

# HURRICANE

# HUGO



By DAVID SUROWIECKI  
Photography Editor  
and TONY DEIFELL  
Guest Writer

CHARLESTON, S.C.— Hurricane Hugo — the chance of a lifetime for two unpaid National Geographic photojournalist wannabes. At 2 a.m. Friday, an eight-hour drive through 60 mph winds and flying branches just didn't seem that appealing — besides, we didn't even have a car.

After about 30 minutes of procrastination and logical reasoning about why we shouldn't drive into the eye of the worst hurricane to hit the East Coast in 50 years, we decided to call each other at 7 a.m. the next day and go from there. Ten minutes later we were on our way to Charleston.

The first problem, the car, was easily solved when Tony merely "borrowed" his car back from the garage where it was being repaired. With the main

obstacle out of the way, we were on the road again — which road, we weren't quite sure, but we knew enough to head south.

Our plan was to head off the hurricane at Wilmington and arrive just as everyone was returning to their homes. Hugo, however, had designs on Charleston and decided to take the direct route to its destination.

Flabbergasted and perturbed, we were forced to alter our plans to con-

form to Hugo's changed flight pattern. We had heard on the radio that Myrtle Beach was being hit hard, so to Myrtle it was.

Unfortunately, the National Guard had other ideas, and despite the fact that we flashed our trusty DTH press pass, we were turned away at the gates of the city. We considered storming the barricades, but eventually decided that our Toyota, which was being blown off the road during the entire trip, just couldn't take the inevitable barrage of gunfire.

Some photojournalists may have thought of packing it in at that point and just going to sleep — we sure did. But about five minutes later, we were on our way to Charleston, our last and only hope.

Hours later, as we finally approached Charleston, our gas and patience levels were dangerously low. Picture this — a ravaged area devoid of electricity, water, telephones and gasoline. A post-nuclear war America? Hardly. It was the post-Hugo South Carolina, and we were running out of gas.

As precious as water in the Sierra, a full tank was the only ticket out of this twilight zone. Should we break into a deserted gas station, steal a siphon and "borrow" some gas? It was our only option until, by the grace of God, we happened upon a flooded fire station. Official people, powerful people, they must know something — they didn't.

Hank Williamson, a temporary paramedic from England, knew something about the rise and fall of the British Army, but the research he had been doing for two years for a book was washed away amidst the deluge of Hurricane Hugo. All of his notes, memories and invaluable books floated down Highway 17 in his Volkswagen van, along with the area's ambulance and two police cars.

The highway was covered with more than stray automobiles. Trees, electrical poles, boats and family homes were like obstacles in a pinball machine. But this game was real. No extra pinballs. No 100 point bonuses.

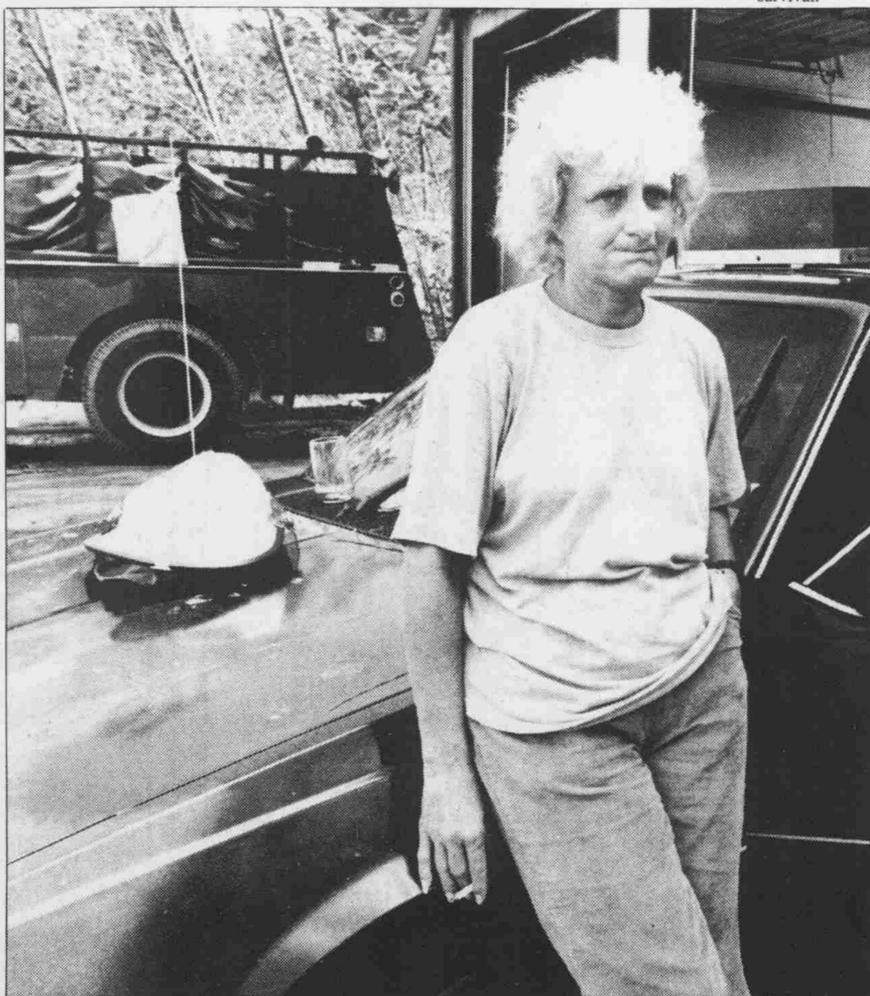
At about 10 a.m. and 20 miles north of Charleston, we were traveling through a part of South Carolina that just doesn't make it on postcards. We were seeing people who had just had their entire lives blown away by six hours of wind and rain.

Born and raised to the age of 76 on the same 50-yard plot of land, Harper McNeil (middle right) represents just one of the many untold stories of misfortune. Returning to the trailer home, which he shared with his wife before her death this past April, he tries to salvage pictures, memories or anything from the remains of Hugo. Harper was quiet and morose, still in shock from the devastating blow dealt him by the hurricane.

Tales of fear and horror concerning Hugo permeate the city, but 5-year-old Joseph Harder (bottom left) seemed strangely above it all. "I ain't afraid of nothing," he says, as if he had experienced worse in his short lifetime.

These people who have lost everything were surprisingly unemotional, perhaps even numbed by the suddenness of the disaster. Many placed their future in the hands of God, with a desperate reach for a supernatural foothold, for any glimpse of hope, of rationale.

Later in the evening, following an afternoon of heart-wrenching stories from nearly every individual we happened upon, we left what remained of Charleston in the background and began the trek back to our unaffected world of Chapel Hill, far away from a world where destruction and poverty were force fed by nature, and a population of seemingly civilized Americans regressed to the most basic nature of survival.



**Top left** — A boarded-up window on the Charleston coast warns of the impending doom. Photo by David Surowiecki

**Top right** — Destruction runs rampant in the towns surrounding Charleston. This church's roof was snapped like matchsticks in the 135 mph winds of the hurricane. Photo by Tony Deifell

**Middle left** — Daily chores must go on despite the effects of the hurricane. Janet Royal of Charleston hangs out clothes drenched by the torrential rains to dry in the midday sun of the calm following the storm. Photo by Tony Deifell

**Middle right** — Harper McNeil, 76, stares in disbelief at the remains of his mobile home along Highway 17. Photo by David Surowiecki

**Bottom left** — The hurricane provided Joseph Harder, 5, with a great opportunity to collect rubber bands and magic markers from a smashed office supplies store. Looting of a much more serious nature, however, was a major problem in the city. Photo by Tony Deifell

**Bottom right** — A home and a new car are the victims of Hugo for Kathryn Jones, a volunteer firefighter in McClellenville, S.C., who has difficulty accepting the changes the hurricane wrought. Photo by David Surowiecki