

Chief of Police Scott Burroughs
Narrator

Nicole L. Boudreau
Interviewer

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Corpus Christi, Texas

NB: My name is Nicole Boudreau and today is November 21, 2017. I am at the Bell Library at A&M Corpus, conducting an interview. Can you give me your name for the record?

SB: My name is Scott Burroughs, I'm the Chief of Police with the city of Port Aransas, Texas.

NB: Thank you, sir. Can you tell me a little about yourself?

SB: Well, I'm 58 years old, married, I'm a 1981 graduate of the University of Texas. I did 26 years of law enforcement in Austin and retired in 2009 and came to work for the City of Port Aransas as a Police Chief at that time.

NB: Okay, that was awhile back. Good deal. As far as Hurricane Harvey, did you and your family stay, or did you evacuate?

SB: We evacuated. The island, the city of Port Aransas was under a mandatory evacuation and as the Police Chief I'm obligated to follow the laws, and it worked out well, and we had a family evacuation plan already in place and my wife evacuated up to Georgetown and then I evacuated with the police department.

NB: Is there a process for the police department evacuation?

SB: Well, we practice these things, we drill them, we do tabletop exercises, we write plans, and most everything we do is based on what we call "battle rhythm," kind of a 120-hour period of preparation and checklists and what happened in this particular case is that Thursday before the storm, I think it was the 24th or the 25th, the 24th. At four o'clock in the morning it was predicted to be a tropical storm and then at ten o'clock we got the news that it had been upgraded to a Cat three hurricane, so we lost the first hundred hours, basically, of our 120-hour plan. So things got hectic and we couldn't dot the "i"'s and cross the "t"'s. so we tried to get the major things.

NB: You have to adapt, I guess. Have you personally ever been through a hurricane before, or professionally?

SB: Not through the actual hurricane, in 2005 I led a group of about thirty deputies, the Travis County Sheriff's office. We went into Cameron Parish, Louisiana on the heels of Hurricane Rita and we were, about twenty to thirty hours after landfall, we arrived in town so we were right on the heels of it, so I had some experience with dealing with that. I've worked other natural disasters, we worked ice storms and floods and tornadoes and those type of events up there, but nothing to this extent.

NB: Yeah, we don't get ice storms here, so one less thing to worry about, right? You told me about police mandatory evacuation procedures; were there any hiccups with the city of Port Aransas evacuating?

SB: As far as the civilians went, we couldn't have drawn it up any better, and I think one of the reasons for our success is that we do a lot of preplanning, we have annual meetings with the citizens, we do a town hall every year dealing specifically with hurricane preparations. I write a weekly column for the local newspaper and I emphasize a lot of, during the hurricane season and leading up to it, a lot of dos and don'ts and kind of lay out plans and try to give people food for thought on how to deal with it, so we didn't really go into this cold and even though we hadn't had a hurricane in Port Aransas since 1970...

NB: Celia, yeah.

SB: Yeah, it went very well. I think part of it was the fact that Port Aransas was the only area that was under a mandatory evacuation, so we didn't have the traffic issues that we would've had if North Padre or the city of Corpus had, but the judges or the mayor issued the order about noon on Thursday and he had asked that everybody be out of town by nine o'clock and by nine o'clock I would say well over seventy percent of our population had evacuated, and we didn't have any other traffic issues. One of the things that we planned for in the event of emergency evacuation was or is, because we are a tourist destination and for a lot of second homes there, is a big influx of traffic coming from San Antonio and Austin and Houston for people to come pick up their boats and RVs, but because we were such a compressed timeline nobody had time to prepare for it and we didn't have that influx that we expected.

NB: All that lost time, oh my goodness.

SB: Yeah, so it was a curse and a blessing both.

NB: Yeah, I mean it's good to get out but, that damage. I understand. Boats are expensive! The level of damage after the hurricane: how would you describe it?

SB: I don't know how to put it into words. I've been a police officer for going on thirty-five years. I've seen a lot of traumatic events, I've been following the heels hours after tornadoes and with major floods and the previous hurricane experience in Cameron, but none of that prepared me for what we came into and it was almost surreal as we came into town, and I think that the

human body kind of has a self-defense mechanism. I remember coming into town and thinking “Well, this isn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be,” initially, and I think I was kind of prepared for where everything was levelled out and as I go through town most of the buildings were still standing, there were a lot of downed power lines, water was still, particularly on some of the finger streets, the side streets, water was still three or four feet deep in some areas. The mobile homes and stuff were on their side, but for the most part it didn’t look all that bad, but every time I’d go through town it kept getting worse and worse and worse. It’s not that anything *happened* after the initial, I just didn’t see it the first time. Like the Holiday Inn, I think I drove by the Holiday Inn three times or four times before I realized the whole north side of the building was gone. I thought the first time I went there, “at least we’ve got a place for responders to come to,” because the hotel is standing, and it wasn’t. Some of the damage, some things were occurring even after we got there because, you know, we’re on a sandbar, we’re on an island that was saturated, and I went into one subdivision, Island Morning subdivision, and the water was about two and a half or three feet deep at the time that we were going back in and doing some of the initial search and rescue operations. We got in just fine and as we were coming out, the road that we had come in was blocked with a palm tree that had fallen after we had gone in, so there were still some trees coming down and some damage that was occurring afterwards. I don’t think you can put it into words, unless you experienced it yourself; even the pictures don’t do it justice, I mean, I’ve got a photograph of a roof shingle that stuck into the concrete wall of the police station. There’s trees that are twisted or broken off halfway up, there are buildings where you’d think tornadoes had come through where the first floors were intact, and this in the flood area, where the first floors were intact and the second floors are missing, completely taken off. We had fifty-something boats that were sunk in the harbor, there were boats scattered on the highway in neighborhoods and in front yards, and I’m not talking little John boats, I’m talking thirty- and forty-foot Bay boats that are tossed around like cord wood, so it’s hard to put into words. I know there’s good documentation, a lot of photographs and videotape and our officers, one of the last things we did before we evacuated is, our vehicles are all equipped with the dash cameras and we had our officers go down every street in town immediately after and then as we came back in we sent a couple of them to go and try to get where they could get, there were a lot of areas we couldn’t get into, but the areas they could, so we have some documentation, we did some drone flights and over flights within about twenty-four hours so there’s some good video out there, but it doesn’t reflect like being there in person.

NB: Right, nothing will do it justice, understandable. The police department...how did you respond to damages, people affected? Were y’all out there in the field directly after?

SB: Yeah, we evacuated to the mall and rode the storm out. The eye passed around three-thirty, four o’clock, and I lived in the city of Port Aransas and I got a couple officers that live in there, so we put together two-man cars, myself and the lieutenant in the lead car and then two officers that live in the city of Port Aransas to kind of go do a scouting mission about four o’clock in the morning. We came out, it was still hurricane conditions as we came out and we went down S.P.I.D. and was pleasantly surprised that there were still lights on, on North Padre and, you know, once we crossed the J.F.K. causeway we started seeing some damage, and on the

causeway itself there were some seaweed up in the rails and stuff, most of the lights were still on, there were no light poles lying across the highway or anything that we were kind of prepared for, and as we got up to the island road Highway 361, a convenience store on the corner was pretty heavily damaged but it was mostly the gas awnings and the signs out front, the building itself appeared to be intact and there were scattered lights on in North Padre so we thought, we felt pretty good about it. We turned onto 361 and started heading from S.P.I.D. towards Port Aransas, sort of going north, and the water on the road, once we crossed Packery Channel, the water on the road was probably two to three feet deep and the rain was still blowing at us horizontal, it was heavy rain but it was behind us, so we weren't having the rain pound the windshield, it was coming from the back of the vehicles. There had been a lot of road work that had recently been completed and so there were reflectors on the highway, on the center stripe, so we have spotlights on our police cars and we used those spotlights, we shined them down through the water onto those reflectors and we followed those reflectors down the highway because we couldn't see the road because it was dark and rainy, and our biggest concern was the road being washed out from under us. The first building we passed was about where the Island of the Son Methodist Church, and the roof was off of that building, and that was the first major damage we had seen and as we had gotten just north of the Island of the Son, then we started finding power poles that were down on the side of the road. There were a lot of, kind of the weirder things that stick out in your mind, there were a lot of pelicans that were on the side of the road that apparently had been blinded by the driving salt water and they were, they looked like they were drunk, they were in shock and just kind of staggering around, and when I say a lot, I'm talking *hundreds* on both sides of the road. We continued to follow those reflectors into Port Aransas and we got up to about where the Mayan Princess condominiums are, probably three or four miles off of S.P.I.D. and we encountered a debris field across the roadway. Being a beach community, all of our police cars are four-wheel drive, and the debris field wasn't very high, it was maybe two or three feet high, and we thought we could get up over the top of it if we needed to, but we didn't know what was underneath it. We didn't know if there was a road underneath it or not, or if it had been washed out, and we made the decision to turn around; we didn't have radio communications at that point, we didn't have phone communications, so we decided to turn around and call for some heavy equipment to come move the debris. What set us back a couple of hours on our response, because we had to get some front-end loaders in there, and that gave us time to go back to the mall and gather our troops and get all of our vehicles packed up and get them in there, so we met back on the highway and the front-end loaders, they pushed that debris field out. After that, we were able to get into town, into Port A unimpeded, and the further north we got, the more damage we saw, you know, with the condos and things along the road, and then we hit Port Aransas and the first condos there were La Mirages, kind of on the far south end of town and they were intact, and we went into town and there's Gulf Waters RV park, and the park was heavily damaged but it was still intact, so we're thinking "this is bad, but maybe not as bad as it could be." Then we got to Pioneer, and Pioneer was one hundred percent lost. Every trailer that was behind was rolled over and upside down, and we broke off, we had two-officer elements, two officers per vehicle, and we broke off two vehicles there and had them go do search and rescue operations into Pioneer, and the rest of us went into town. I live right off of access road 1A, so I took a detour to go check my property as the rest of the troops went into, our

rallying point was at the City Hall community center, our civic center there on Avenue A, so I took a quick detour and checked on my personal property, then we met up with everybody at the City Hall and as we were getting there we were starting to get support elements coming from Task Force One, which is the National Guard search and rescue unit and they have heavy amphibious trucks and a lot of support from highway patrol, from DPS, and we laid out some maps of the city and gridded it out for search and rescue operations, and we spent the rest of the day Saturday doing search and rescue. Fortunately, we didn't find any fatalities. We did evacuate about forty people that stayed behind that we encountered along the way that we brought back and arranged for evacuation, but knock on wood, we were fortunate we didn't come across any fatalities that first day.

NB: With that level of damage, that's great. As far as housing and supplies for all of the residents that were displaced, what were the procedures for that? Was that something the PD was involved in?

SB: We were, I mean, everybody's involved with everything, and part of being in a small town is everybody kind of steps up and helps their neighbors. One of the reasons we were successful in such a speedy recovery is that everybody did what they were supposed to do, and then a little bit more. One of the big issues we ran into was donations and people wanting to bring things in; there's not a building in Port Aransas that's not affected by the hurricane, and there's a small percentage that were slightly affected, but most of them are heavily damaged. We just didn't have any place to *put* supplies, and people kept wanting to donate clothing and bedding and things for the kids, and we didn't have any place to put it, so we set up a distribution center at the city park, and we limited donations to water, basically water, tarps, and then the third or fourth day once we started letting outsiders come into town, there were a number of groups that came in and set up kind of makeshift kitchens in the parking lots and some of the other places around town and fed a lot of people, but we didn't do any, the city didn't get involved in donation management, other than life necessity needs, at all just because there wasn't any place to store it and we didn't have the resources to distribute it, but there were some churches and some other groups that came in from the outside that helped a lot with that.

NB: That's great. It's nice to see everyone come together in places like that. Were there any specific groups, organizations, people that helped with recovery, assisting families in need?

SB: There were a lot of different groups there. As far as on the national level, the Salvation Army was good about feeding people and bringing us supplies. I hate to, well, I don't hate to, but I was real disappointed in the response of the Red Cross. Every time there is a major crisis, they solicit funds and donations and go on this nationwide campaign, "we're going to be there to help," and they weren't. They had a real small group of people that set up a food trailer and they had a couple manning some small trucks eventually, you know, weeks down there, but one of the biggest disappointments was they came in and they broadcast loudly and broadly that they were going to give a \$400 stipend to the residents there to help them get reestablished after the hurricane, and then they had, not entirely their fault, but their computer system was kind of a

beta test one, and it got overwhelmed the first day, not from people from Port Aransas, but people from Michigan and Ohio and New York and California that were trying to scam the system, and then the people of Port Aransas, out of the thousands of homes that were damaged there, their rejection rate...their system wasn't set up to deal with, like a mobile home park that has a single street address, and so the first person that applied got accepted, and then everybody else that lived in that mobile home park, it said it was a duplicate address, and they brought a level of hope and then they shot people down, or weren't able to deliver, and it hurt peoples' feelings. So that was disappointing; it would've been fine if they'd just showed up and done it, but they advertise it so much and got everybody's hopes up. We had several big churches that came from the Austin area, from San Antonio, from Houston, actually from all over the country, We had people showing up and volunteer time on a professional level, the Jourdanton Police Department out of San Antonio sent down officers to help us out, the Hays County Sheriff's office from the Austin area sent a bunch of officers in, the Atacosa County Sheriff's office sent in a small contingency but they're a small department, so they sent in, and we had help from a number of volunteer fire departments from Alice and professional departments from Fort Worth and Corpus Christi and of course the local, the Corpus Christi Police Department was real helpful, the highway patrol state police were real helpful with the initial responses also.

NB: Well, that's great. Sorry about the Red Cross, that's disappointing, but people need to know. Did you or anybody you know witness anything that stood out or seemed to be inspiring or specifically kind?

SB: Yeah, the amount of support, just as the community coming together as a whole was amazing. You know, having been a responder to other disasters, it's much different when it affects you personally. You can always separate the professional and personal when you're going in to Cameron Parish or Bastrop, Texas where we would go in and do a job. I didn't know everybody that was affected, but everybody I knew was affected, so the first weeks, lots of tears, lots of hugs, and trying to keep that emotional separation from the professional obligations was a challenge. On the individual level I can think, there's a subdivision called Channel Vista on the backside of the island, it's kind of where most of the locals live, and there was a retired military veteran there, he was probably seventy-five, eighty-five years old, and the whole subdivision came together and helped him out, and throughout town there were similar situations where people initially went to assess the damage to their own houses and they'd do what they can at their house, and when there was nothing more they could do they went to help their neighbors, so the two of them would get that neighbor's house squared away and then the four of them would go someplace else, and the response grew exponentially before the people that didn't live in town started showing up. It was just a real positive experience. You know, we had a few knuckleheads we had to deal with, it's always that way, that's why cops stay employed, but for the most part, you know, the people that live in Port Aransas were cooperative and helpful for the law enforcement response, they kind of policed their own neighborhoods. We didn't have phone or radio communications and so we stationed police cars in as many subdivisions as we could and asked people if they needed police response, to find a cop, and they let them call in because we could do car-to-car radio, but if they dial 911 nothing would happen, so they had to do that. Just

the outpouring...just yesterday, the police department from the Converse Judson I.S.D., the Judson police chief was down here and brought Thanksgiving baskets for all of our cops, so just little things. They bought boots for our guys because the first day or two we were sludging through sludge and mud and broken boards and broken nails, and our boots were all strutted and just nasty, and there's no water to clean them up with, and the Jourdanton police department brought down boots for everybody, and I've got one officer that wears a 16EEE, so it wasn't like they could walk over to Wal-Mart and buy a bunch of boots and help people out. [laughs] So it was real helpful. The local doctor came over and set up a free clinic over at the civic center where we were housed and anybody that needed anything, they came in and there was no insurance, you've got an insurance card, no co-pays, it was just "what do you need?" I think between them and EMS, they did probably 1,500 or more tetanus shots for people in town, so as far as the man helping man, the humanist side of it, you couldn't ask for a better experience.

NB: Fantastic, the answer I was hoping for! Good! As far as recovering, how far along would you say, I mean, it's been almost three months...

SB: It's hard to say. I keep thinking that the formal recovery operation where we're actually in a recovery mode, where we're thinking about recovery and stuff, we're probably another six or eight months in that, but we're three to five years away from the city being built back to like it was. My wife always says that the hurricane continues to revel itself, that we find things now that we didn't see months ago, and people are finally having their houses demoed, they've got the sheet rock out, they've got the roofs off, they're getting down to it and finding structural damage that they didn't know existed, some of the older homes because of current codes, if they rebuild the houses, if there's more than fifty-one percent that has to be rebuilt, then they have to be built to current codes. There are people that don't have adequate insurance to do that. We're finding people that were cheating the system a little bit over the years, like the house belonged to their grandparents, and their grandparents had an "Over 65" exemption and when the house got passed down they never changed the tax exemption back, so they're trying to collect insurance and the insurance company is saying "it's in your grandparents' name, we need them to sign off," "Well, they've been dead for twenty years," "Yeah, so how do we get this done?" "Get the house changed over in your name." To do that, they're going to have to go back and pay twenty years of back taxes that they didn't pay, so we're losing people that may want to be there but can't afford to be there. We have restaurants that are trying to open and there's no work force, so the owners are cooking and busing tables, and there's a lot of little things that you don't think about. The city's trying to put together a program to help people whose homes need to be demolished, but they can't afford to demolish them, and trying to get that, a lot of out debris removal is being partially, ninety percent funded by FEMA, but we need to get permission from them to say "hey, is it okay with y'all if the city comes in and bulldozes these houses and pushes the debris and y'all haul the debris off, and trying to jump through those bureaucratic hoops because technically we're not supposed to, the government's not supposed to be involved in these type of operations. I think it'll work out, but it just takes timer. We have thirty-five people waiting that we know of so far that are waiting to have their houses demolished, and before they can even start there's hang-ups with insurance, there's hang-ups with the banks. Personally, we

received an initial insurance check on October 15th, and our house is mortgaged, we have to pay our monthly fees, and so we have to endorse the check to the mortgage company, the lienholder is also on the check. They didn't release the check for thirty days after, so we have thirty days where we have contractors lined up and we can't do anything because the mortgage company's sitting on the check while the insurance company's paid off, so there's a lot of little hiccups. The first week we got back we thought our house was intact, and then the floor started bubbling and we started seeing the tape from the sheetrock sort of peeling and stuff, and now we're down to studs. That's happening we think we got it all, and then something else happens, and so it's going to be a long process. I worry that the Port Aransas is going to change, it's always been this sort of eclectic, old hippy place, you know, laid-back lifestyle, and we know that the culture has been changing for the last several years, there's big money coming in, Cinnamon Shores and Palmilla, and some of these places, but I think this is just going to open the floodgates and it's going to be a lot more like Key West than Port Aransas in five or ten years because the opportunities there, the Texas economy's strong, investments are here, we've been discovered, people know about us, and I think that funky Port Aransas chic is going to give way to more of a Key West lifestyle. But there'll always be pockets, and it's not the architecture that makes our town, it's the people. As long as we can hang on to that, even if it's not the same people but at least the same attitude, then we'll be okay

NB: Y'all are doing a good job of hanging onto that attitude.

SB: Well, we're trying! Like I said, it's going to be a long process.

NB: It's getting there, and that's good. Was there anything else that you wanted to add?

SB: I appreciate y'all documenting this, I think this is a historical event and we haven't lost perspective of that and good Lord willing I'll continue to be the police chief there for the next several years, so if you got students or people that are doing research and want some more in depth or want to come and visit with me, we've always got a pot of coffee on and we're pretty easy to find, and come on over and we'll sit down and go through details or answer any unanswered questions that we can. [laughs]

NB: Absolutely. I mean, when it's in the news, it fades after a few weeks and people seem to just forget about it, but y'all haven't, so it does need to be documented.

SB: The Judson police chief was teasing me yesterday when she came in because when the storm first hit we were just overwhelmed with everybody in town or in the state wanting to come and help, and I told her, because she volunteered early on and we already had quite a few responses there, and I said we're okay right now, but in three or four months when we're not on the headlines and people get on with their lives, then we're just going to be old news, that's when we're going to need the help. She remembered that and she checks in about every three or four weeks, and I've got other police chiefs from around the state that I've told that to and they've

been really good about touching base and I think part of it helps that it's Port Aransas, and it's the place that so many people go from all over the state. It's kind of a Texas hidden gem.

NB: It is! The beaches are better than all other places...

SB: I think that gives us an advantage over Taft or Ingleside or some of these other communities that are hit hard but they don't have that connection outside of the coastal bend that we're fortunate to have. Us and Rockport are probably the two places that everybody comes to that don't go to South Padre or Galveston.

NB: Exactly. When you know about it, that's where you go. Excellent point. Well, we do appreciate you agreeing to interview. This will be on our records, so anyone who wants to research it will be able to, and you will get a copy December 9th, I believe.