

Archives 2013.039.0006

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM  
HOBOKEN STORIES:  
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: POLICE CHIEF ANTHONY FALCO

INTERVIEWER: ALAN SKONTRA

DATE: 14 AUGUST 2013

Track #1

AS: First question: tell us about your connection to Hoboken? How long have you lived here? Approximately where in the city do you live? And who do you live with?

AF: I've lived in this city my entire life, sixty-four years. I'm in the [unclear], on Grant Street, and I live there with my wife.

AS: How long have you been with the Hoboken Police Department?

AF: Forty-two years.

AS: When did you first hear the words  
"Hurricane Sandy?"

AF: Well, we heard approximately three to  
four days prior to, that we were going to probably be hit  
with a storm. We didn't know the extent of it at the time,  
but as it got closer to the day, we were told that it might  
be a storm like we've never seen before.

AS: What did you expect would happen?

AF: Expectation wise -- the devastation that  
I saw, that day and into the week following it -- I never  
expected anything as I have ever witnessed before.

AS: How did the Hoboken Police Department  
prepare for the storm?

AF: Well, preparation -- we had meetings  
with the mayor, I guess it was a few days prior to. There  
were a number of meetings over the weekend. There were a  
number of meetings over the weekend. [Interruption]

AS: How did the Hoboken Police Department prepare?

AF: Prior to the storm, maybe two days prior to, there were meetings held up in the mayor's office. Present were members of the emergency services; also utility companies; OEM; and anyone who would be in the entire plan, coordinating of the plan, and carrying it out. As far as our police department, we made sure that all our equipment was operable -- flashlights, and our vehicles, and any other equipment that would be needed, as far as effecting the entire process, in getting people through this storm.

AS: Did you feel like you had enough equipment, or the right equipment?

AF: No. I don't think anyone was prepared for what we witnessed. As far as equipment, now we know what we might need to prepare in the future. Hopefully, we'll never see a storm like this again.

AS: Was the department fully staffed? Did you feel that you had enough personnel? And how and where did you deploy the personnel?

AF: My entire department was called in. Anyone who did show up for work -- naturally, we had people who were out, injured, at the time. But anyone on furlough, vacation time, they were called back into duty. They reported at 8:00 in the morning, prior to the storm, the day the storm hit. We put them on four-hour shifts on and four-hour shifts off, their downtime. Cots were set up here, in the lobby. We also made some accommodation at the hospital, and also up at Stevens, where we can house men and have them bedded, decentralized to respond to any calls we might have received.

AS: Where were you when the storm hit?

AF: I was here in the department. With our plan, our emergency plan, we were instructing all our personnel what we expected of them; where they were going to be deployed; and reminded them of the different agencies that we had at a command center in City Hall, that they would be able to contact, if need be.

AS: When did you first get out to survey the damage? Where did you go? And what was your reaction?

AF: Well, actually, I got out on the street immediately after my men were deployed, and as the day went on we started to feel the effects. I guess my first stop would be up along the Hudson River, to see if there was any rise in the tide. As the day went on, and as evening hit and the storm hit us full force, what we were getting were panic calls that the river was overflowing. Water was coming down the street. Offices that were in line of the water coming down the street had to pull out their vehicles in time not to float away. Once the river breached, all hell broke loose.

AS: Do you know how many calls the department received?

AF: There were 1000-some-odd calls.

AS: What were the challenges during the storm, and then the aftermath. And of those, was there one that was the most urgent?

AF: Well, at approximately 10:00, the evening of the storm, our electricity went out. The generator kicked in, but unfortunately it only supplied power to the first floor. Up on the top floor, the heartbeat of this department, the lights were completely out for approximately two days. The most challenging moment is when our communications went out for approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. I had to deploy men approximately one to two blocks apart, and we used our handy-talkies to communicate. Also, at the same time, our telephones went out. Our telephones were out for approximately a week or better; the only line we had coming in was one line, a main line, into the desk area.

AS: Were there any operational problems behind the scenes?

AF: The operational problems were communications, when the radios went down and our telephones went down. That would be our only operational problems. Loss of vehicles would be another operational problem, because at that point we did lose some vehicles,

because we were not equipped with a vehicle that was able to navigate the water.

AS: Did the department headquarters suffer any long-term or structural damage?

AF: No.

AS: So you mentioned the problems with communication during the storm. What about the days after the storm was over, with disseminating information.

AF: After the storm, as I stated, our telephone lines were still out. We were having trouble -- no cell-phone communication. It was sporadic -- and we had some trouble with our communications. As far as what we were supposed to do in the aftermath -- everyone performed in a manner in which I would have believed they would, and we just got the task done. With traffic, the next day, you had people who were coming into the city, on-lookers -- rubber-neckers, if you will -- and they caused traffic jams. Mind you, we didn't have electricity for many days. Our traffic lights were out, so we had to maintain officers

at key traffic points, to have a continuous and safe flow of traffic.

AS: With so much of the city being out of power, were you worried about any looting, or any other crime happening?

AF: Well, what we did -- we planned for this -- was to deploy our officers in certain areas of businesses and homes that were left evacuated. I'm happy to say that I think during the entire period there were only three break-ins at that time, and arrests were made at two of those break-ins.

AS: Who are some of the unsung heroes of the department?

AF: One that stands out in my mind is Leo Colon. You saw his picture on national news, rescuing two people from the high waters -- an older woman, throwing her over her shoulder.

Track #2

AS: Who were some of the department's unsung heroes?

AF: One that stands out in my mind is Officer Leo Colon. I believe people saw his picture on national news -- CNN -- rescuing a woman out of a vehicle that was overcome with the flood waters. Then, also, an old man. As you can see, as he bent down, he took a mouthful of water. He just threw the people over his shoulder, and saved them. There was also an Officer Dristi, and Lulaj, who had the forethought to take up a surveillance point on a business that the window was broken, sensing that the burglar would come back in a while -- which two of them did, the burglar and his accomplice -- and they effected the arrest. But I think, collectively, the unsung heroes were the men and women of this police department, and also all our emergency-service workers, and anyone who spent the time in the command center, and all the days that it took to get this city up and running again.

AS: What kind of a toll did dealing with the storm take on you, in terms of physically, mentally, emotionally?

AF: Well, I'm a Type-A personality, very active. I worked with little sleep, and spent my time with the officers. I don't think I realized how drained I was, both mentally and physically, until maybe a week after the storm hit. With that, looking back on it, I wonder where the people who were involved in this rescue mission, and dealing with the city -- where we all had the energy to just keep going, sometimes with one to two hours' sleep.

AS: What did the department learn about handling the next disaster?

AF: well, we learned that we don't have the equipment needed to deal with this type of disaster. My officers are well trained. I have a need for a high-water vehicle, that hopefully I'm going to get. The city does flood, not even during a storm, but if we have heavy rains, we're not able to reach certain people. We've talked about this, we've had discussions about it, and I think our main problem is having the proper vehicles to navigate the flood waters in this city.

Also, we need a generator. Most recently, I know, the mayor had requested of the council -- and that just passed the first reading. Hopefully, by the end of

September we may have a generator that would fire up this entire building.

AS: What did Hoboken learn about itself, whether as a city or the people of Hoboken?

AF: We learned that, at times of catastrophe, or an event such as this, that we all pull together as one. It was almost a seamless transition from prior to the storm, when the storm hit -- how everyone coordinated their efforts. A lot of it was on the fly, but it worked. The sad part is, weeks after, or months after, when everyone forgets, and that feeling isn't there.

AS: Do you feel as if Hoboken has recovered, and if so, was there a moment that made you think, "Hoboken is back."

AF: Hoboken is back -- I would say 99% of Hoboken is back. There's still a lot of work to be done. People still have damage to their homes. People have mold. There is psychological damage. People who lost everything have to get started again. Getting back to equipment -- when I get what I need, to have my officers have that

equipment and be able to deal with an event such as Sandy,  
I think we'll be back 100%.

AS: Is there anything you'd like to add that  
I didn't ask about?

AF: Well, what I would like to say is that  
in my entire life in this city, I've never seen such  
devastation. Hopefully, I'll never see it again. I'd like  
to thank the citizens of Hoboken. I'd like to thank the  
Emergency Service and the National Guard for the efforts  
that they put into helping this city.

AS: Thank you.