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Trapped by Isabel

Photojournalist Douglas Clifford lost his SUV, found his courage and, with two other men, withstood a hurricane.

By DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD, Times Staff Writer
Published September 29, 2003



[Times photo: Douglas R. Clifford]

Douglas Clifford's rental SUV is pushed off N.C. 12 by the storm surge as Hurricane Isabel makes landfall on Hatteras Island near Rodanthe, N.C. Clifford and two other stranded men linked themselves with a rope and hiked to find shelter.

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RODANTHE, N.C. - At first, the wave seemed like all the others. Just as deliberate, just as foamy. I turned the sport utility vehicle's wheels into it, figuring I would ride it out.

But this wave was stronger and faster. Driven by Hurricane Isabel, the swell pried the steering wheel from my hands and lifted my vehicle off the pavement.

I punched the gas, but the wheels just churned the soupy sand. The engine choked on the rising water.

I had slid off the pavement into a mire of sand and surf. The "service engine soon" light glared as the motor's steady hum faded into a whine, then fell quiet.

* * *

I have been a photojournalist with the St. Petersburg Times for more than six years. This year, I am on the newspaper's hurricane team. As Hurricane Isabel approached the North Carolina coast this month, I was sent to Kill Devil Hills, N.C., to document what happened.

For a while, it seemed there wouldn't be much to photograph. The hurricane, once classified as Category 5, was downgraded to 2 before it hit land. Half of the hurricane team was called back to St. Petersburg. We



[Photo: Scott Anderson]

Photograph by SCOTT ANDERSON
St. Petersburg Times photojournalist Douglas Clifford rests on a swing after taking refuge on the second-floor porch of a beach home.



[Times photo: Douglas R. Clifford]

Austin Anderson, left, and his brother Scott warm up while riding out Hurricane Isabel in a hot tub on the third-floor balcony of the beach home where they took refuge with Clifford.



The 1983 Chevrolet Blazer of freelance videographer Austin Anderson became trapped in sand while he and his brother were trying to escape Hurricane Isabel.

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anticipated that the storm could fall apart by landfall.

Still, my goal was simple: Drive as far south as possible on N.C. 12 and take a safe position in Hatteras Island, where I was guessing most of the damage might be.

As I drove on Sept. 18 the wind and rain quickly grew. By the time I crossed the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge onto the island, my rented Buick Rendezvous was swaying in the bands of wind. I thought about turning back, but the road was dry and I was about 20 miles from the island's first town, so I pushed ahead.

My journey took me into the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, where 14-foot sand dunes let me know what was coming. The dunes, crowned by sea oats, were spraying mists of sand across the road.

Soon they were disintegrating, the sand carried away by a swath of tidal surge. Sand and sea foam floated in a rolling wake.

I looked in my rearview mirror and saw a dozen or so breached dunes cutting off the road behind me. I began to see hazy silhouettes of stilted, three-story vacation homes, offering me hope for safety if I had to abandon my vehicle.

I crossed a dozen more breaks in the dunes, the Buick twisted eastward with each rushing wave. The wheels lost traction briefly as sand and water churned around them.

I passed a Chevy Blazer parked on one of the broken dunes. The lights were on and the passengers were talking on cell phones. I waved but drove on. I was only a quarter mile from the beach homes.

They made it this far, I thought. They seem fine. I'm already moving forward, so I'll keep on going.

I was kidding myself. They had a four-wheel-drive truck, and it was mired in thick sand. They weren't okay and neither was I.

* * *

Unable to move after the water knocked out the engine, I called a co-worker. I told him about the Blazer I had seen and that I might be able to hitch a ride.

I hiked about 50 yards through the storm to the truck, where the men were digging at the wheels and unloading a large jack.

"My car is stuck," I said.

"We're stuck too," one of the men replied.

"I'll help you, just tell me what to do," I said.

"Well, you can start digging."

Austin Anderson, 42, and his brother Scott Anderson, 36, both of Austin, Texas, had also come to cover the hurricane. Austin is an Emmy-winning freelance videographer who traveled to the area with Scott, a teacher, to

cover the hurricane for NBC.

They had driven from Texas in Austin's trusty "buddy," a 1983 Blazer he had bought for \$7,000 in 1984. The truck was buried up to its axles in a thick puddle of sand and saltwater.

I returned to my Rendezvous, grabbed as much gear as I could carry and returned to the truck. My plan was to help them dig the wheels out and return to Kill Devil Hills and the safety of the Ramada Inn.

We used every piece of wood we could find: utility posts, fence posts, sign posts, anything drifting by to shove under the wheels as Austin used a 4-foot jack to push the truck above the quicksand.

But we couldn't bring the front of the truck up without the wheels sinking in the sand again.

We needed more wood. Scott decided to go after some plywood. I followed him to one of the stilt homes where Scott pulled a sheet from a window. It was an emergency; the homeowners would understand. The wind was so strong we had to carry the plywood while crawling through foot-deep water back to the truck.

The plan worked. We got the front end of the truck jacked up above the water and sand. We were free, for the moment.

* * *

Austin and Scott were confident in the truck. All we had to do was stay on the buried highway.

We started north, slowly rolling through the sand. We were trying to pick points in the distance to keep the truck rolling above pavement.

But somehow we strayed, and we began to sink. The wheels bogged down and the transmission strained as Austin worked the truck forward, then back.

"We're not going anywhere," I said. "We're done."

This wasn't about work now. It was about survival.

Scott immediately countered my worries. "We'll be fine. I'm an optimist, I am always an optimist. We'll just hike back to the houses."

Water was swelling outside the truck, splashing over the roof and running across the hood.

"We have to get out of here before it turns over," Scott said.

We decided to take 30 seconds to gather what we could: camera gear, phones and a 50-foot length of heavy rope.

"Let's go!" Austin said.

We tied ourselves together with the rope. Scott led us, with me in the middle and Austin on the end. Scott had a 30-foot lead, as he would decide when it would be safe to cross through the breaks in the dunes.

Twelve-foot waves were breaking on the beach, pushing 4-foot surges of water through the broken dunes with enough force to knock us down.

The Anderson brothers were in top physical condition. Although I was in decent shape, I quickly found it difficult to keep up.

My raincoat zipper had jammed, turning my coat into a kite. My waders had flooded, so I had to slog along as if I had gallon jugs of water tied to my shoes. And my equipment pack was heavy with gear and water. I struggled with each step as the waves took turns pushing us around.

I was the first to fall. A 2-foot-deep surge broke through an eroded dune and swept my feet from under me. I drifted in waist-high water as Scott and Austin braced to stop me. The line snapped tight and they pulled me up.

Then Scott fell. We pulled him up. Then I fell again.

My waders were so flooded and my pack so heavy that I was finding it hard to get back up. I was exhausted. Austin offered to carry my pack.

"Doug, you need to keep moving, your life depends on it!" Scott hollered.

"God, help me get through this!" I shouted. "Get up, get up, get up!"

I struggled to my feet. I turned to Austin and apologized. "I am really sucking wind, I am really having a hard time here."

I thought about ditching my pack, which contained my camera gear and laptop computer. I thought about taking off my waders and untying myself from the rope, allowing Scott and Austin to move on as I clung to a utility pole.

I kept repeating to myself: "I am not going to die out here."

* * *

I questioned why it was me on this assignment. I thought about Destiny, a 4-year-old foster child I help care for. She was the last person I talked with back home. I was sorry my goodbye had been so short.

I thought about what drowning might be like. I was afraid.

I have always believed in the power of perception, of projecting one's self into the future. At that moment I decided I wanted a future of life, not death, so I focused on each step. I concentrated on conquering each flooded dune.

I told myself I needed to keep Scott and Austin safe, too, even though I was holding them back. After all, wasn't I the one who remembered the rope? I focused on how important the rope was, and that gave me strength to go on.

"Keep your feet moving!" I yelled to myself.

By this point, sand had filled my ears, eyes and mouth. Scott was a hazy figure plodding ahead. He was deliberate and strong, and his pace quickened.

"I see houses ahead!" he yelled. "We are almost there!"

I searched the horizon. I saw no homes and figured Scott was only saying this to keep us sharp. But moments later, pilings, roof peaks and porches emerged from shimmering silhouettes.

Scott led us toward a three-story stilt home several hundred yards inland. It was an important choice, for the house had to be strong enough to withstand the hurricane, close enough to hike to, and accessible enough to provide shelter.

I collapsed into the current and let it carry me to the structure. I lay in the still, cool water near a stairway, thankful to be alive.

"Can I just lie here forever?" I asked my companions.

* * *

As I cooled off, they scouted out a safe area on the second floor porch and began to move our gear up the stairs.

"Come up with us, Doug. We need to stay together," Scott said.

I was exhausted. But as I lay there, feeling the heat radiate from my body, I knew I was going to survive.

I accompanied the brothers upstairs to a corner on the porch, where we rode out the storm.

A small boat floated by as the wind howled though straining power lines. A propane tank shot a plume of gas 15 feet into the air as it grazed a flooded boardwalk.

Shingles fluttered over the roof like blackbirds and pressure-treated boards tumbled through the relentless surge of wind and water.

We took turns leaning into Isabel, now enjoying its firm grip on our chests, our coats, our pants.

Scott and Austin found a hot tub on the third floor.

"There's still hot water in it," Austin said, delighted at his discovery. "We're getting in."

They gingerly took off their saturated rain gear again and climbed in for a soak.

After the storm subsided, we learned that we were only a mile north of the town's water desalination plant, which was on high ground, with working phone lines and a power generator.

We hiked to the plant, which was staffed by employees on 24-hour emergency duty. We ate, bathed and shared our stories with them into the night. The next day, with the equipment we had salvaged, we went back to work, making images of Isabel's aftermath to the south.

It turned out that at least 40 people had died in the storm.

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