

Sheriff Plans Rescue of Stranded Deputy Following Hurricane

Law-enforcement family teams up across geographic and jurisdictional lines to bring him to safety

By Julie S. Bettinger

Many of us in Florida have felt the anxiety of knowing that a family member is in the eye of a hurricane. Some of us have even provided refuge to relatives, as they sought to get out of harm's way.

But what if you knew that family member had survived Hurricane Katrina, only to become caught up in the chaos that followed? That is, stranded at the New Orleans Convention Center, going for days without food and water, and having their personal safety at risk?

Manatee County Sheriff Charlie Wells knows how it feels. One of his law-enforcement "family" team members, Manatee Detective Bill Waldron, was in New Orleans on business during the hurricane and was caught in the aftermath.

Sheriff Wells was patient, at first, counting on law enforcement in that area to do the right thing and get his man out. But when he received word that New Orleans police and officials refused to even enter the area, citing it as "too dangerous," he made a decision.

"I knew that if something happened to (Detective Waldron) and we didn't do everything we could, I wouldn't be able to live with myself," he says.

Here's the story of how one Sheriff put everything on the line for his deputy. And how that deputy managed to survive what is being



Manatee County Detective Bill Waldron

Photos by Tiffany Tompkins-Conde, Staff Photographer the Bradenton Herald

called one of the worst natural disasters in our nation's history.

Stranded

Detective Bill Waldron had traveled to New Orleans to testify in the trial of a woman arrested in Manatee County who was being prosecuted for murder in Louisiana. He was scheduled to fly home on August 28, but with Hurricane Katrina fast approaching, flights were canceled, all rental cars were booked and he soon found himself stranded. Officials advised him to ride out the storm in a hotel along with some of the New Orleans police.

Around 10 a.m. Monday, after the hurricane had passed, Waldron left his hotel to survey the damage. He was able to purchase a can of Pringles potato chips and water – not realizing it would be his last meal for the next three days.

Waldron says he identified himself to the police officers and tried to find out what options were available to him, but communications to the district captain had broken down and they were getting very little information.

That evening is when the looting started.

Since Waldron is an experienced hostage negotiator, has served as a disaster team responder and spent many weeks last fall providing assistance during the Florida hurricanes, his first tact was to offer to assist the police. "But I was basically told, 'Sorry about your luck; you're on your own,'" he says.

He sensed a lot of confusion among the ranks because the radios weren't working, so he just hunkered down in his hotel room and decided to wait.

Tuesday morning Waldron was told that the water behind the levee was rising and he had to leave the hotel. He and others were told to go to the Convention Center, a reported shelter, where there would be food, water and the National Guard.

Arriving at the center, though, Waldron didn't find anything like what he'd been told. Officials refused to allow anyone in the facility, saying it wasn't a shelter and directing them to go to the New Orleans Superdome, instead.

Waldron says that would have been a three-to-four mile walk, crossing through about 12 feet of water, so like many others, he stayed at the center.

With so much dissension, chaos and division between local officials and residents, he says, "At that point, I decided not to identify myself any longer as a law-enforcement officer."

Unarmed, he says he played it safe and just told people he was a tourist who got caught in the city. Still, his appearance and mannerisms seemed to betray him.

"Most of the citizens I encountered were black. Here I am, a white guy, about 6 feet, 4 inches tall, 245 pounds with short hair." People began suspecting he was a cop. "They would just come up to me and say, 'You look like one.'" He says he just did his best to fit in and kept busy helping others.

More people, no officials

By around 6:30 Tuesday evening, a New Orleans police sergeant

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allowed people inside the Convention Center, but there was no food or water and no law-enforcement presence. Waldron says occasionally he'd see a National Guardsman come through and they could see pallets of food and water, but it was not being distributed to the people.

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- Manatee County Sheriff Charlie Wells



By Wednesday morning, it was searing hot inside the center with no ventilation and very little light. The doors were all locked and barricaded. More people who had been rescued by boat or helicopter were being brought in.

"They were in pretty bad shape, exhausted and dehydrated," he says. The Superdome was now at capacity and they had orders to bring people to the Convention Center. The numbers quickly swelled from about 5,000 to around 20,000.

"I just stayed busy," Waldron says. And that meant caring for the sick, appealing to the few authorities he met to get assistance for them and covering up the dead bodies out of respect.

It was like the triage scenes from the old "M*A*S*H" television shows. Everywhere he looked there was a need...and yet his hands were tied because he didn't have the resources needed to save lives.

He recalls one woman who was suffering from the heat, and a paramedic, who happened to be on site, said they needed to bring her temperature down. Waldron appealed to a National Guardsman for anything they could use to cool her down and, after much resistance, he was finally given a bag of frozen crab cakes.

The woman died 10 minutes later.

Waldron's voice grows quiet. "Her name was Anita Lopez."

Perhaps the worst discovery was the lifeless bodies of two infants, maybe 1 to 2 months old, wrapped in clothing and paper towels, and left on a bathroom sink.

Despite the horrors and deprivation, Waldron insists there was no evidence of violent crimes – the rapes and murders – that were

reported by the media. And though he saw people coming into the center after looting a nearby mall, they made sure the elderly people got food and water, first. People were really taking care of each other.

Safety concerns

Waldron had discovered some pay phones in a dark alcove of the center and used a cigarette lighter to see for dialing. It took about two hours to get through, but he was able to reach his 16-year-old son, Nick, and his mother.

"I tried to stay upbeat for my son. I didn't tell him that I was actually scared for myself, with the growing anger toward authority in general. People were coming up to me and saying, 'You're a police officer – what's a white boy like you doing here? You're a cop. You're trying to find out who's doing the looting so you can arrest us afterwards.'"

Waldron says on one of his next calls home, he told his mother about the concern for his safety and she relayed it to the Manatee Sheriff's Office, which had been checking on the family daily.

On Thursday, Sept. 1, Sheriff Wells could see that they were going to have to take things into their own hands to get Detective Waldron out. The Sheriff started a two-pronged approach – first assembling about

two dozen deputies for a rescue mission. They were told of the dangers – New Orleans police were refusing to even go near the Convention Center due to reported sniper fire and gangs – but all deputies were willing to go.

Sheriff Wells also made calls to Gary Perkins, executive director of the Florida Sheriffs Association, and to Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Guy Tunnell.

Perkins quickly got the word to representatives of the Florida Sheriff's Task Force working the law-enforcement desk at the state Emergency Operations Center. He also assigned retired deputy and FSA liaison Phil Rivers to work as many angles as possible to assist in the effort.

Commissioner Tunnell had his people working on the problem, as well.

It happened that Florida Fish & Game Commission's Director of Law Enforcement, Col. Julie Jones, was at the state Emergency Operations Center when she learned of Detective Waldron's plight. She told Rivers that her counterpart in Texas, Col. Pete Flores, already had a contingent in New Orleans, as Florida was responding to Mississippi. After contacting Flores, and getting his support, she arranged to get a driver's license mug shot of Waldron sent to the on-site game wardens via their Blackberries, which were working, though all other cell phone service was down.

"Cowboyed in there"

According to Colonel Jones, the Texas Parks & Wildlife officers tried to solicit local law enforcement for the mission, but were told the area was too dangerous. Texas PW's Major Butch Shoop told his wardens, "OK, guys, we're cowboying in there."

They armed themselves with M-16s and headed for the center.

That day, Waldron had spent about six hours trying to get phone calls to go through and was on the phone with the Manatee Sheriff's Office when he saw the game wardens he'd been told were attempting to rescue him.

He came out of the dark alcove, identified himself, and the officers

immediately roughed him up and handcuffed him. That was part of the plan; a strategy they thought would prevent resistance from bystanders.

"They were pretty tough about it, and I was convinced for a very brief moment," Waldron says. One of the guys whispered that they were there to get him out and asked if he had any personal belongings. When they went to retrieve them, he says people were asking, "What are you arresting him for?" The wardens answered, "Murder," and the crowd cheered. "It's about time you arrest a white boy," one of them said.

Waldron says he caught the eye of some of the elderly people he had been hanging out with and he says, "I'm sure they were looking at the handcuffs and thinking, 'We were talking to a murderer.'"

Shower, rest delayed

Relief was still a few hours away, though, as Waldron's rescuers were detoured to help evacuate 60 patients from Charity Hospital. He says he finally got something to eat that night – a spaghetti and meatball MRE. "It was the best spaghetti I've ever had," he says.

They returned Waldron to the command post in Gonzales, Louisiana, where he had the first shower in four days and a few hours of sleep. At 5:30 a.m., he was back up along with the rest who were putting in 20-plus hour days.

That morning, he saw the Manatee County Sheriffs' cruisers pull up, and he says it brought tears to his eyes.

"I expected maybe a car or a truck, but I saw all these 12 guys together, and they had raid vests on, sniper rifles – they'd heard how dangerous it was, and they were ready.

"Their plan was that if they couldn't get me out, even if they had to fight off the police, whatever, they

were coming to get me.

"That's what was so overwhelming – they're taking care of my family, plus coordinating efforts to get me out of there," Waldron's voice grows quiet, "and I'm just one guy."

Credits training for survival

Though he's still processing the



experience, Waldron says if anything stands out in his mind, it's the value of his years of law-enforcement training. "All those years – some of it's been good and some of it I didn't want to attend – but all of those years of training came back.

"If you train a certain way – and constantly – in cases of high stress, you automatically do those things without thinking. I would find myself doing something and think, 'I remember getting this training,' and I just instinctively did it. Training is very important."

Waldron says communication is key and can go a long way toward preventing problems. "One of the things I heard in the Convention Center is they wanted a law-enforcement presence – they wanted someone there to give them good information." Even if it was bad news, like there wouldn't be any food and water for a few days, he says just telling them what to expect would have helped.

"As rough as the whole thing was," Waldron says, "I am glad I experienced it. It's kind of a life-changing experience to view things as a victim. I was able to see things

from the standpoint of people being displaced from their homes, and what their fears were. I think it will benefit me and I hope it will benefit other people in agencies as a result of my experience."

Sheriff Charlie Wells expressed his gratitude to all the people and agencies that assisted in winning Detective Waldron back.

FSA's Gary Perkins and Phil Rivers "did exactly what any Sheriff in this state would have expected and hoped they would do," he says. He added that even though this scenario involved only one deputy, "They stepped up to the plate and hit one out of the park."

Sheriff Wells offered written thanks and Manatee County Sheriff's

Office's "Distinguished Service Awards" to all who played a role in the rescue.

He says he sent the awards to the governors to ask them to present them on MCSO's behalf.

"Make no mistake about it, the wildlife officers from Texas and Louisiana are my heroes," Sheriff Wells says. "They demonstrated remarkable courage for a brother police officer in the face of adversity – they heard all the excuses of why they couldn't rescue that deputy and they went in there anyway."

Col. Julie Jones says she was happy to lend her agency's resources – including connections – to the cause, and hopes that this event will help all law enforcement in the state to recognize the capabilities at their disposal.

She says the way law enforcement worked together on this mission was thrilling. "It was so cool – it was like (the movie) 'Saving Private Ryan' for me."

And thanks to her efforts and those of her law-enforcement counterparts, it had a happy ending. ❖