

# Storm of the Century: The Labor Day Hurricane of 1935

By Willie Drye  
National Geographic, 2002

**A**NYONE WHO HAS EVER BEEN TEMPTED to ride out a hurricane warning rather than forfeit the beach rental (how bad can it be, after all?) should read this book.

Sometimes, it can be very, very bad, indeed.

Factoring in wind speed, storm surge, and barometric pressure, the hurricane that hit the middle of the Florida Keys on Labor Day in 1935 was the most powerful storm to strike the United States in recorded history. But weather measurements of this Category 5 storm tell only part of the story.

It was a strong storm that inexplicably quickened as it passed through the straits of Florida, exploding in a burst of energy that analysts to this day don't totally understand.

And when the storm hit land, bringing with it a storm surge of more than 20 feet, it crossed directly over three oceanfront work camps housing about 750 World War I veterans, sent from their Bonus March shantytowns in Washington to construct a highway connecting the islands of the Florida Keys through to Key West.

Because it was a holiday weekend, a number of veterans had left the camps to enjoy some liberty in Miami or Key West. But of those who remained, it's estimated that two-thirds—between 250 and 260 men—were killed. Their deaths were particularly tragic because the ordering of an evacuation train in the hours before the storm hit was fatally delayed by dithering and miscommunication between camp administrators.

It's a shame that the opening pages of Drye's ultimately gripping account of this tragedy are weighed down by a long recapitulation of early 20th-century history, including World War I, the Depression, the Bonus Marchers, President Roosevelt's New Deal, the development of the state of Florida, and the construction of the Florida East Coast Railroad. But once the stage is set and the unnamed hurricane makes its entrance off the waters of the

South Atlantic, Drye's narrative soars.

Drye skillfully interjects snapshots of individual experience, culled from archived survivor interviews, as he describes the storm and its aftermath. (One quibble: a list of the people he quotes or mentions, located in the preface or the appendix, would have been helpful in keeping names and identities straight). Still, the effect is riveting. Consider, for instance, the story of G.C. Sain, a timekeeper at Camp 3, who was blown through two rooms and an outer wall when the mess hall where he'd been sheltering collapsed. Sain managed to grab on to the floor sill of the demolished building as timbers, stoves, iceboxes, and tables flew past his head:

"Sain felt safe for a while—until the water started rising. Eventually it reached his chin, and then it kept rising until it reached the floor of what had been the mess hall. The water lifted the floor from the sill and washed away the underpinnings. The sill dropped onto Sain's right foot. He was trapped.

"I finally succeeded in getting off my right shoe, and by this time I was entirely underwater," Sain said.

"Sain grabbed a piece of two-by-four and worked it beneath the floor sill. With all his strength, he tried to use the wood as a lever to lift the sill off his foot. He couldn't budge it. Then he had another idea.

"Sain timed his lifting to correspond with the waves pushing against the sill. The force of the waves, combined with his makeshift lever, provided just enough force to get the sill off his foot."

Drye is careful to salt his narrative with

facts that offer perspective. His discussion of exactly how strong hurricane force winds are, for instance, helps to explain why several storm victims—fighting winds of 150 to 200 miles per hour—were blown clear across Florida Bay to the mainland, or why others resorted to desperate measures, such as belting themselves to tree trunks, to try and survive once their shelter was blown away.

"In winds blowing at hurricane force—74 miles per hour—a person can lean forward into the wind at a 45-degree angle without falling," Drye writes. "When the wind reaches 80 miles an hour, it is impossible to walk without the support of a railing or other structure. Boards, tree limbs, and other flying debris can kill when wind speeds reach 120.

A 130-mile-per-hour wind can lift people off the ground."

Regrettably, the story is not over once the storm is over. Drye depicts an elaborate dance of recrimination by various government agencies ducking responsibility for the evacuation delay. It's almost as appalling to read as his descriptions of the actual storm.

Novelist Ernest Hemingway, who rode out the storm in Key West, captured public sentiment on the fate of the veterans in an essay published by *New Masses* magazine just a few weeks after the hurricane. Noting that the Florida Keys are the playground of the wealthy during the winter months, Hemingway pointed out that they are avoided during the summer because of the threat of storms. "There is a known danger to property" during the summer months, Hemingway wrote. "But veterans, especially the Bonus-Marching variety of veterans, are not property. They are only human beings, unsuccessful human beings, and all they have to lose is their lives."



**United States Postal Service  
Statement of Ownership  
and Circulation**

1. Publication Title: Contingencies.
2. Publication Number: 1048-9851.
3. Filing Date: 10/01/03.
4. Issue Frequency: Bimonthly.
5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 6.
6. Annual Subscription Price: \$24.00.
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (not printer): 1100 17th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20036. Contact Person: Becky Horst. Telephone: (202) 785-7882.
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (not printer): 1100 17th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20036.
9. Full Name and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Publisher—American Academy of Actuaries, 1100 17th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20036; Editor—Steve Sullivan, 1100 17th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20036; Managing Editor—Becky Horst, 1100 17th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20036.
10. Owner: American Academy of Actuaries, 1100 17th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20036.
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders: None.
12. Tax Status: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.
13. Publication Title: Contingencies.
14. Issue Date of Circulation Data Below: September/October 2003.
15. Average Number of Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months. a. Total Number of Copies (net press run): 26,545. b(1). Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (including advertisers' proof and exchange copies): 24,166. b(2). Paid/Requested In-County Subscriptions (including advertisers' proof and exchange copies): 0. b(3). Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: 0. b(4) Paid/Requested by Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 1,042. c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 25,208. d(1). Free Distribution by Mail (Samples, complimentary, and other free) Outside County as Stated on Form 3541: 0. d(2) Free Distribution by Mail In County as Stated on Form 3541: 0. d(3) Free Distribution by Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 200. e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means): 400. f. Total Free Distribution: 600. g. Total Distribution: 25,808. h. Copies Not Distributed: 737. i. Total: 26,545. j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 97.7 percent. Number of Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date. a. Total Number of Copies (net press run): 27,854. b(1). Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (including advertisers' proof and exchange copies): 25,997. b(2). Paid/Requested In-County Subscriptions (including advertisers' proof and exchange copies): 0. b(3). Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: 0. b(4). Paid/Requested by Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 1,015. c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 27,012. d(1). Free Distribution by Mail (samples, complimentary, and other free) Outside County as Stated on Form 3541: 0. d(2). Free Distribution by Mail In County as Stated on Form 3541: 0. d(3). Free Distribution by Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 150. e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means): 300. f. Total Free Distribution: 450. g. Total Distribution: 27,460. h. Copies Not Distributed: 394. i. Total: 27,854. j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 98.4 percent.
16. Publication of Statement of Ownership required. Will be printed in the November/December 2003 issue.
17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner: Becky Horst, Production Manager, 10/01/03. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete.



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