

## An Imperfect Storm

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The only thing “perfect” about Tropical Storm Sandy, the wet and windy scourge of November 2012, was the precision with which it was predicted. Imagine the scope of its damage had the warnings been less reliable. As it was, we had roughly a week to prepare.

What was it like before weather satellites kept watch over us? One has only to dip into the holdings of the Greenwich Library Oral History Project to discover one example. In 1975 Barbara Ornstein conducted a very descriptive interview with Paul Pierson Palmer on his experiences during the storm that later became known as the Hurricane of 1938. At the time of the massive storm, both Paul and Barbara lived in the Willowmere section of Riverside.

From the start of the interview, it is clear how times have changed. At noon the students, unbelievably, were left to find their own way home during what would turn out to be the biggest hurricane to hit the region in years. So it was for Paul and his friend Buster (John Clarke), both fourteen at the time. They arrived safely at Paul’s house to find the cellar flooded, whereupon the two boys immediately began helping Paul’s father pumping and baling. All proceeded smoothly until Mr. Palmer went to the Riverside Yacht Club to see about the family schooner. It is then that the story takes an ominous turn.

After a period of torrential rain and heavy winds, the eye of the storm passed over the area creating a period of calm the boys mistook for “all’s clear.” As boys will do, they took off exploring, and at the end of the street, looking out over Greenwich Cove, they saw a boat aground off Great Captain Island. Wanting to get a closer look, they walked along the top of a wall enabling them to cross over to “Quigley Island,” what was then property owned by Martin Quigley. Later, when the tide came in, water rose to the top of the wall they had climbed earlier. At that time Mr. Arnold Pitcher stuck his head out the window of his house on Willowmere Circle, calling the boys into safety, an offer Paul accepted but which Buster turned down, preferring instead to try to make it home. The rising water and intensifying current, however, threatened to sweep Buster away when a wave came up and pushed him over the wall. Luckily, he was able to grab and hold onto a nearby telephone pole.

Paul started out to rescue his friend, but the rising water soon flooded the house, and poor Buster was left hanging, literally, when Paul began to help Mr. Pitcher instead. Only Buster’s “hollering out there,” as Paul put it, caused him to jump into action to save his friend. He ran outside to see Buster spread-eagled but still hanging on. Somehow Paul found a barrel, tied a line to it, and threw it out into the current where it floated to Buster who grabbed it as Paul and Mr. Pitcher pulled him to safety.

All three came into the house to see what must have been a surreal scene: the dining room table adorned with lit candles floating around the room. Mrs. Pitcher had just finished preparations for dinner when the rising tide flooded the house.

Looking back, knowing he had lived through a treacherous hurricane, Paul describes how quickly the water rose, estimating it to have been around four feet in the house.

Paul, Buster, and Mr. and Mrs. Pitcher were all rescued by climbing out the kitchen window and into a rowboat manned by a neighbor. On higher ground, Paul made it home where, without a way to stay in touch, his mother was frantic. As it was, his father was stranded on the schooner until the next day.

Everyone made it that night, even Buster survived, but Paul adds sadly that Buster was later to die in WWII in a Navy Air Force night training flight.

As for Paul, he continued to be friends with Mr. Pitcher, who must have thought a great deal of him because when it came time to sell his house on Willowmere Circle, he would sell only to Paul, who, after he moved in, made all the alternations necessary to keep the house of his dreams warm, cozy, and dry.

This Interview, The 1938 Hurricane in Willowmere, is available through the Greenwich Library Oral History Project holdings located on the first floor of the Greenwich library.