

Brian Lukas : Before Hurricane Katrina



For almost four decades I would cover the brutality of the hurricanes and tropical storms as they swept over the southeastern regions of the United States. The massive devastation wrought on the population as the storms ravaged the coastal communities. On the evacuation route it is always an eerie site to observe all of the headlights streaming away from these deadly storms, and I am the only one going in to it.

Then, after surviving the storm, witnessing the devastation in its aftermath, it is unimaginable. One can only observe this vast destruction in a war. Entire streets are peeled back like the skins of a banana, huge trees are ripped from the earth, houses are destroyed, evacuation shelters are blown apart, survivors are displaced, lives are destroyed. Lives are lost. And in south Louisiana even the dead are tormented and found floating in the wake of the tidal surge as the Gulf of Mexico pushes on the shores of coastal region.





Before Katrina: Brian Lukas

It is in the faces of the people one can observe the stress of being a survivor. Here I looked into the eyes of Milton Picou.

Shivering, standing in the cold waters that cover Grand Callow Road, Milton Picou wonders how he survived the rising waters of Hurricane Lilli. Visibly shaken and tired, he carries his pet with him as he climbs into the National Guard truck. He has lived all his life in the fishing villages of Montegut and Dulac and has made a living in the coastal waters of Louisiana. Milton thought his past experience with other hurricanes would give him some comfort. He told me, "I survived all other hurricane by riding them out at home."

Land transformation: "The land has changed", Milton said, still shivering. "The marsh is sinking all we have now is water...the trees are dead." Looking at his small dog and near tears, he remarks, "I'll never ride out another one. That was scary." As I helped him jump into the National Guard truck, I looked into his eyes. Then I realized the impact of coastal land loss in Louisiana.





Indicator events along our coast: “But it ’s just a small



tropical storm.”

Evacuations, rescues, high water — strong wind, intense rain, and levee breaks. This was not Hurricane Katrina but a series of small storms that changed the culture and environment of south Louisiana. It was perhaps a prelude to a greater disaster that was to occur in just a few short years.

Isidore and Bill were two of relatively small tropical storms of the 2002. Hurricane Lili was a minimal hurricane hitting the coast near beginning of 2003 hurricane season. However, even though considered minimal storms, they wreaked havoc on the coastal region of south Louisiana.

It is said that history does not linger long and memories of both tropical systems have long faded. But, maybe, we should have paid more attention to effects of "Isidore, Bill and Lili". They were the prelude to Katrina. These are my notes as I covered the tropical storms.

Into the Storm:

At night it becomes an eerie sight looking through the curtain of rain on my windshield. I can almost make out the blurry lines of headlights coming from vehicles evacuating coastal



areas of south Louisiana. Families are fleeing an approaching hurricane. In the other lane, I am the only vehicle traveling the opposite direction, going into the storm, meeting the winds and rain head on. It makes one pause and reflect, because very shortly the most powerful force in nature will bear down upon you.

In many cases the hurricane will have already killed hundreds of people as it slowly plows through the Atlantic and into the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. In 2002, Tropical Storm Isidore struck Louisiana and then, just seven days later, Hurricane Lili came ashore. Then in 2003, just nine months after Isidore, another small tropical storm - Tropical Storm Bill - formed in the Gulf of Mexico. These three relatively small storms devastated the lower coastal regions of Louisiana. As I reflect on my personal experience covering these storms for broadcast, little did I realize that they would be a prelude to a hurricane that would destroy one of America's greatest cities.

Sunday Morning, October 6, 2002

I woke up this Sunday morning at 3:30 a.m. The lack of sleep over the past few days has conditioned my body to stay awake most of the night, but I am fatigued. Sipping a cup of coffee, I fold my body into the cushions of a chair, trying to get up enough strength to grab the scissors my wife placed on the counter top in the kitchen. I need to cut the bandages wrapping my feet. I have been walking in the dirty and filthy waters of the coastal tidal surge the last couple of days. Huge blisters have formed on my toes. The water from the hurricane and flooding have gushed into my boots and I have lived with wet feet for the past couple of days.

Staying dry while covering a hurricane is unachievable, no matter how well one attempts to prepare.

Four Days Earlier: Wednesday Morning October 2, 2002

I departed New Orleans to cover Hurricane Lili early Wednesday morning this Oct. 2. Lili is a Category-2 hurricane and is churning in the Gulf of Mexico.

Concerns are mounting that the storm is escalating in strength and power. Forecasters predict the path will eventually hit the Louisiana coast. I covered Tropical Storm Isidore just last week and felt her strong winds as she came ashore in the parishes of Terrebonne and Lafourche. Memories are clear about that event. In the small fishing village of Empire, the winds lashed about the shrimp dock where we have our live broadcast position. With my eye keenly focused on the metal roof above us, we continued to brace against the vertical winds and piercing rains.

I have seen other metal roofs wrap and fly off like pieces of shrapnel. The velocity of the high tropical winds rips the roof into sharp slivers of metal. Many times the strong winds imbeds the pieces of metal into nearby houses and trees. These pieces of flying metal roof could easily slice any unsuspecting person in half. The tidal surge is coming up -- we have to be alert to that. We don't want to be trapped in the rising waters. While standing in the wind and driving rain, I mentioned several times to a reporter that if Isidore is just a tropical disturbance, then God help us if a full-fledge hurricane hit. In the not-to-distant future, that statement turned out to be prophetic.

Wednesday Morning October 2, 2002

We are rushing to New Iberia. All indications at this time Hurricane Lili is heading to the western part of Texas, or near central Louisiana. Now the small hurricane seems to be moving away from New Orleans. That is what we all want to believe. We hope the forecasters are correct.



Passing through Morgan City, their 20-foot flood walls have not been closed. Just the day before I was in Morgan City filming the city's preparation. People were boarding up their property. A large tidal surge would be devastating to this area. Just standing next to these massive flood walls surrounding this city makes one pause - one can only imagine how a breach in the wall would be potentially devastating to this city.



Several miles down the road we reached New Iberia. In a small town of Patterson, residents along Hwy. 90 are frantically preparing for the approaching storm. Here the Landry's are boarding up their house. The house just next to them is already secured. The Landry's said that they were not going to take any chances with "Lili." I can see the fear in their eyes - they are worried.

Vermillion Bay is only 10 miles away, and if we get a 20-foot tidal surge here, all of this area will be under water. "We will lose everything," Vernon Landry tells us.



Later in the day we now find out that Hurricane Lili has reached a Category-3 level. In the town of Centerville, just past Patterson on Hwy. 90, a home for the elderly is in the process of being evacuated. It is sad to see the human condition here. The elderly are being transported out of their environment and into waiting ambulances. Many cannot walk.

They are being carried out of the facility on stretchers. A fleet of ambulances wait in the driveway. The medical personnel are trying to evacuate the elderly quickly. In past storms this facility was inundated with 3 feet of water. Moving the elderly has become a priority. Trying to evacuate them in a hurricane would be certain tragedy. The human wave away from Hurricane Lili now begins.



At the end of Hwy. 333 we reach Intercoastal City. Vermillion Bay is in front of us. The lagging shrimp and oil service boats are hastily making their way up the canal. Many will dock miles up in the small community of Delcambre. The area is deserted.

"Good, very good," I thought to myself. The residents have evacuated. Authorities send out an alert that a strong tidal surge will reach more than 20 miles inland. This region will be flooded as Vermillion Bay rushes up from the Gulf of Mexico. On Avery Island, Mrs. Sevioe said she will ride out the storm on the salt dome on the island. The salt dome rises 150 feet above sea level. "I've done this before," she said. "It's one of the highest places in Louisiana."

Back up Hwy. 333, we noticed a long line of cars sitting on the road. We later learned that this is not a road block, but citizens of New Iberia lining up for almost a mile trying to get the 15 sand bags allotted to them by the parish government. In the small town of Delcambre, the gas stations are doing brisk business. We also gas up my vehicle here. Every drop of gas becomes a precious commodity.

Here Susan Fochan and her four sons have finally made the commitment to leave this low-lying area. She is going further up the road to her relative's house. "There's no place open to take us. We called too late and everything is booked up. What can we do?"

Another person at the gas station is trying to calm his family by telling them not to panic. "We'll get by this," he assures his wife and children. "It's not time to panic. We'll just ride north as far as we can go." So many residents decided not to leave this small



community, and sheriff's deputies are going around collecting vital information on the handful of residents who are staying behind. It's an ominous sign. Later we hear that Hurricane Lili has now reached a Category-4 status. All of a sudden the anxiety level of everybody increase. This could be a devastating storm, beyond imagination. A Category-4 hurricane with 145 mph winds would rip New Iberia apart.



The tidal surge will advance almost 20 mile inland, and there is still a chance that the storm may turn toward a more northerly course toward New Orleans. We wait and continue to cover the anticipated landfall, hoping that the storm will make a more westerly turn, past the 90 degree latitude line due north of New Orleans.

It is night time now and New Iberia is a ghost town. Bands of strong winds and heavy rain pummel the town. It is midnight and everyone is exhausted. We decided to get some rest, maybe some sleep in a renovated movie theater. The mayor of New Iberia opened the old theater for us. But, there is no sleep tonight because the roof leaks and the floor is wet. We have a live shot at 4 a.m. in the

morning. Hurricane Lili, a Category-4 hurricane, is still off the coast of Louisiana and headed toward New Iberia. In a bizarre way it is somewhat of a relief that this storm is heading for us and away from New Orleans. Mentally it would be difficult to cover any hurricane realizing the potential devastation that could be wrought upon the people of New Orleans.



As Lili made landfall, it hit the area with a vengeance, but thankfully as only a Category-2 hurricane. The winds started ripping around New Iberia. Trees are falling on houses. Fire trucks are racing around and sectioning off parts of the city where downed power lines lay on the streets. Gusts of winds, more than 90 miles an hour, are ripping signs apart, flattening sugar cane fields and almost overturning my news unit. I see a large piece of tin roof fly near the back of my news unit. I asked the reporter I'm with if it hit my vehicle. It didn't, but it came very close.



The winds continue to howl around the trees and buildings. Pieces of debris are flying in the air. In front of us a power line just fell. I just kept thinking to myself that thank God this is not a Category-4 hurricane.

At the broadcast live shot location, the piercing rain is horizontally flowing around the buildings. Awning are being ripped off the windows. The heavy rain is penetrating and stings as it flies straight at you. There is nowhere to escape it. You only hope that the loud noise that you hear just off ear shot is not a piece of debris slinging its way toward you. There is no getting use to the physical beating. You just have to survive in it. The hurricane made landfall early morning. Because the hurricane is compact in physical size and is moving at a clip of 17 mph the brutal hammering last just for seven hours. We later learned that the eye of Hurricane Lili past just west of us in village of Abbeville. New Iberia received the full brunt of the easterly side of the Hurricane Winds.

No sleep and all wet, at this time we are hoping that after a report on the storm for the 5, 6 and 10 pm shows relating the effect of "Lili" on the New Iberia area we could go home for the night. Again, there is a sigh of relief that the New Orleans area was safe. The hurricane moved to the west of New Orleans. Our families were all right, and most importantly, they are safe. But any rest from covering Hurricane Lili was not meant to be.

After the noon satellite report, we were told to leave quickly for the Houma area. The full storm surge didn't hit the New Iberia area, although this area had tremendous wind damage. The Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes caught the back end of Hurricane Lili. We cautiously raced down Hwy. 90. My car tire is losing air and losing air rapidly. As we reached the police road block on Grand Caillou Road, the tire was completely flat, but we made it. The flat tire was inconsequential compared to what we witnessed here along Grand Caillou Road: Houses that were never flooded before, even in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, were inundated with floodwater. Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes had survived the high winds and rain from Hurricane Lili, but the storm surge is now impacting to the area.



Near Pointe-Aux-Chen and Montegut, a levee overtopped and broke, flooding hundreds of homes. It is a desperate situation for many. Entire families ran for their lives leaving, in most cases, with very little personal belongings - some leaving their pets behind. We hitched a ride on a National Guard's Duce-and-a-half. As we drove down Grand Caillou Road to the fishing village of Dulac, the road eventually became part of the bayou. Every home seems to have water in it. There are still some people in them. Many residents didn't have time to get out because the water came up too fast. With a blast of a Duce's horn, Milton Picou came out of his flooded home. Shivering, he is holding his small dog as he climbs barefoot into the National





Guard truck. He mutters out-loud to his rescuers, "Never again, never again will I say behind. That was too scary."

Picou rode out Lili only to have the tidal surge rise 6 feet in his house. He almost drowned. Shivering, a National Guardsman wraps him in a blanket. In the distance there is a woman peering out of another house. She lives on higher ground, but the water is near her doorstep. She said she wanted to stay even though the water is still rising. Grand Caillou Elementary has

about 3 feet of water in it. This is a disaster for this area. This is bad. Then, just as I thought it couldn't get any worse, a National Guardsman screamed out, "look over there, look over there -- a coffin!" In the distance a coffin bobs in the flooded areas of Dulac. The cemetery is under water and some of the coffins were forced from their crypts. More coffins are floating in the distance. It is sad.



Several of the National Guardsmen rounded up the coffins and brought them to higher ground. To these souls, even in death, are tormented by the rising high water.



Two days later: Friday, October 4, 2002

In the community of Pointe-Aux-Chein, Emray Naquin is standing in 2 feet of water in the front of his house. He seems to be in shock, staring in the distance and taking a break from the sad task of removing inches of mud and sludge from his house. There was almost 7 feet of water in his home. Emray

told us it is a frightening experience missing the worst of the hurricane winds only to be forced

from his house by the high waters. His refrigerator, once filled with shrimp and fish, is full of mud.

Here in Montegut, more than 600 houses are inundated with the high waters brought in by the tidal surge creating the levee break. Robert Pellegrin, walking out from the waste-deep water with his son, remarks, "This is worse than Hurricane Andrew, and I just don't know what to do. We have no else where to go. I guess we're going to live in water."



It is the feeling of hopelessness that I witness in the eyes of these people. Many are in shock, in despair. Alton Cambell is walking in waist-deep water, slowly and hesitantly walking to his wife Mary on higher ground. They bought some property here just two weeks ago and moved into their home. I can see the anxiety in Mary's eyes as she

anticipates the fate of their belongings. As Alton moves out of the water, he embraces his wife of 51 years, and they cry. Alton told Mary they "just lost everything". The water is 6 feet over their house. So, after 51 years of marriage, they have to start all over again. Alton and Mary Cambell cried in their embrace. Then we all cried.



One day later: Saturday, October 5, 2002

The flooding waters along Grand Caillou Road have gone down today. Still, there is water in many homes. Gary Foret is trying to clean and care for the cemetery along Grand Caillou Road. Sadly, several coffins line the road. A young woman who died in 1996, just 33 years of age, lies in her coffin in the path of on-coming traffic. It is a sad sight to witness.

Gary Foret continues to wipe the mud off the tops of the tombs and assists other family members trying identify their love ones. Gary remarks, "The people buried here are my friends. None are my family. They're just my friends for life. I'm just helping. They would do it for me up in

heaven, I'm sure."

Gary continues to clean the debris and sludge off the tombstones and graves and caskets. Just down the road in Dulac, Jason Villmeret's wife is cleaning the mud off her Christmas decorations. She wipes a tear from her eye, but the cleaning is of no use. All of the Christmas decorations have to be thrown away. Their house experienced severe flooding, almost 8 feet of water. The furniture was floating in the waters. They left with almost 6 inches of mud in their house. It is hot and humid. They have no electricity, no running water, but yet they are gracious enough to offer us some of their bottled water—a commodity more precious than gold in this terrible situation.

Then only nine months after Hurricane Lili, a small tropical storm quickly formed off the coast of Louisiana. It is named Tropical Storm Bill.

Nine months later - June 28, 2003

It is a Sunday morning when I received a call from the news director. The large area of scattered showers in the Gulf of Mexico formed into a tropical storm. It is presently heading toward south Louisiana. Tropical Storm Bill seemed to surprise everyone, even the National Weather Service, by its rapid formation in the Gulf. So tonight I am heading back to the small south Louisiana town of Houma, Montegut and Pointe-Aux-Chien. Images of devastation only nine months ago is still present in my mind. It is as if I am returning to the scene of a crime.

Monday Morning June 29, 2003.

Tropical Storm Bill is now forecasted to hit the Louisiana coast around 1 p.m. I'm in the middle of the storm, with high winds and heavy rain. I drove past the small town of Pointe-Aux-Chien. Their residents are still recovering from the storms just months ago. The town is dry. Presently there seems to be no flooding from the tidal surge and no broken levees. The levees apparently are holding the water back. I can only see the levees in the distance, but the water is high and the strong winds are pushing water against them.



We made it through the night, but around 10 a.m. the road to the small fishing community of Cocodrie had been closed by the sheriff's office. The water is rising and now flows over the road. Here comes the tidal surge.

It is noon now and it is very difficult to film the storm. The winds have picked up quite a bit. The residents and those that have fishing camps in Cocodrie are evacuating the low lying areas. From all indications, this is still just a small tropical storm. Even the residents from Cocodrie are saying "all this water from this storm. This is terrible. Why do we have all this water coming in?"



They were asking me that question as I continued to film the high winds and blasting rains. Eventually we had to leave our live broadcasting location. The tidal surge is pushing more water onto the road. If we didn't move our camera position from behind the levee, we would have been trapped. The one very important lesson I have learned from covering hurricanes and tropical



storms in South Louisiana is always look for a way out, some type of exit. Getting trapped in these high waters makes you another victim of the storm.

Just two hours later, in the early afternoon, we now seem to be in the worst of the winds and rains this Monday. We are being pummeled by the piercing rains of the storm. We drove a little further from Cocodrie and are relieved to find that the homes devastated nine

months ago in Hurricane Lili are spared for the high waters.



Then what seems like a very short 20 minutes later, we drove back through Montegut and are horrified to see the entire neighborhood under water. The levee broke. It was the same levee that failed during Hurricane Lili, but this time Bill is only a tropical storm.

Tons of water from the Gulf is flowing in and toward the homes of Pointe-Aux-Chein and Montegut.

It is a disaster, another catastrophe repeated in just nine months. Residents are being rescued and evacuated from these small towns. The elderly are heaved up into National Guard trucks and quickly moved out of the flooded areas. All the residents keep saying, "My God, what if it would have been a Category 2 or 3 hurricane?" And again, the faces and weary eyes of those affected by tropical Storm Bill's wrath told the story. They are worn down by nature. Devastated by a small hurricane just nine months ago, they have to start all over again, now recovering from a small tropical storm.



Pamela Ortego, a Pointe-Aux-Chein resident, is frustrated after being flooded and evacuated from her home twice in only nine months.

"They keep repairing these levees. If they would repair the barrier islands, it would stop the surge before the waters hit these levees. We would have a heck of a lot less water. The water would come in and spread out evenly instead of one big wave."

Salt water intrusion has killed a large section of trees in Lower Terrebonne Parish. The resulting effects are catastrophic. As the trees die, the land sinks and the waters of the Gulf of Mexico moves a little closer. The skeletal tree line vividly illustrates a drying marsh. Further in the distance, more trees are stressed and dying. These important barriers against hurricane and tropical storms are vanishing. The residents of this area say it is an environmental disaster waiting to happen.



One resident commented, "Louisiana, we're supposed to be the seafood capital of the nation. What are they going to do when it's gone? It's only a matter of time before we lose everything."

Tropical Storm Bill also breached the barrier island that protects the Port Fourchon marine terminal. I slogged through the 75 breach with a scientist, and in the distance a dolphin foraged in the freshly open inlet. The words coastal erosion takes on

more value as I walk through this breach and feel the Gulf of Mexico is pushing through the surf. One wonders if the words and images can truly convey the potential disaster if, and when, a large hurricane bears down on the coastal areas of Louisiana. Given what I have seen with these recent

tropical storms and a minimal hurricane, any large storm would reap havoc on the Louisiana coast line and the residents of New Orleans.



Jon Aucoin, fishing guide, Golden Meadow, Louisiana: “The water levels coming in higher. We’re getting more water as the years go by. But, the land is also shrinking and the wave action from these tropical storms is just eating up these small islands. And that what’s happening, the land is eroding fast. We’re not doing anything to restore these barrier islands that protect us from these storms. So they are just steadily washing away from erosion.”