in phases, the last phase starting at noon on the 22nd. I live in the area of the last phase.

The problem with our area is that if the storm is a Category 4 or a 5, the storm surge could easily cover the entire area. I have weathered Category 1 storms in my current residence and am not concerned about a Category 1 or a Category 2. Strong 3's and up are very worrisome. By the time it hits it is too late to change your mind. If it looks like a 3 or better, running for the hills is the smart thing to do. Most of the deaths in a hurricane result from drowning, most associated with the storm surge. I have been through Category 3 and 4 hurricanes but at those times I was not living in an area that was vulnerable to the storm surge. Our Emergency Management people and the NWS folks had given us presentations this month about what would happen if those categories of storms were to hit just right in our area. As of Tuesday, the 20th, the prediction was that it was coming in very close or at Galveston and was going to be a Category 4 or 5 hurricane. It looked very bad. In the big storm of 1900 no one was left alive on the West end of Galveston Island. The same would happen today with the perfect storm. That is why so many people heeded the warnings.

A Little Geography Lesson

Originally my wife and I and our dogs were going to stay with some friends just north of the Houston area. As time progressed, it looked like we would have a Category 5 storm and even that would not be safe. We decided to go stay with a Cousin that I had not seen in 12 years but had been in touch by email over the years. He lives north of Beaumont about 110 miles, which should have been plenty enough inland to miss the main fury of the storm and was WAY east of where the predictions were indicating that the storm would hit.

If we draw a right angled triangle with Houston and Beaumont on the bottom and Zavalla, Texas, where I was headed, at the top north of Beaumont, you can get the picture of the planned journey. The hypotenuse would run from Zavalla to Houston. It was about 130+ mile trip normally. I felt that I should work my way east as soon as possible to avoid all of the Houston traffic headed north toward the more populous sections of the state. That was the plan to avoid traffic. I thought we would be going just before the major thrust. Boy, was I wrong.

Time to Go

My wife has an elderly mother in bad health living near us. My wife had major back surgery six months prior to the storm and was not yet recovered. She still had a lot of pain and general discomfort. She tries to limit her time in the car.

Her mother did not want to leave and kept moving the time that she would make a decision forward. Finally I decided that we would leave the next morning, Thursday the 22nd, before dawn. Our evacuation time that had been scheduled for our area by the authorities was noon that day. My sister-in-law took responsibility for my mother-in-law so we felt comfortable in leaving. Besides, we could not wait. The storm was looking more and more like it was coming to Galveston.

We were packed and on the road by 5 A.M. Thursday the 22nd. The first 10 miles or so went at the speed limit. The road that we had to go on, Highway 146, goes from two lanes to three lanes to four lanes back to three then to two and then to one as it moves north past Interstate 10. For the next twenty miles the traffic moved at a snail's pace. We

spent the next several hours in that line. We turned off the air conditioning in the car as we did not want to waste gas. Gas had been hard to find before we left and I was sure it was not going to get better. I guessed at least one thing correctly as we did not find gas until Sunday the 25th when we returned home. But, I am getting ahead of myself.

We started seeing cars breaking down as we waited in that line. One fellow had an old large pickup truck loaded down and he was pulling a trailer also loaded down. Not 30 miles from our house in the dense traffic moving at less than 5 miles an hour, something gave way in his engine and oil started pouring out. He got over to the side. This was the first of hundreds (yes hundreds) of cars that we would see pulled over, either out of gas or broken down. A lot of them were people who were trying to make the way-over-the-hill car go with it full of family, pets and belongings. It was a heart wrenching sight as we would not know what would happen to them. That ferocious storm was bearing down on all of us. There was no time to lose. Everybody had their vehicles loaded to the gills.

What would you take if you thought that nothing was going to be left when you returned?

A Category 5 storm up Galveston Bay would have totally wiped out tens of thousands of homes including mine. Your pets had to go. We had our three small dogs with us. Before the day was over the temperature would get to 103. Most of the day we were in 99 – 103 degree heat with high humidity. Fortunately I had packed a case of water. Had I not done that, I do not know how we or the dogs would have made it. Early in the trip, before it got past 95 degrees we saw one young couple pulled over trying to revive their pet dog who was having a heat stroke and was in convulsions. They were pouring water over the animal's stomach to try to cool him down. I know that this was one of many pets who were seriously stressed or died as a result of this evacuation.

As the hours began to pass on this freeway, nature started calling many people. Children would get out of a car and jump between the barriers separating the inbound and outbound and take care of their business there. Adults seem to be better able to hold if for now. But that could not last. This would be a continuing problem for the 22 hours that we were to be on the road.

Several hours later, I was able to take a side road east to get to I-10 to go towards Beaumont. I planned on going east for a time and then to start heading north between Houston and Beaumont. When we turned off of I-10 to head north, my wife said she needed to stop, but everything was extraordinarily crowded. I ask her if she could wait a little while as we should find something less crowded as we got into the less populated areas. We pulled into a small country convenience store in another few minutes. I could have topped off with gas but did not, a mistake I would come to seriously regret. We got a couple of soft drinks and used the outdoor facility before we left. At that store we saw several cars with very elderly people who were obviously in bad health. One lady appeared to be in very serious condition. Considering what was to come, I do not know how any of those elderly people made it as they would have to be in the same lines and the interminable heat as we were.

Unbeknownst to us, the Mayor of Beaumont had called an evacuation as well, so the roads we were planning to take were suddenly becoming very crowded, a fact that we did not understand until much later. The Mayor of Houston and the Harris County Judge (the County where Houston is) had also called for an evacuation of all areas that were

prone to flooding. The roads were now extraordinarily crowded. So much for an orderly evacuation. Instead of staging the evacuation, the officials had just called for an every man for himself evacuation. The only thing slightly different from that was that law enforcement got busy and started shutting down roads so you could only go where they sent you, which may not be in the same direction that you wanted to go in. There were no exceptions. I saw several people being hauled off to jail for disobeying orders or cutting in line. The end result was that all of the traffic was being funneled to a few roads, most of them two lane (one lane in one direction). Hundreds of thousands, perhaps more than a million cars (the evacuation was estimated at 2.5 million people) were being forced into choke points. Many families brought all of their vehicles. One family might have three fully loaded vehicles. I saw some conveyances of 10 or more cars.

As we traveled the back roads trying to get to a town called Kountze, Texas which would connect us to Highway 69 so we could go north to Zavalla. Suddenly the traffic came to a complete halt. We sat for 15 minutes or so and then several ambulances came whizzing by. I made an assumption that there was a bad accident ahead that would be causing this backup. We did some back tracking and some circling around for 30 minutes or so to try and bypass this bottleneck. As it turns out there was no bottleneck. This was the traffic line. By circling around and coming in from the west instead of the south, I did avoid a small amount of the line I had been in. We spent the next several hours in this line. Law enforcement was funneling one line of traffic coming from the east and a second coming from the west into a single line on a single lane road to get to Kountze. When we got to a fork in the road, it was blocked off in the direction of Kountze. I told the Deputy Sheriff that I wanted to go to Kountze but he said this other route would get to Zavalla quicker. We were to spend the next 12 hours in that line. We had been on the road for 8 hours already; it was 103 with 95% humidity. We were becoming exhausted. Fortunately we had that case of 1 liter water bottles. We started drinking the water and sharing it with the dogs.

After a very brief stint at the speed limit we found the next line. Law Enforcement had all other roads blocked. You could not exit from this route once you were on it. It moved at a pace of 1 – 3 miles an hour. This continued for the next twelve hours. Now we were headed in the wrong direction, in a line we could not exit, in heat that was unbearable.

Just before we were directed onto a road that led to a community called Big Sandy, several cars started going north in the south bound lanes. In about an hour a police car with lights going came up the south bound lane headed north. In 15 minutes or so the police car came by going south leading a convoy of the cars that had tired to cut in line. In a short distance we reached the next fork where police were preventing us from going where we wanted to again. I assume that is where the cars were stopped and held.

About 8 o'clock that night as we passed through Big Sandy, one family had set up a cold water station and was handing out a large glass of cold water free to those who asked. Nothing had ever tasted so good. Within an hour or two (just a few miles down the road) a store appeared that was open. We were able to stop and get two soft drinks and two bags of M&Ms. This was all we had to eat since 5 am. We were so relieved to find that store.

The one advantage of being in the woods as we were was that each time the line stopped, which it did for usually 20 minutes or so, people would make a beeline for the woods to relieve themselves. Even though we were drinking water like crazy, we had to make very few trips due to the heat.

Close to midnight we were 6 miles from highway 190 which went to Livingston, Texas to the west and Woodville, just south of Zavalla to the east. I estimated that we might make that intersection by 6 A.M. at the pace we were moving. I had been grabbing cat naps as we stopped between spurts of advance of 100 feet to ½ mile. My wife would wake me when the line moved. I was feeling a little better after the M&Ms and the catnaps.

Angels Drive Duallys

As we were sitting there in the woods, occasionally traffic from the other way would pass. I saw a big white dually pickup coming towards us. He stopped at a few cars ahead of us and said something. As he approached us, I waved him down. He said "Do you want to get out of this mess?" I answered in the affirmative. He asked where we were going. I told him Woodville. He said "About 400 yards ahead is a dirt road to the right called 'Village Cutoff Road'. Take that for 5 miles and you will hit 190. Turn right and it is clear to Woodville. If you want to follow me, I am going to the school and will guide you." I thanked him profusely. A lady behind us walked up and asked me what he said. I repeated the story three times for her but she did not seem to understand. My wife said that I was being very clear. All of us were so tired that nothing seemed to make sense. This story seemed like a practical joke from a local. I am sure that no one else believed him. Something about him made me feel that he was not putting us on.

The line started moving again. About 40 yards down the road a dirt road appeared and the street sign said "Village Cutoff". My wife yelled that this was it. I hit the brakes and turned right hard. No one ahead of us or behind us took this road. I figured that we would only lose a few places in line at most. I counted off the miles. When I got to five I began to get concerned. Shortly and very suddenly a major road appeared. I turned right. There was very little traffic in either direction but almost none coming from the direction where we should have come from at that next intersection. Law Enforcement was not allowing anyone to turn right. Once again they created more of a mess. We drove at the speed limit for 20 miles or so towards Woodville seeing very few cars. Near Woodville was a road that the map showed took us 10 miles or so north of Woodville to State Road 69. I breathed deep and took it. Once again we had no traffic for the 10 or 15 miles on this road. When we got to 69 it was running clear. You could have heard us yell for a long ways. We turned north onto 69 and started heading for Zavalla. Eventually 69 started backing up. Right after that people started using the south bound lanes to go north. This lasted for 10 miles or so until we got to Zavalla. At 3 A.M., 22 hours after we started, we pulled into my cousin's drive. Amazingly, we still had ½ tank of gas.

There were lots of hugs and emotions spilling out as we exited the car.

A Little Rest

I stayed up for an hour or so and talked with my cousin while my wife went to bed. After that I showered and went to bed as well. I woke up about 10 A.M. on Friday. My cousin had been to the shelters in town that were rapidly filling up. I went to town (3 or 4 miles,

population 647) and went to the shelter at the high school. The conditions were awful. Cots and pallets were everywhere, jammed right up next to each other. Children were running around, elderly people from nursing homes lying in the halls on pallets. Many of them were disoriented and confused. Nursing home staff was trying to take care of them but it was a losing effort. In a couple of days this was going to turn into chaos.

Later we took a big pot of taco soup (a Texas delicacy) to a shelter being set up for the locals who wanted to ride out the storm as it was predicted that the Eye of the storm would come over us. When we arrived and asked if someone would put it in a refrigerator or on a hot plate, the Red Cross lady became very hostile and told us to take it away as we were not to bring food there. A gentleman who was working as a volunteer at the local shelter, told the Red Cross woman that this was a local shelter for local people and that the Red Cross had nothing to do with it. He then said that she needed to be quiet. After that another woman put it in a refrigerator. The Red Cross lady was not happy.

As it turns out, I left a very safe area and drove into where the storm would be the strongest. Since we were over 100 miles inland, it would weaken considerably before it reached us though.

Showtime

About 10 P.M. the winds began to pick up. Shortly after that I showered and went to bed. Sometimes after midnight we lost power. The worst part of this was that it shut down all of the plumbing as the house was on an electric pump and septic system. As the storm raged and I need to take the dogs out, I took advantage for myself as well. A very large metal shed across the road blew down and the house near it lost a lot of siding and part of the roof. Very large trees blew down across the roads. Some of the locals seemed to carry chain saws on their belts, so they would cut enough of the tree to allow one lane of traffic by. The wind and heavy rain had stopped by noon.

There still was no gas anywhere. My cousin had seven gallons of gas in cans for his riding lawnmower. We put all of that into my tank.

Home again, Home again, Jiggity, Jig

About 2 pm Saturday we left. My cousin told me of a short cut. I asked about the downed trees and he said the locals would have cut them up by the time we got going. We took the short cut and about 8 miles into it we came across a very large tree across the road. We turned around and headed back. When we got to 69, I took a deep breath and started heading south. A few hours later 69 was to be closed because the Trinity River dam had to be taken down and it would flood Highway 69. We got through before that. When we got to the famous town of Kountze there was a lot of damage but none that seemed to be serious. We had passed many, many downed trees. There was a road out of Kountze that would take us around Beaumont and cut 24 miles or so off of our trip. I stopped a Sheriff's Deputy and asked if the road was clear. He said there were lots of downed power lines and trees. He said that the lines were dead, but to be careful. He thought all of the trees had been cleared so you could get by. He was exactly right. We wound up in a small convoy behind some large pickup trucks which made us feel better. At times the space between the parts of the downed tree was very narrow. We made it

to I-10 and then to 146 which would take us home. When we got on 146, we were the only car for a long ways. This is a major highway, 4 lanes in each direction at times. Houston was a ghost town. The only restaurants open were Dairy Queens. Nothing else at all was open, only Dairy Queens. I had not eaten at a Dairy Queen in 10 years but it was like the poshest restaurant in town for us weary travelers.

When we pulled into our driveway, my car computer showed that we could go another 50 miles before running out of gas. The next morning when I went to get fuel, the fuel warning light came on when I started the car

Conclusion

This was a man made tragedy of enormous proportions. I heard on Monday, the 26th NBC Nightly news that 40 soldiers had died in Iraq during these storms. The newsman was trying to make a not so subtle point. I am sure that many more than 40 people died in two days running from Rita in an unnecessarily chaotic evacuation. These folks died for no purpose in a situation they did not volunteer for led by leaders who sat in their shelters not having to suffer. Reacting was done on a slow schedule, not on one that could have minimized the suffering and death that occurred. We started hearing on the radio that one of the major freeways was going to be turned into a northbound only road Thursday morning. It was supposed to happen at noon at first. I believe it did not happen until late afternoon so far outside of Houston that it did not relieve anything. It turned into a bottleneck very quickly as it had to narrow before the traffic was lessened. That very newsman and his fellows fed the panic in the days preceding the storm making many flee who did not need to flee. Perhaps the media needs to take its share of the blame for the tragedy it helped to cause.

Many people lost everything that they had in this evacuation, not from the storm but from the events surrounding the evacuation. Those were cars that were not fit to travel and broke down and were then towed off and impounded at exorbitant rates by localities outside of Houston. There is no FEMA aid for these folks. Many families have been bankrupted by the shortsightedness of planners who refused to or could not recognize what the problems could possibly be in a massive evacuation like this one.

Weather predictions are not accurate enough yet to pin point where storms will hit, but the planners of this evacuation and panicky local officials made a bad situation deadly. No one had thought about the traffic tying up and the shortage of gasoline and the unrelenting heat. The stated evacuation plan plainly said that you could exit where you needed to, but somehow that changed.

The Little Boy Who Cried Wolf

No one did this on purpose but if no one takes a very hard look at what role they played in all of this and how they can make their part work better, then the next time will be worse. No one will leave when the danger is very real. We had plenty of notice with this storm. Hurricane Alicia that struck in 1983 formed and hit land in Galveston in 72 hours. We had over 5 days warning with this storm. How will we handle another more powerful Alicia?