

# ***Camille: One Family's Story***

v.2



by: *Don*, a Survivor

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## Introduction

Many accounts, including entire books, have been written about Hurricane Camille—and countless other natural- and man-made disasters as well. Such accounts typically describe, in macro-view terms, the impacts on entire regions and populations. But it is important to remember that, while disasters happen to thousands of people, tragedy happens to one person at a time. A major disaster is the sum of all its individual tragedies. Therefore, to understand such an event from the micro-, or human-view, it is necessary to hear the personal stories of those who were there. This is one such story, one family's story.

## Prologue

I once read about a literature instructor who had held a mock contest for his students. The contestants were assigned the task of composing the absolute-worst opening sentence imaginable for some nonexistent novel. "*It was a dark and stormy night*" won, hands-down.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, that cliché is a most accurate and succinct description of what our family experienced on August 17-18, 1969, on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. For, on that night, Hurricane Camille—the storm with the highest winds at landfall ever to hit the United States<sup>2</sup>—emerged from the northern Gulf of Mexico, completely shrouded in terrifying darkness for the entire duration of its overnight visit, and laid waste to a region accustomed to periodic "ordinary" hurricanes.

Old timers on the coast used to tell tales about the great hurricane of 1947 (before hurricanes had names), or even the hurricane of 1915, but no one had ever seen anything like this. As with our family, everyone else who experienced the epicenter of Camille's catastrophic landfall would forever have his or her own personal memories and tales of survival. For many, by their own reckoning, their lives thereafter were bisected into "Before Camille" and "After Camille", and it would be a defining event in each of their lives, as it was in mine.

"A Night to Remember" might have been a fitting name for such a story, but that title was already taken, by the acclaimed book, and later movie, describing another overnight sea disaster, the 1912 sinking of the RMS Titanic. The following narrative has no grandiose title; it is just the story of an ordinary, extended family, suddenly and unexpectedly caught up in extraordinary circumstances. It is a personal memoir, told largely from the point of view of the author, who was then, at age 16, the youngest member of that family. So, it's not "based on a true story"; it's a factual account—to the best of my recollection—from a survivor—me.

## 1969

### Thursday, 14 August

During the second week of August 1969, trouble was brewing in the sun-heated waters of the Caribbean Sea. Tropical weather disturbances are common in that remote area of the world, so the ominous meteorological conditions developing there at the time were of little concern to anyone, aside from local maritime- and aviation interests. But, in the United States, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) started taking notice. On August 14, they noted that a tropical

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<sup>1</sup> That corny line lives on, thanks to Snoopy and others.

<sup>2</sup> Hurricane Camille, when the eye came ashore, had sustained winds of 190 MPH, at that time, the highest winds ever recorded worldwide for a landfall. (source: <https://geology.com/hurricanes/largest-hurricane/>).

depression had formed southeast of the narrow gap between Cuba and Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and that it had strengthened into a tropical storm a few hours later.<sup>3</sup> The NHC knew that what was emerging—by then, designated Tropical Storm Camille—had the potential to pose a severe threat to the U.S. mainland, and started preparing accordingly.

Meanwhile, the media—and much of the world—were oblivious to what was churning in the faraway tropics. Instead, they turned their attention toward what was then developing on an obscure cow pasture in Bethel,<sup>4</sup> New York, where a figurative storm was gathering. In a few days, what would become known simply as Woodstock,<sup>5</sup> would rock the world. It would become what some have called the defining counter-culture event of a generation, a “coming of age” for the Baby Boomers. The four-day<sup>6</sup> festival would be long-since over before many in the Gulf Coast region knew that Woodstock had ever even occurred. They were still digging themselves out from the devastation of Hurricane Camille's wrath.

#### Friday, 15 August

On August 15, Camille, by then a small, Category 2 hurricane, crossed the western tip of Cuba and entered the Gulf of Mexico. In its warm, open waters, Camille intensified rapidly while drifting generally northward. As the course wobbled slightly between north-northeast and north-northwest, NHC struggled to project a most-likely point of landfall on the United States.

At the same time, an estimated 400,000 exuberant, and predominantly young, people were clogging the highways and backroads of upstate New York, all on a mission, steadily converging on that heretofore-unremarkable field. But a huge event was about to get underway. The spectacular show kicked off that evening and continued all night, into the next day and beyond.

#### Saturday, 16 August, 0530 CDT

Saturday dawned in my hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi, yet another still and stifling late-summer day—same as what much of the South was suffering. The humidity was already well into the 90s and the temperatures were headed there, too. Even in the early morning, absent any breeze, one could not find relief from the suffocating steaminess outdoors. No place was steamier than the municipal pool, where, following my sophomore year in high school, I worked at a summer job as one of the lifeguards.

On that day, like most of my co-workers, I was looking forward to it being the last day that the pool would be open for the season. I enjoyed being a lifeguard, but after two and a half months of it, I was ready for it to be over. Furthermore, local history had shown that public usage of the pool declined significantly by the middle of August, so the City customarily closed it then each year, with two weeks-plus remaining in the summer vacation break. The kids were tired of splashing, screaming and running on the pool decks, and we—the “grown-ups”—were tired of babysitting (I mean *lifeguarding*).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> (source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Camille](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Camille)).

<sup>4</sup> The “Woodstock” venue was actually at Bethel, some 40 miles southwest of Woodstock, New York.

<sup>5</sup> Billed as “An Aquarian Exposition: 3 Days of Peace and Music” (multiple sources).

<sup>6</sup> As noted previously, originally planned for 3 days.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some of the parents were quite unhappy to have the pool close for the season. Some would drop off their kids every day before the pool opened at 10:00 a.m., and pick them up after the pool closed in the evening. The cost of children's admission was just 25 cents, plus another dollar or two for their snacks from the concession—a bargain-deal for all-day babysitting.

In Gulfport, Mississippi, two hundred miles southeast of Vicksburg by highway, it was also going to be another hot one. But my grandparents and their neighbors could often find some relief from the heat, thanks to the usual on-shore breezes, as their houses were only two blocks from the beach.<sup>8</sup> Mercifully, my grandparents' house was also air-conditioned. They had lived in their modest but pleasant wood-frame home in Gulfport for over twenty years. Grandma made sure that the interior of the house was always neat and tidy, especially the tastefully decorated formal living room (which included the front door), and the adjacent dining room. Granddad's domain was the outside. He took great pride in the picturesque lawn and gardens he had established and continued to nurture over so many years,<sup>9</sup> the roses, azaleas and the giant flowering magnolia<sup>10</sup> tree, with a birdbath in its shade. Crowning his landscaped back yard was a huge live oak, with its massive, nearly horizontal branches, a variety so familiar in the coastal region. Together, the oak and the magnolia were to have a fateful impact on the outcome of this story.

#### 0645 CDT

My grandfather was awake by 6:45 a.m., though not feeling very rested, on that particular morning. Normally, he was a light (or maybe restless) sleeper. On his bed stand, he kept an antique tube-type multi-band radio. He enjoyed listening to it, mostly late at night, often tuning in short-wave stations from around the world. It wouldn't surprise me if, on some of those nights, Granddad might have heard Edward R. Murrow start his broadcast with, "This is London calling," during the Battle of Britain and subsequent Blitz bombing. But on the night of August 16, 1969, he was tuning into AM stations much closer to home, such as New Orleans' 50,000-watt WWL. They were starting to talk with increasing concern about a hurricane rapidly intensifying in the central Gulf of Mexico, headed generally toward the U.S. Gulf Coast, anywhere from Florida to Louisiana. That included Mississippi, then just a few hundred miles away from the storm's center. My grandfather had weathered his share of hurricanes, but this storm appeared to be shaping up into one of extreme intensity. Though intended to be a means of nighttime relaxation, Granddad's listening to his special radio was instead increasing his level of anxiety.

#### 1000 CDT

Back in Vicksburg, my parents were likewise feeling anxiety about the approaching storm, even before its projected landfall area was narrowed down to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Mom and Dad remembered the 1947 hurricane and, more recently, Hurricane Betsy, in 1965. Both storms had caused damage in Gulfport, even though it had experienced only fringe effects each time. But, with Camille bearing down closer to Gulfport and with greater power than its predecessors, Mom was very concerned about her parents and our aunt and cousins. She called Grandma and urged—pleaded—that they all drive up to Vicksburg that afternoon and stay in our house with us until the hurricane threat had passed. Of course, as we expected, they were not about to "evacuate". After all, they were veterans of past hurricanes, and they would "ride it out" in their own homes. They would be "alright," they assured her.

#### 1200 CDT

By noon, the worst of the midday heat was sizzling throughout Vicksburg. Nevertheless, lifeguards on their one-hour break in the pool's "office" were, as usual, listening to rock music on AM radio station KNOE, out of Monroe, Louisiana. Unlike on typical days, KNOE and other regional stations were by then broadcasting regular and frequent bulletins on the "extremely

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<sup>8</sup> ...and one block west of West Side Park, where a playground and the old, open-sided, barn-like community center were favorites of my elder brother, John, and me, when we visited our grandparents.

<sup>9</sup> With the assistance of a series of "yard men".

<sup>10</sup> The magnolia is the official State Flower *and* State Tree of Mississippi.

dangerous” Camille. The radio stations reported that U.S. Air Force “Hurricane Hunter” reconnaissance aircraft, flying repeatedly through the eyewall, had recorded 165 MPH sustained winds, already well above Category 5 strength.<sup>11</sup> Although we were all looking forward to getting off work in just a few hours for the remainder of the summer, all of us were quietly contemplating what might be coming. Where along the coast would the storm strike? Would inland Vicksburg feel any severe effects? Those were questions whose answers could not be known at that time, but which would be unveiled over the next 36-48 hours. As for myself, I could not then imagine that, less than 24 hours later, I would be in the middle of it—the worst of it—on the coast.

#### 1400 EDT

On that Saturday afternoon, those lucky—and persistent—enough to have made it to Woodstock were being treated to an all-star lineup that included Country Joe McDonald, Santana and John Sebastian. The incredible evening-night fare included the Grateful Dead, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Janis Joplin.

#### Sunday, 17 August, 0610 EDT

The sun rose over Bethel at 6:10 a.m., but it did not gently usher in the usual peaceful summer dawn, with the countryside gradually awakening, then yawning and stretching. Instead, precisely at the time of local sunrise, British band *The Who* were blasting hard rock over the sea of weary but happy faces, by that time numbering “half a million strong”.<sup>12</sup> Various musicians, mostly rock groups, had performed almost continuously throughout the night, with only brief breaks in between. Many more hours of rock music were in store for the masses. Sensory overload, fueled by amped-up sound, drugs, alcohol, and lack of sleep, resulted in widespread exhaustion, yet the prevailing mood was remarkably peaceful and congenial. Tired as they were, the mostly young people recognized that they were witnessing not only some great concerts—they were also participating in history being made.

#### 0524 CDT

History of another type was about to be made that day elsewhere in the country. Over 1,100 miles to the southwest (as the crow flies), the sun was making its debut over the Mississippi coast one time zone later, at 5:24 a.m. The beautiful early dawn weather, with the first rays of the sun highlighting the Gulf’s horizon, was a cruel deception, considering the ghastly conditions just hours later. But it would soon be time to get out of bed (by 6:30, at the latest), for my grandfather and many other folks. That was mostly out of habit, since it was, after all, the Sabbath. Despite the hurricane warnings already posted for much of the Gulf Coast from Louisiana to Alabama, many folks still planned to attend Sunday school and/or church that morning, as always. *Faith, naiveté, or hubris?*

Granddad was one of the faithful regulars—he never missed Sunday school. Others, casting a wary eye out over the still-placid Gulf, were nervously weighing whether to trust the apparent serenity and stick around for the later church services. My grandmother, who had a separate

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<sup>11</sup> The wind speed of Hurricane Camille would not have been described as Category 5 at the time of the 1969 storm. The Saffir-Simpson hurricane wind scale was developed in 1971 by the National Hurricane Center, due, in part, to the lack of a consistent means of categorizing hurricane wind speeds, recognized with Camille. Category 5 is the highest category of the Saffir-Simpson scale, with one-minute-sustained winds of at least 157 MPH. Its official description starts with, “Catastrophic damage will occur.” (source: National Hurricane Center).

<sup>12</sup> From the song “Woodstock”, written by Joni Mitchell.

bedroom,<sup>13</sup> usually arose somewhat earlier than Granddad. Though she was active with the Women of the Church, Grandma rarely went with him to Sunday school, let alone attend church services,<sup>14</sup> preferring to spend the morning preparing one of her generous<sup>15</sup> and delicious Southern-style Sunday dinners.<sup>16</sup>

An early Sunday morning notwithstanding, by then, everyone in the region was following the increasingly ominous—and increasingly frequent—bulletins from the National Hurricane Center and various local news outlets. Consequently, many early-risers were not going to church at all; instead, they were *getting the hell out*. People who had “ridden out” past hurricanes were beginning to comprehend the unprecedented level of threat and were frantically packing up. Along with thousands of their neighbors, they started early, heading inland in a massive exodus by all available northbound routes. Camille paid no heed, advancing inexorably toward a defenseless—and rapidly depopulating—coastal area.

### 0630 CDT

Although sunrise had officially occurred at 5:24 a.m., its rays were just then filtering into Granddad’s east-facing bedroom, where he was still sleeping. Grandma was already preparing breakfast<sup>17</sup> in the kitchen, adjoining his bedroom.

“Pappy, time to get up! Breakfast is just about ready.”

Grandma hummed to herself as she fried the bacon to a blackened cinder.<sup>18</sup> Next came the scrambled eggs and buttermilk biscuits. The coffee aroma was already drifting throughout the house. There was not much more to do for breakfast to be ready.

A few minutes later: “Pappy, come and get it!”

Still more minutes; it was not like my grandfather not to respond when called. Moreover, he usually did not wait to be called for breakfast, already ambling through the kitchen on his way to the dining room.

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<sup>13</sup> An add-on to the original house’s south side, adjoining Granddad’s room, it was a combination bedroom, TV room, and small family room, all in what could be called “sun room”, with plentiful natural light from the nearly continuous windows on three sides.

<sup>14</sup> It was common knowledge in our family that Grandma couldn’t stand the pastor, though, as a kid, I was never privy as to *why*.

<sup>15</sup> Nearby relatives and friends were frequent Sunday dinner guests.

<sup>16</sup> Like many Southerners—and unlike “Yankees”—it was our custom to call the midday meal “dinner” and the evening meal “supper”, whereas non-Southerners typically call those meals “lunch” and “dinner”, respectively. (At least no one in our family would eat grits.)

<sup>17</sup> Prior to starting any breakfast preparations, Grandma would always make sure that the “front door cat” and the “back door cat”, whom she had named “Kitty” and “Kitty Baby”, respectively, got their separate breakfasts. Both were beautiful, yellow tabbies, and were the last surviving members of a feral litter born under the house years earlier. At that time, those two estranged brothers, still living in the crawlspace underneath, would not eat or otherwise associate together, as that would entail one cat’s trespassing across some hidden boundary into the other’s territory—thus, the separate feedings ritual. Grandma was the only person who could even approach—let alone pet—those ornery old tomcats. By the time of this story’s events, only one (Kitty Baby?) was still living.

<sup>18</sup> ...and just the way I have always liked it, thanks to her. When I order bacon at a restaurant, I always stipulate “crispy”, which seems wholly inadequate for how I really want it. But “burnt” might be insulting to the chef.

"I wonder what's holding him up?", she may have said to herself. She went into his room and saw that he was lying on his side in the bed, his face toward where she stood.

"Pappy?"

She leaned over the side of his bed for a closer look. His eyes were half-open, vacant and lifeless. Momentarily confused and frozen, she quickly realized that her husband of more than sixty years was dead. He had passed away in his sleep—or maybe upon waking. "Peacefully"? Hopefully so, but we'll never know for sure.

Suddenly, the shock hit Grandma, and she ran out of the house, into the street, hysterically screaming, "Pappy's gone! Pappy's gone!" Just as quickly, she ran back into the house, and as if on "autopilot", dialed<sup>19</sup> our phone number in Vicksburg. My mother—Grandma's elder daughter—answered the phone. Even before Mom could say "Hello", she heard Grandma again wailing, "Pappy's gone! Pappy's gone!" and then hang up, before Mom could even say a word.

Of course, Mom was by then near hysterics herself. Somehow managing to steady her shaking hand enough to dial back to Grandma, Mom placed the call. Surprisingly, Grandma answered the call. In just a few seconds, she had regained enough of her senses to confirm the dreadful news to Mom. With all that commotion, including Mom's crying, my dad and I came into the room. "Pappy" (to his wife and to his son-in-law), "Dad" (to his daughters), and "Granddad" (to his grandchildren, including me) was gone.

#### 0700 CDT

It was still early in the morning in Vicksburg, when unexpected tragedy rocked our family. As a result, like lots of folks on the coast, we also would *not* be going to Sunday school—or church—that day. Instead, and in contrast to the countless people rushing to flee *from* the coast that day, we were preparing to go *to* the coast, into the jaws of the approaching beast. We hastily gathered and packed what we would normally take along on one of our "ordinary" trips to Gulfport (typically about three times per year). We also prepared for a funeral, but.....

*What do you take along when you're headed straight into a monster hurricane, with only one hour's notice, after learning that one of the family patriarchs has fallen?*

Before leaving, Mom tried to call John, my elder brother, in Atlanta, and give him the sad news. John was in seminary, studying to become a minister. His wife, Judi,<sup>20</sup> worked various jobs to support them both while he concentrated on his studies. John was serving as a summer intern minister, and had responsibility for two worship services that Sunday morning, as the regular pastor was away. A member of the church staff got the message from Mom and passed it along to John between the two services. Judi went home and quickly packed for an uncertain road trip. They left Atlanta shortly after noon for the 450-mile drive to Gulfport.

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<sup>19</sup> "Believe it or not," telephones once had mechanical dials to select numbers and place calls.

Telephones were all non-mobile, and connected to other fixed-location telephones by means of landline cables. One had to "hang up" to end a call.

<sup>20</sup> John and Judi married on June 14, 1969, only two months before Hurricane Camille. Granddad, already in apparent failing health, attended their Memphis wedding—the only time he and Judi ever met, and the last time they saw him alive. Mom, Dad and I last saw him on July 20, in Gulfport, where we all watched on TV the unforgettable first Apollo Moon landing and walk. Granddad had been fortunate to live long enough to witness that "one giant leap" event of world historic significance.

### 0800 CDT

With sorrow—and trepidation—Dad, Mom and I set off from Vicksburg for the 3½-hour drive (under normal circumstances) to Gulfport. Though I had gotten my driver's license more than a year before, Dad would do all the driving that day. We talked very little during the somber trip. Once in a while, Mom would weep silently, then gaze at nothing in particular through the windshield. By myself in the back seat, I felt alone with my thoughts: *What are we getting into?*

At the outset, the morning sky was almost clear of clouds, except distant white ones, low on the southeast horizon, as we drove east on Interstate 20<sup>21</sup> toward Jackson. Traffic was light eastbound, but noticeably heavier westbound. Just east of Jackson, we turned southeast on US Hwy 49,<sup>22</sup> and were then heading toward the Mississippi Gulf Coast. That was when conditions began to change. Southbound traffic, already light, became even more sparse as we kept going in that direction. Meanwhile, traffic in the northbound lanes was heavy, but not yet gridlocked, as it already was closer to the coast.

### 0930 CDT

Aside from the worsening northbound traffic, we were then observing something extraordinary as we drove farther south. Against a bright blue morning sky, the white outermost cloud bands of the storm system had reached central Mississippi, more than 300 miles in advance of the hurricane's center, still well out in the Gulf. Adding our car's southbound speed to the northbound speed of those low clouds gave the illusion that they were moving faster than they really were. The concentric, spiral structures were unlike any other cloud formations any of us had ever seen in real life. They looked like today's modern satellite images of the outer cloud bands of a hurricane—only in our case, seen from below while looking up. Most of the clouds were white from our perspective, because we were on their sunlit sides, but we could also see much of the gray, shaded sides of the clouds at the same time. This is because they were aligned in a broadly-curving east-west pattern, even as the storm system as a whole was moving north. Nature was reminding us that, in addition to its destructive side—which we would soon experience—even a hurricane has a beautiful side. We were privileged to be witnessing that in this prelude, the proverbial “calm before the storm”.

### 1000 CDT

By that time, with hurricane warnings posted for all coastal areas, an estimated 200,000 people were evacuating in vehicles of every description, headed north on any and all routes leading away from the coast. Vehicles on Hwy 49-northbound were just creeping along as far north as Hattiesburg, more than 70 miles inland. They were bumper-to-bumper and, in some places, four-abreast, driving on the two traffic lanes and both paved shoulders. Mississippi Highway Patrol cars were stopped at frequent intervals along the route. Given the emergency, troopers were allowing shoulder-driving, motioning all to keep moving, and generally just trying to maintain order. Considering the circumstances, it was all quite orderly.

In contrast, hardly any other vehicles could be seen going in our direction. From Hattiesburg onward, we had the southbound lanes virtually to ourselves, and could have exceeded the speed limit with impunity. It's a good thing we got an early start, for we learned later that, behind us as we drove south, the Highway Patrol was systematically closing off all routes leading to the coast from anywhere along I-20 across central Mississippi. That included, in addition to Hwy 49,

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<sup>21</sup> I-20 is like a belt traversing the waist of Mississippi from the Alabama state line on the east, through Meridian and Jackson, to the “belt buckle”, Vicksburg, overlooking the Mississippi River on the west.

<sup>22</sup> Hwy 49 is like an Interstate highway. It is a freeway, 4 or more lanes wide, all the 150 miles between Jackson and Gulfport-Biloxi, connecting the state's two largest metropolitan areas.



Interstate Highways 55 and -59, U.S. Hwy 61, various state routes and a network of lesser roads. In coordination with their counterparts in Louisiana and Alabama, the Highway Patrol was effectively sealing off the coastal zone from anyone trying to enter it. Meanwhile, for those “bugging out”, the radio stations were reporting that, in addition to the over-crowded local evacuation shelters, hotels and motels as far away as Memphis were filling up.

*There is, understandably, something inherently scary about being part of a mass evacuation. On the other hand, it is both scary and crazy to be running counter to the exodus, against the flow, against all instinct, against all reason.*

As we drove farther south, the earlier sunny and beautiful aspect of nature’s storm gave way to a gray overcast of ominous, low clouds. Intermittent showers of large raindrops and breeziness alternated with lulls when everything was calm. After a while, that turned to almost continuous light-moderate rain and blustery breezes. Occasional strong gusts of easterly crosswinds would buffet our southbound car. By the time we got to Hattiesburg, northbound traffic, while still congested, was noticeably less so. The heaviest part of the evacuation exodus had already passed us in the opposite direction. No doubt, many of those folks would have been breathing a huge sigh of relief by then.

#### 1130 CDT

We arrived in Gulfport before noon and parked by the curb in front of Grandma’s house. Although the sky was a solid, leaden gray, the rain and breezes were actually lighter than an hour earlier and 50 miles back up the road. The lull did not last long, however. Grandma and Aunt JM (who had been weeping) came out of the front porch screen door and greeted us.<sup>23</sup> Grandma was remarkably composed at that time. After a brief exchange of mutual condolences over our shared grief, we went inside, where the conversation quickly turned to the approaching hurricane.

Soon, my cousin (and Aunt JM’s younger daughter) Gayle arrived in her green Mustang. In order to escape the somber mood in the house, I chose to go back out in the rain with her to a nearby mini-mart to pick up some last-minute supplies. Surprisingly, even at that late time, we were able to find and buy some more flashlight batteries. Jan, my other cousin (and Gayle’s elder sister) had arrived when we got back. After returning to the house, we all visited for a while. But with the TV broadcasting bulletins in the background, and the weather outside then deteriorating steadily, it was time to make final preparations for the impending crisis. Aunt JM and Gayle then left to ride out the storm in their own home, just one mile west of Grandma’s house. Jan returned to her apartment between Gulfport and Biloxi. It was early afternoon.

#### 1230 CDT

While we were getting uncomfortably settled in at Grandma’s house, John and Judi were driving through Georgia and Alabama. After receiving the sad news that morning, they had left Atlanta shortly after noon, and headed west 290 miles on I-20. Even “gaining” an hour by crossing into the Central Time Zone, it was late afternoon, local time, when they reached a critical junction in Meridian, Mississippi. At that point, their plan for the remaining 160 miles to Gulfport was to turn south on I-59, then connect to Hwy 49 in Hattiesburg. From there, they would drive the last 70 miles to their destination, where we were all waiting anxiously.

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<sup>23</sup> The funeral home had taken Granddad’s body earlier.

But their luck—and time—had run out. The Highway Patrol had already barricaded access to I-59 southbound from I-20, along with southbound routes farther west. Prohibited from going any farther toward the coast, John and Judi had no choice but to continue west on I-20 the final 130 miles from Meridian to Vicksburg. There, they settled into our home for the duration, and began watching the continuous TV coverage of what was happening—and about to happen—to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. It would be a long night.

#### 1630 CDT

All afternoon, the TV media had been hyping the NHC forecast of a 20-foot “tide”<sup>24</sup> near the landfall, by then projected to be on the Mississippi coast. With tropical storm-force conditions already underway in Gulfport, Dad decided we would make a quick drive down to the beachfront, just two blocks away, and assess the potential for a 20-foot tide to threaten the house we were in. Even with the windshield wipers on high, we could barely make out the angry sea and its whitecaps right in front of us. The water already covered the usually broad, white-sand beach, and was lapping onto the stair-step “seawall”. Estimating that Grandma’s house sat at about 20 feet above mean sea level (MSL),<sup>25</sup> Dad, a civil engineer, figured that a 20-foot storm surge probably would not reach the house, and if it did, would not be high enough to seriously endanger it. We returned to the house and hunkered down for whatever was to come. At that point, what other choice did we have? One possibility was about to present itself.

#### 1837 CDT

It was hardly noticeable that the sun had set at 6:37 p.m., as, under the heavy clouds, it seemed to have been dark for hours already. With sustained winds in the Gulfport area then approaching hurricane force—and gusts even higher—a Civil Defense officer, braving the fierce conditions while nearing the end of his rounds, knocked on the front door.

When my dad opened it, the officer hollered over the roar of the wind, **“Time is running out. You folks need to *EVACUATE NOW!* There is a shelter in the school, just two blocks away, by the railroad track. If you wait any longer, it will be too dangerous to go outside.”**

Dad, knowing that Grandma was adamant about not leaving her home,<sup>26</sup> said, “Thank you, but we’re going to stay here.”

The Civil Defense officer, raising his clipboard to write on, then said, *“What are the names of your next of kin?”* After taking a few notes, he turned back into the windblown sheets of rain and disappeared into the gathering darkness.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Today, correctly referred to as “storm surge”, the huge swell of ocean water pushed ahead of a hurricane, was, in the past, commonly, but erroneously, called the storm’s “tide”. In fact, if an area’s astronomical tide was +5 feet above mean sea level (MSL) when a hurricane made landfall with a 20-foot storm surge, the surge would be added to the high tide, resulting in seawater 25 feet above normal (local topographical features can also affect combined water level). (multiple sources).

<sup>25</sup> Research for this narrative revealed that the actual elevation at my grandparents’ house was only 15’ MSL, or 5’ lower than we estimated at the time. (source: USGS quad map). Had we known this, it would have significantly altered our calculations.

<sup>26</sup> Earlier in the evening, we had tried—gently—to persuade my grandmother to evacuate to a nearby shelter, but she would hear none of it.

<sup>27</sup> In other neighborhoods, Army National Guard trucks with loudspeakers blared, *“Get out! Get out!”* (multiple sources).

That day was exactly one week after my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I was beginning to fear that I might not be around to see the second week after my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, let alone my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday or beyond. My youthful—and false—sense of invincibility had completely melted away, replaced by having to come to terms, at that very moment, with the possibility—perhaps likelihood—of my own imminent mortality.

#### 2030 CDT

Without warning—but not unexpectedly—electrical power failed. Lost were the lights and the all-important TV news lifeline, on which stations from Biloxi and New Orleans were providing non-stop, on-site reporting and bulletins on the steadily-worsening conditions. The power didn't go out everywhere all at once, but it did go out everywhere within a very short time, as hurricane-force winds were slamming the entire coastal region by that time. For a short while, bright, blue-green arcs could be seen, reflected against the low clouds, as transformer circuit breakers kicked out, one by one, until power was out everywhere. To make matters scarier, soon the scene outside—including trees contorted at extreme angles by the howling wind—was visible only during the frequent flashes of lightning. Indeed, “it was a dark and stormy night.”

With the power out—leaving no TV to watch—and the winds increasing to a frightening fury, it occurred to us that the aforementioned live oak, or just some of its heavy branches, might fall on the house. Dad decided that we should be prepared to move out of both the more vulnerable TV room and the living room, into a short interior hallway. This was because it was the only place in the house removed completely from all exterior walls, and it was also under the strongest central section of the roof. For the time being, we remained in the living room, occasionally looking up with consternation, as if we could see the oak tree through the ceiling.

#### 2100 CDT

Right after the power went out, we lit candles that we had strategically placed throughout the house earlier in the evening. We also had several flashlights and a good supply of new batteries, some purchased just that afternoon. By flashlight, I had been periodically monitoring a barometer on top of my late grandfather's chest-of-drawers. I watched in disbelief as it plunged completely off the low end of its scale (28 inHg., or 948 mbar), by far the lowest barometric pressure I had ever seen—or even heard of. That was a stark indicator of just how intense the storm was—and the eye had not even arrived yet.<sup>28</sup>

#### 2130 CDT

As noted previously, John and Judi had finally arrived at our home in Vicksburg after a long, stressful drive from Atlanta. When they called Grandma's phone number, they—and we—were surprised that telephone service to her house was still functioning, since electric power had been lost all along the coast. They told Mom that they had made it to Vicksburg alright. Mom said that it was getting “really bad” where we were. We didn't know it then, but that was our last communication with the outside world until several days after the storm.

#### 2200 CDT

In addition to monitoring the barometer inside, I took a high-beam flashlight to the windows in different rooms, and even went out onto the screened porches of both the front and back doors, to see what was going on outside. That part, even though the porches were under the main roof, was particularly unnerving, due to the wind's combination of a high-pitched scream with a

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<sup>28</sup> At peak intensity, a barometric pressure of 26.58 inHg. (900 mbar) was recorded, the second-lowest ever in the United States. (source: Hurricane Camille: Monster Storm of the Gulf Coast; Phillip D. Hearn; 2004; University Press of Mississippi).

deafening roar—it is impossible to describe with words. I could only guess at the wind speeds, having never experienced anything even approaching such velocities. *150 MPH?* seemed like a good guess at the time—and turned out later to be quite close to that actually recorded, not long before the peak winds arrived with the eye.

Seen with my flashlight, small branches littered the front yard, and the rain appeared to be flying sideways. It was raining so hard that water soon filled the street all the way between the curbs on both sides (the far curb was almost beyond the range of my flashlight, on account of the heavy rain). Our new car, which we had bought less than two weeks before, was parked by the curb on the near side of the street, straight out from the front door. I noticed that the rainwater was rising so fast that it topped the curb, spilled into the front yard, and started rising to halfway up the wheel covers on the car.

Looking out the window in the front bedroom, I called to Dad, “Come and see how fast the rainwater is rising out there.” He took the flashlight, looked outside for a moment, and then, gravely, said, “That is not rainwater. That water is right up out of the Gulf.”<sup>29</sup> Moments later, with the water rising halfway up the car doors, we watched, aghast, as the car lifted off the street and started to float. Pushed by the wind, it floated down the street, beyond the range of our flashlight. There it filled up with water and sank in the darkness. That was a turning point: at approximately 10:00 p.m., the “spear tip” of the dreaded storm surge had just appeared in our neighborhood, to be followed by a flood of rapidly flowing and rapidly rising seawater.

I went around from the front bedroom, through the living room, to the front door, out on to the screened-in porch and opened the screen door. With my flashlight, I could see that the water already covered the lawn and was lapping onto the two steps outside of the screen door. Within moments, it began to spill onto the hardwood floor of the porch, which meant that the surge water had risen about two feet since it first appeared in the streets, less than ten minutes before.

I hollered to my parents and grandmother, all of whom had been sitting in the candle-illuminated living room since the power went out, that it looked like the water was going to come in under the front and back doors. That would get the hardwood floor and rugs wet, and we needed to stuff towels under the doors immediately, which we then did. That held the leakage at bay for a short time, but we could see through the window that the water on the porch was already a few inches higher than it was in the house. Dad and I then rolled up a woolen carpet that covered much of the living room floor, and placed it lengthwise across a sofa, in hopes that it might be spared, even if the water covered the floor by an inch or so. For a moment, we relaxed a bit, thinking that we were containing the water infiltration, and keeping damage to furniture, etc., to a minimum.

All of a sudden, water started coming up from the crawlspace through a gas floor furnace in the central hallway of the house. The furnace had been covered with a small rug for the summer, so we hadn't even thought about it. At first, the water coming up through and around the furnace looked like a rectangular ring of small, six-inch-high fountains of dirty water. Without warning, the entire furnace shot up out of the floor as if riding a dark geyser, heaved by the pressure from under the house. Water was by then flooding into the house, and was already knee-deep within five minutes of first entry. That just moments before we were scrambling to keep maybe an inch of water from getting the rugs wet now seemed absurd.

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<sup>29</sup> Just two blocks away.

We could not believe what we were seeing with the flashlights shining on the wall: the water was rising about six inches per minute, faster than one can fill a bathtub. Another five minutes and it was waist-deep on Dad and me. In accordance with our earlier plan to move into that better-protected interior hallway, he and I lifted Grandma onto an old cabinet-type sewing machine to keep her above the rising water. We found a stool for Mom to stand on, and she held on to steady Grandma. At that moment, Grandma lost her composure and started wailing, "This (the hurricane) is God's punishment of me for the way I treated Pappy!" We assuaged her feelings of guilt by reassuring her that she had been a good wife to Pappy. Also, we said that God would not punish thousands of other people for the alleged sins of one person. She calmed down again and remained quiet but engaged.

The water level continued rising very fast inside the house. Not knowing how high it might go, Dad and I quickly examined a long-unused ventilation grate in the ceiling above the floor furnace. Dad realized that we might have to break into the attic to escape drowning in the house, if the water got that high, and it looked like that's exactly where it was headed.

Suddenly—and it does seem that a lot of things happen "suddenly" in such extreme circumstances—the entire house structure groaned and shifted, as if moved by a giant, unseen hand. The movement was enough to make us grab onto things to maintain our balance in all the water. At first, we didn't know what that unusual sensation was—no earth tremors had ever been felt in that region. Then it happened again, with more force, and the house started swaying side-to-side, with some up-and-down motion as well.

From inside the house, we could hear unsettling sounds from underneath; wood being strained and splintering; pipes twisting and buckling. Then we realized what was happening: just a half-hour or so after first appearing, the storm surge had risen high enough outside to lift the house entirely off its raised foundation and float it like a large boat. Grandma's house had become our "Ark". I couldn't help but wondering, *Will we be swept out to sea in it?*

Just moments after the first house movement, the strong odor of natural gas rose from the crawlspace. As the house lifted up off its foundation and floated with the rising waters, the gas pipes connected to the furnace, water heater and kitchen stove had been wrenched beyond their breaking point, and were releasing natural gas into the main part of the house. Flashlights in hand, Dad and I scrambled, as fast as we could in water waist-deep or more, to extinguish all the candles around the house. The last thing we needed was to be blown up with our Ark in a gas explosion triggered by a candle in a hurricane! I think we just barely averted that disaster, and after a short while, the smell of gas largely dissipated. Nevertheless, from then onward, we were down to flashlights only.

Not much later, we noticed that the water was no longer rising inside the house. At first, we thought maybe the eye of the hurricane was coming ashore, and that this was the peak of the surge. That turned out to be false, as we found out shortly, when the eye did make landfall. Dad—the engineer—then figured that the water level inside the house had stabilized precisely because the sturdy, wood-frame house had lifted off its foundation and floated. That created an equilibrium which kept the water level inside at about waist-deep overall. It made perfect sense. And it was also proved correct in the days following. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, investigating post-storm forensic evidence such as high-water-mark damage on trees,

estimated that the storm surge in our area peaked at about ten feet above ground level (AGL).<sup>3031</sup> That would have raised the water level inside our house to well above the ceiling and into the attic, had the house remained anchored to its foundation. That the house broke loose and floated *saved our lives*.

But we were about to go along for yet another kind of ride. The surge outside contained swells that rocked the house from end to end, like a ship crossing swells in rough seas. In the living room/dining room, the water would rush from one end of the house to the other, carrying furniture and other objects with it. When the water level would peak on one end, it could be six feet deep there, while on the opposite end, only two feet deep. Then it would reverse. The back-and-forth motion went on for some time. We watched with flashlights, dodging the larger objects as they were swept by the indoor “surf”. The dining room china cabinets turned over with a crash and the shattering of fine china and crystal.

At the same time, outside, the house was frequently being battered and jolted by something we could not see in the dirty surge water, even with the flashlights. One or more unknown objects would shake the whole house with each impact. At that point, we could see nothing in the outdoor darkness, but, nevertheless, the house continued pitching and swaying. Again I thought, maybe we were going to be washed out to sea. I suggested to Mom, Dad and Grandma that we pray. Mom gently replied that all of us were praying (silently).

### 2330 CDT

Camille made landfall a half-hour before midnight as a Category 5 hurricane with sustained winds of 175 MPH.<sup>32</sup> The 8-mile-wide eye passed over the Waveland/Bay St. Louis/Pass Christian area. At the west end of Gulfport, we were just outside the eastern edge of the eye. As a result, our location did not experience the brief period of relative calm typically observed inside of a hurricane’s eye. Instead, we endured the relentlessly-highest wind speeds and storm surge anywhere, the brunt of the storm.<sup>33</sup> Further, because we were not inside the eye upon landfall—and also due to the midnight darkness—the “peak” of the hurricane’s fury was not obvious in our area. Rather, it was a prolonged period of maximum intensity—probably lasting at least an hour—with a gradual ramping-up of winds beforehand, and a slow subsiding afterward, as the storm center moved inland.

The storm surge, however, had a more extended period of maximum impact. The saltwater flood began in our area about an hour before the strongest winds arrived and lasted until the center passed. With landfall of the hurricane’s eye, and due to its counterclockwise circulation, the winds in our area—which had been onshore—swung around, over 30 minutes or so, to offshore. That reversal released the pressure which had pushed the storm surge ashore on the east side of the eye.

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<sup>30</sup> (multiple sources).

<sup>31</sup> Added to the MSL elevation of 15’ at our location, the total storm surge height we experienced was 25’. See also footnote no. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Other measurements recorded sustained winds of 190 MPH, with gusts estimated as high as 230 MPH. Those could not be confirmed, because the extremely high winds destroyed all wind recording stations in the region. (multiple sources). See also footnote no. 2.

<sup>33</sup> This is because, as a counter-clockwise spinning cyclonic storm moves northward over an east-west coastline, the highest wind speeds and surge height are in the right-front (or northeast) quadrant. In other words, where we were received the “right cross”, that is, the most powerful blows the incoming hurricane had to dish out. (multiple sources).

Almost immediately, we noticed that the dirty water inside the house was starting to recede. Soon, it was rushing out around doors, windows and, especially, the chasm where the floor furnace had been. On the flashlight-illuminated walls, we could clearly see the water level going down, like a bathtub draining. Shortly, we felt the house shudder, the definite sensation of the house settling back down onto the ground. Very quickly, the remaining water rushed out of the house, leaving a layer of mud throughout. From the time it started going down inside the house until it was all gone was no more than 15 minutes. We were astonished at the speed.

Outside, what was left of the storm surge was rapidly receding back into the Gulf. But we were too tired to look, given what we had been through the previous two hectic hours. Even though the wind was still howling, and it would not be daylight for a few more hours, we knew the worst was over. With the 180-degree shift in wind direction and the passing of the eye, the surge flooded back into the Gulf with almost the speed and power it had roared ashore just a couple of hours before. As it receded, the water swept trees, wreckage, bodies, and no telling what-all, out to sea. But it was just a matter of time before conditions would improve enough to venture outside. The storm was still raging, and conditions still life-threatening, but the diminishing trend had begun, its message unmistakable: *We had survived.*

Elsewhere, at exactly the same time as Camille's climactic landfall, blues/rock legend Johnny Winter was putting on one of his patented frenetic shows, electrifying the huge Woodstock audience, who demanded and got a midnight encore. For part of his set, he was joined on-stage by his brother, Edgar Winter. Next came Blood, Sweat & Tears, followed by super-group Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. With only three bands remaining, and sunrise due in just a few hours, the historic festival was nearing its memorable and spectacular early-morning finale.

#### Monday, 18 August, 0030 CDT

Not long after the spent storm surge receded back into the Gulf, we performed a cursory assessment, by flashlight, of the damage and the dwelling's structural integrity, its interior and contents. The house was remarkably intact—attesting to its quality construction—but the interior was a scene of hellish chaos. The furniture and any other items that could float in the brief indoor flood were left in muddy shambles and ruined. Items that could not float were also mostly destroyed, in some cases by heavy furniture crashing into, or coming to rest on top of, them. Among the flashlight findings, sadly, was Granddad's prized radio—never to play again, submerged and destroyed beyond repair by the saltwater that invaded his bedroom, just hours after his own spirit had risen to Heaven from that very room.

#### 0130 CDT

Just getting around in the mud and debris inside what had been an immaculate home only three hours earlier was challenging, perhaps even potentially hazardous. Nevertheless, we persevered until we were satisfied that we knew the situation as completely as possible under the circumstances. Exhausted—and with nothing else we could do at that point—we decided we should try to get some sleep before daylight. Dad and I removed debris from Granddad's saturated mattress and climbed onto the soggy bed together. Grandma and Mom took the front bedroom (the one from whose window I had watched our car float away into oblivion). As we lay down, Dad said to me, "In the morning, you're going to see destruction, the likes of which you've never seen."<sup>34</sup> Despite the continuing noise outside, we all soon fell asleep.

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<sup>34</sup> At times over the following years, Dad would relate to others his admonition to me that night, noting that when daylight did come, the destruction was so much worse than even he had expected to see. (As a point of reference, he had also experienced wide-spread and severe devastation in France and Germany, 1944-45.).

### 0524 CDT (0624 EDT)

Dawn pulled back the curtain of darkness from the coast, revealing a surreal landscape of utter destruction, and stunned survivors wandered their unrecognizable neighborhoods in disbelief.

Meanwhile, last-act Jimi Hendrix would soon bring down another, figurative, final curtain, at Woodstock, with less than a tenth of the peak audience remaining on the muddy field—hardy souls, to be sure. His psychedelic rendering of the “Star Spangled Banner” became immortalized in the blockbuster documentary movie and multi-disc phonograph album released a few months later.

Two momentous events, Woodstock and Camille, unrelated and far apart, yet linked in time, were passing into history.<sup>35</sup>

### 0600 CDT

With daylight, Dad and I took our first tentative steps outside where it was still gusty, but not raining at the moment. The street scene was chaotic, with houses, vehicles and miscellaneous debris everywhere. Our house (to my surprise) had not floated very far after all; it lay diagonally to its original position, part way out into the street, with one corner still resting haphazardly on the foundation blocks.<sup>36</sup> We could see our car about a block down the street. After it sank, the receding storm surge deposited a floating wooden loading pallet on its hood. Trying to turn on its ignition confirmed what we expected: being submerged in saltwater had destroyed the electrical system and “totaled-out” the car.

At that point, we also noticed alien objects which did not belong in that residential neighborhood. First, we could see what had apparently caused all the impact sounds and jolts on the house during the nighttime surge. There were hundreds of large paper spools, carrying the kind of brown paper from which cardboard boxes are made. The loaded spools were approximately four feet long and four feet in diameter, and had floated in from the Port of Gulfport and settled on the streets. Though they may have weighed hundreds of pounds each—dry—they floated well. Furthermore, they were clearly the only objects present capable of delivering the heavy impacts we had felt during the night. Second, the ground was covered with what looked like sleet or hail. Translucent-white, and larger than BBs, but smaller than peas, they were polyethylene beads, from which plastic milk cartons and other products are made. They also washed in from the Port, in unimaginable numbers.<sup>37</sup> Those beads, if not biodegradable, may still be there to this day, in the sandy soil, below the grass.

### 0800 EDT

Grandma, Dad, Mom and I set out for the one-mile walk down the beach to the house of Aunt JM, as Grandma’s house was uninhabitable, and we had no working cars. (Besides, all the streets were blocked with debris.) In blustery conditions, we walked along the top of the seawall, because West Beach Blvd. (U.S. Hwy 90) was covered in sand and debris. As we had hoped,

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<sup>35</sup> In a way, it can be said that the turbulent, but idealistic, 1960s—and what that era stood for (or against)—began to die out on that stage in the cow pasture that day, months before it ended on the calendar. Out of place in the polyester “Me Decade” which followed, Sixties icons such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Mama Cass Elliot and others would soon perish.

<sup>36</sup> After the hurricane, Kitty Baby was never seen again. He was presumed drowned in the crawlspace when the storm surge flooded in, his body then crushed when the surge receded and the floating house settled onto the ground but off the foundation.

<sup>37</sup> “Billions and billions”, as Carl Sagan was fond of saying.



JM's house, because it was on somewhat higher ground, had been mostly above the storm surge's reach. Therefore, it had largely escaped the principal cause of most destruction in the area. Although it had sustained relatively moderate damage from the ferocious winds, it was still habitable—fortunately for all of us in immediate need of shelter.

After arriving at her house, we spent the rest of the day planning how to cope on our own for a few days. Owing to the scope of the disaster, we knew we could not expect help anytime soon. But the Army National Guard began arriving in force, as soon as they could clear the way for their convoys, and fanned out to save lives and help start the recovery process. We decided that it was better not to venture very far from the house that day, since the back side of Camille was still spawning thunderstorms—and reportedly some tornadoes—in the area, and we were hearing reports from neighbors of venomous snakes and leaking gas mains.

### Tuesday, 19 August

August 19 was the first full day after the departure of Camille. Dad and I started exploring the neighborhood and beyond. We also walked back down to Grandma's neighborhood to check on the house and collect any valuables or other important items, as there were reports of scattered looting. Search and rescue operations for live victims were already winding down, but recovery of fatalities was well underway by that time.

Hearing rumors of a body just a block or so away, Dad and I headed over to the scene. Confusion seemed to be prevalent. As Dad and I stood alone near a large tree, we turned around, and there, about ten feet above ground, was the battered body of a woman. From the way her body was jammed in among some branches, it did not look like she had swum through the surge water and tried to hold onto the tree. Instead, it looked more like her already lifeless body had been carried by the water as it receded back into the Gulf, then got snagged on the tree. That her body was ten feet off the ground was evidence that the surge must have been at least that high in that area. That her body was still in a tree, unnoticed in plain sight for a day and a half, was ample evidence of the confusion.

"Now you've seen the worst," Dad said to me.

He was not quite right. Only a little later that afternoon, I saw a recovery effort underway just down the street from Grandma's house (Dad was not with me the latter time). I went to be of help, if I could be. There was a large pile of wood, the remnants of a house on the corner, which was obliterated by waves coming right up the north-south street from the Gulf. Men pulling back the heavy, splintered boards one at a time were pretty sure that there were at least two bodies underneath. The heat of the day was causing them to decompose quickly, and the odor helped locate the deceased.

I was lifting a board off the pile when a man next to me uncovered part of a discolored leg. "Who is it?" I asked. In a subdued, flat voice, he replied, "I *think* it's my mother." *That*, for me, was "the worst" of it.

### Aftermath

Once the hurricane had departed the coastal region, it became apparent why we were so fortunate, while others nearby perished. As it turned out, our house's location on an east-west street, parallel to the Gulf beach, was one of the major factors that saved our lives. We were not subjected to the unimpeded wave action as all the structures along north-south streets leading up from the beach were. Those houses were demolished. The other factor was the location of those two mighty trees (the magnolia and the oak), together with a standalone garage, in my

grandparents' back yard. Between their back yard and the beach were three rows of houses. Every one of those houses was obliterated, with their wreckage and debris piling up against those two trees and the garage. That created a twenty-foot-high breakwater of lumber and other rubble<sup>38</sup> behind the house we were in. As a result, our location experienced more slack water during the surge, and not the pounding wave action that slammed the house next door or those that disintegrated and thus became our saving breakwater. The two great trees defied Camille; they did not fail, but rather protected us. They were still living years later.

On the third day after the hurricane, John and Judi arrived in Gulfport. The Highway Patrol was still restricting non-essential access to the disaster zone. John and Judi were finally allowed to pass, waved through by a state trooper because John's car windshield had a home-fashioned black cross-like emblem, signifying a funeral, to which they were, in fact, also headed. Our entire family was relieved and thankful at this reunion. Moreover, John and Judi brought much-needed supplies from Vicksburg, especially ice, since the power was still out everywhere.<sup>39</sup>

My grandfather's funeral, delayed since before the hurricane, took place on a very hot afternoon, as all of them were that week. Although all of us family members were sad at his passing, we found a short spell of relief in another sense: the funeral home had an emergency generator that powered central air conditioning in the building. After several days with no shelter from the relentless heat and humidity, the coolness inside the funeral home was hard to leave behind. Strangely enough, I have no recollection at all of the interment.

Having lost our new car during the storm, Dad, Mom and I rode with John and Judi back to Vicksburg in their small, un-air-conditioned car. But, at last, we were getting out, away from the disaster, which, by then, had the full attention of the nation, no longer overshadowed (in the media) by that other landmark event of the same weekend, the Woodstock festival.

We would have several tasks looming after we returned from the coast, not the least of which were filing insurance claims and obtaining tetanus shots (on account of the conditions to which we had been exposed). Of course, we were sorely aware of how much worse things were—and would remain so for a long time—for those unfortunate souls remaining on the coast. It also served to remind us how much we were blessed to have survived and had a home and life to return to.

Finally, upon turning the corner into our Vicksburg neighborhood and arriving at our home, we were overwhelmed with amazement and gratitude to find our house already full of family friends and neighbors. They were awaiting our expected return with a huge array of food, including casseroles, main courses, desserts and other dishes, which kept us well-fed for days. That was a homecoming to remember, made all the more special because it was such a demonstration of love from true friends.

### Epilogue

Due to the extreme devastation and high death toll from that storm, the NHC permanently retired the name *Camille* after the 1969 season. It will never again be used for an Atlantic or Gulf hurricane or tropical storm.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> High enough that I was able to clamber up the pile of debris and step *down* on to the roof of the garage.

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, water service continued uninterrupted in the Gulfport area, as it was served by a network of artesian wells, whose use of gravity differential and aquifers provided natural pressure for the water mains. As a result, we were able to take hose showers in the back yard—a welcome relief.

<sup>40</sup> (source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Camille](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Camille)).

Camille still holds the record for peak wind speeds by a hurricane at landfall in the U.S. It held the record for storm surge on American shores until exceeded, in nearly the same place, by Hurricane Katrina, in 2005. The latter storm, like its predecessor, was a Category 5 while out in the Gulf of Mexico, but, unlike Camille, Katrina's intensity and wind speeds had diminished to Category 3 at landfall.

Nevertheless, because Katrina was so much larger overall than Camille, the sheer mountain of seawater it gathered and pushed ahead of it while it was a Category 5 resulted in a storm surge at landfall that was both higher than Camille's at all points and extended farther east and west from the eye along the coast.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Katrina's storm surge damage was both more extensive and more severe—something unthinkable in the aftermath of Camille, thirty-six years earlier. Many places and properties that had survived Camille were destroyed by Katrina, including the former homes of my grandparents and Aunt JM.

Part of the unique legacy of Hurricane Camille surrounds a myth that has stubbornly persisted over the years and since passed into popular folklore throughout the nation. It involves the infamous "hurricane party" at the beachfront Richelieu Manor Apartments, a few miles west of us, in Pass Christian. There, it is said, all twenty-three supposed partiers paid Camille for their hubris with their lives. It has taken years of investigation to refute, once and for all, that urban legend, and document the facts: at least eight people did, in fact, die when the storm surge completely leveled that three-story complex, down to its foundation slab, but no such "party" took place there that fateful night.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, the hurricane was responsible for at least 143 fatalities along the Gulf Coast, though the exact toll will never be certain.<sup>43</sup> The estimated direct damage cost to the region was \$1.421 billion (1969 dollars).

Today, my grandfather's grave is one of maybe a hundred or so dated August 17, 1969, in the Biloxi-Gulfport cemetery. His is perhaps the only one not directly due to Hurricane Camille. But a case can be made that he was, in fact, the first to die there on account of it. Before he passed away early that Sunday morning, he recognized, in the approaching menace, that all he loved and had worked for all his life was almost certainly coming to an end that very day. The impending loss of his home and way of life, as exemplified in his beloved lawn and gardens, was too much for his weakened heart to bear. It was a blessing that he did not have to endure it. Furthermore, our family all later agreed that it was a blessing he had died when he did—in bed, because if he and Grandma had tried to evacuate to a shelter during the hurricane, his heart would have given out then, plus we would have lost Grandma at the same time.

By mere coincidence, my grandmother became a widow earlier on the same day that Camille struck and ruined her home. She never spent another night in that house.<sup>44</sup> With her few remaining personal belongings, she moved in with my Aunt JM and cousin Gayle about

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<sup>41</sup> (multiple sources).

<sup>42</sup> (multiple sources).

<sup>43</sup> A few days later, the remnants of Camille caused an additional 113 deaths in Virginia, due to catastrophic flooding and landslides. (multiple sources).

<sup>44</sup> The house was renovated and sold to new owners. It was lived in until destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Today, where my grandparents had lived—including Granddad's gardens—is just a vacant lot, surrounded by miles of vacant lots, with "driveways to nowhere". Where neighborhood communities had once thrived for many generations, all has since been wiped out by Hurricanes Camille and/or Katrina.

one mile farther west and also near the beachfront. There she quietly spent her seven remaining years, living long enough to see her first two great-grandchildren born,<sup>45</sup> and her youngest grandchild—me—graduate from college. Whenever the subject of Hurricane Camille would come up, Grandma referred to it not as “Camille”, or “the hurricane”, but simply as “the storm” (or “starm”, in her Southern accent). In 1976, she was buried next to “Pappy”.

Mom and Dad made many more trips to Gulfport after Camille, especially while Grandma was still living.<sup>46</sup> Two years after the hurricane, they saw me off to college, and supported me financially until I graduated. Later, they became grandparents (of Jennifer and John Jr.), then great-grandparents (of William and Andrew). They enjoyed their retirement, especially traveling, family and friends. Both having lived into their nineties, they passed away in 2010 and 2015, respectively. After more than sixty-six years of marriage, they are now buried together in Vicksburg.

John and Judi returned to Atlanta, where John graduated from seminary and embarked on a career as a pastor. Judi worked for many years as a librarian. Over the years, they lived in Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee. They are the parents of Jennifer and John Jr., and the grandparents of William and Andrew. They are now actively retired, enjoy having all their children and grandchildren close-by, and, at present, live in Nashville. Having also experienced much of this collective event, they contributed their own memories so valuable to the completeness of this memoir.

Aunt JM and Gayle lived together for several years after Grandma died. They both passed away since 2000. Jan and her son, John H, continue to live in Gulfport, where they also survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

My name is Don, and I was a Survivor among a Family of Survivors. As fortunate as we all were to make it through the ordeal, my first instinct was to put the whole experience behind me as soon, and as completely, as possible. I returned to Vicksburg, able to escape the physical destruction left behind on the coast, though the experience perhaps had some impact on my psyche. But, unlike the battered residents of the coast, I was not burdened with having to “pick up the pieces”, either literally or figuratively. Nevertheless, I did not go back to the coast until the following spring. We would never return to my grandparents’ home, where we had had many good times. They are just memories now.

Two weeks after the hurricane, and just after Labor Day, schools opened for the new academic year. Back home in Vicksburg again, I immersed myself in my junior year in high school, in part to put Camille in my rear-view mirror. After that school term ended, and the summer break of 1970 arrived, I was—you guessed it—right back at the municipal pool, babysitting, I mean *lifeguarding*, (again).

For many years after the hurricane, I would occasionally “wake up” (it seemed) in the middle of the night, and my nearly-dark bedroom would appear to have two or three feet of dirty water in it. Strangely, the water would be eerily calm, not raging, and there would be no roar of wind—or any other sound, for that matter—and no one else would be there but me. The surreal imagery would then dissolve as I became more fully awake. I guess it was merely how my sub-conscious

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<sup>45</sup> John H and Jennifer.

<sup>46</sup> A few weeks after Hurricane Katrina, Mom and Dad returned to the coast and observed—on an even wider scale—the kind of catastrophic devastation wrought by Camille, all those years before. Even many long-time locals had believed that Camille could never be equaled, let alone exceeded.

mind had processed and altered my perception of an incredible actual experience. I could never deduce any other meaning in it. That bizarre dream recurred many times before finally fading for good, decades later.

And even after more than half a century, on August 17 of every year—without fail—the first thought I have upon waking is about this date, in 1969. On every anniversary, I always look back on and remember Granddad and the rest of my family—survivors of Hurricane Camille.

In conclusion, I moved forward and continued with my education and, later, my career. I have been fortunate enough to have had many opportunities, and I have been reasonably successful as a result. But that is due mainly to the fact that my life “After Camille” has been blessed. The most important blessing brought Ellen and me together in 1988, for which we are both grateful. I wish that, just for a moment, the two of us could travel back in time, to a point before we had met in real life, “*Before Camille*”, so Ellen and the now-departed members of our extended family could all come together. Granddad and Grandma would have been so proud of Ellen and would have loved her as another, special granddaughter.

In 1989, Ellen and I were married in our adopted hometown of Seattle.

In 2017, the Woodstock festival site became listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



The Author invites Readers of this narrative  
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