

## THE LESSONS OF HURRICANE HUGO

# Law Enforcement Responds

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*A number of buildings in the Charleston area collapsed, unable to withstand the storm's fury.*

**O**n the evening of September 21, 1989, Hurricane Hugo raged across the South Carolina coast. This storm, which had already devastated Martinique and Puerto Rico, passed directly over the city of Charleston, spreading hurricane-force destruction on a 200-mile front. It would later be judged one of the largest and most destructive storms to hit the U.S. mainland in the 20th century.

In recent years, Charleston has often been the possible point of landfall for tropical storms and, in each case, some preparation has been made. Fortunately, those threats came and went, leaving little in their wake but heavy rain and minor wind damage. Nevertheless, each new storm must be treated as a potential disaster.

On Monday, September 18, 1989, the Charleston County Emergency Services Division notified the police department that a hurricane watch had been declared. From that point on, all departmental planning and activities were based on the assumption that the storm would hit the city of Charleston with its most powerful front. Worst-case scenario planning was

left to chance, since there would be no opportunity during the crisis to correct mistakes or rectify omissions.

### ***Staff and Personnel Briefings***

Once a significant threat is evident, the agency must take steps to brief both command staff and individual employees, including:

- Scheduled staff meetings where problems are presented, duties assigned and follow-up on accomplishment levels done. These meetings must be kept short and to the point if they are to avoid defeating their own purpose. Assignments such as supply requisition, vehicle checks, etc., should be assigned to personnel with expertise in those areas.

- Situation briefs, conducted by appointed briefing officers, to keep the staff updated on the storm or disaster situation.

- Informative meetings to let employees know the particulars of the situation they are facing, what is being done by others, what they are expected to do and what steps they need to take to safeguard their own families and property since

incident. During Hugo, we emphasized the fact that no officer would be allowed to leave during the storm unless there was a case of documented injury to a family member, and strongly encouraged evacuation of family members. We were gratified with the high level of compliance.

### ***Personnel Recall***

The implementation of recall may be staged with essential personnel—generally including members of the command staff, as well as communications and emergency-preparedness personnel—both placed on notice and brought in earlier. Other personnel should be advised that, once they report for duty at a predetermined time, they should expect to remain for the duration of the incident; thus, they should bring sufficient gear for two to three days and should make appropriate provisions in advance for their families.

In general terms, a major disaster would dictate a total recall for sworn personnel, while civilian personnel would be