



During fatal storm rescue, bravery in the ‘fog of war’

By HENRY ROME
SENIOR WRITER

Published: Monday, October 17th, 2011

“Driver, if you are in the vehicle, honk the horn!”

Sgt. Geoff Maurer was the first Princeton Township police officer to arrive at a flooded Rosedale Road in Princeton, just minutes from the University campus. Down the street in front of him, submerged in rushing flood waters, sat a dark colored sedan. It was 4:37 a.m. on Aug. 28, in the middle of Hurricane Irene.

Maurer and three other officers who arrived on the scene tried with flashlights to figure out if anyone was in the car. He then called out to the car using his cruiser’s PA system, asking anyone inside to honk the horn or flash the brake lights.

The brake lights flashed a few minutes later. Maurer asked other officers if they saw the lights flash; they did.

Minutes before rescuers were about to enter the water, police were told that a New York woman reported she had abandoned her gray Volvo earlier in the evening on the same part of Rosedale Road. But officers weren’t positive that this was the same car.

Two volunteer rescuers from the Princeton First Aid and Rescue Squad — Michael Kenwood and Peter Simon GS ’01 — were directed to get closer to the car to see if it was occupied. At 5:01 a.m., the rescuers, tied together and wearing life vests, slowly shuffled into the

water.

In seconds, the rescue attempt took a tragic turn.

Kenwood and Simon were swept downstream and became stuck in trees. Because of the rain, dark and brush, Simon and other rescuers on shore lost sight of Kenwood. Then, suddenly, officers saw a yellow life vest — which they realized was Kenwood — being sucked downstream.

Maurer's voice crackled over the police radio: "[He's] face down in the water!" Maurer shouted. "Face down in the water!"

Kenwood, 39, was in the water for about five minutes and later died from his injuries. Simon was unharmed. The car was empty.

Two months after the fatal rescue attempt, dozens of pages of police and ambulance records combined with 20 minutes of police dispatch recordings reveal previously unreleased details about what happened that morning.

Most notably, the documents illustrate confusion and uncertainty at the scene — whether the Volvo was occupied, the decision to enter the water, the rescuers' attempts to battle strong currents and the desperate attempts to save Kenwood's life — that soldiers often call the "fog of war."

The documents — including maps, incident logs and firsthand accounts of four police officers and three EMTs who were on the scene — were released on Friday to The Daily Princetonian under the Open Public Records Act.

Kenwood, who officially died due to acute asphyxia due to drowning,

according to materials released to the media, was the only rescue worker killed in the United States during the hurricane. He is survived by his wife and three-year-old daughter.

The abandoned car

About 10 miles north of Princeton, in Belle Mead, N.J., a couple from New York was visiting their in-laws. Around 3:30 a.m. on Aug. 28, the family decided they had to evacuate the flooding home. Traveling in two separate cars, the couple and their in-laws decided to drive to Lawrenceville. The couple drove a gray Volvo.

Instead of reaching Lawrenceville, the two cars were detoured onto Rosedale Road. There were no barricades on the street, the family later told police, so the drivers decided to continue.

However, the road had been declared flooded and Princeton Township Public Works reported installing barricades to block off the road. Township police Det. Ben Gering later wrote that he found “no evidence that barricades were still in place” when the Volvo drove by, raising the possibility that they had been swept away or removed.

As the New York couple began driving down Rosedale Road, they encountered low standing water. Deeper water was ahead, so they decided to back out. But the car stalled, and the couple was forced to climb out the sunroof.

They traveled in their in-laws’ car to the Nassau Inn. They arrived there at around 4:30 a.m. and notified Princeton Borough police officers about the abandoned car.

‘Overtaken by water’

At 4:31 a.m., a member of the Princeton Sewer Operating Committee who was near Rosedale Road noticed a car — later identified as the gray Volvo — in the water near an overflowing Stony Brook Creek. The man called Princeton Township police dispatch. The call faded in and out, but the caller’s message was clear: The car was “overtaken by water,” but the caller was unsure if there was anyone inside.

Four police officers responded immediately and were able to get within 275 feet of the car. PFARS rescue units were also dispatched. A fifth officer tried to drive around to the other side of Rosedale Road to get a better vantage point but was stopped by flooded roads.

The tail reverse lights of the car were on, but due to poor lighting and the storm officers couldn’t determine if there was anyone inside. The flashing brake lights — possibly caused by a shorting out of the electrical system — only added to the uncertainty.

At 4:47 a.m., Borough police Det. Thomas Lagomarsino notified Borough police dispatch to report the abandoned Volvo after speaking with the owners. The information was immediately passed on to officers on scene.

The dispatcher asked: “OK, what kind of car is it? Because the squad is about to launch a boat to see if anyone is inside it.”

Lagomarsino transmitted the license plate. He added, “And the car is empty. Everyone was able to get out of it.”

When Township officers on scene were notified about the abandoned Volvo, there was momentary confusion between dispatchers and officers: There were two cars, in addition to the Volvo, on the street,

but officers quickly judged that those other two cars were empty and out of danger.

The situation became more complicated when an additional car arrived on the other side of the street. This new car was shining its headlights, and officers didn't know if anyone was inside. They soon learned it was the personal car of a PFARS member.

The only car in question now was the Volvo, and officers sought to determine whether this car was the same one that was abandoned. The PFARS member on the other side of the street said he didn't see anyone inside.

Officers were told that the license plate of the abandoned car was New York EFN2182. Looking through his binoculars, Maurer thought he could see "2182" and the blue stripe of a New York plate. But because the plate was obscured by the water, he wasn't sure, and neither were other emergency personnel.

"It appears that that vehicle is the same vehicle the Borough reported," Lt. Robert Toole told the dispatcher. "We're unable to 100 percent confirm that. The water rescue team is going to go out and try to confirm that."

The next radio transmission, three minutes and four seconds later, reported that the rescuers had been swept off their feet. They were stuck in the trees.

'Added risk'

Kenwood and Simon, already dressed in dry suits and personal floatation devices, arrived on Rosedale Road at 4:55 a.m. along with other PFARS rescuers. The pair immediately prepared an inflatable

raft called a “banana boat” and put on their helmets.

Looking out at the vehicle, Simon noticed that the water had risen about a foot, just enough to cover part of the vehicle’s license plate. EMS Capt. Nate Plough ’11, in command of the squad at the time, made the decision that the rescuers should get a closer look.

Kenwood and Simon hooked a retrieval line onto their life vests, with Kenwood at the end and Simon several feet from the end. They were attached with breakaway rings so they could break off the line in case of trouble. They also decided to abandon the banana boat, in favor of wading in themselves.

Kenwood and Simon stood in the center of the roadway and began shuffling slowly toward the car. The water level had risen to the base of the car’s windows, and white water crested over the roof. Police officers, EMTs and firefighters held onto the other end of the rope.

But as the pair got about halfway to the vehicle — roughly 150 feet — Simon decided to call off the mission.

“Although we could proceed further, we would not likely get close enough to the vehicle to complete our task” because the depth and flow of the water was increasing, Simon wrote in an account of the incident.

“The added risk,” he wrote, “was not warranted.”

The pair began to retrace their footsteps, with water settling at just their mid-shin. But about five steps after they started walking back, Kenwood fell. Simon tried to keep walking, but he began being dragged downstream. He tried to brace himself on a curb. Simon then lost his footing too.

Kenwood and Simon were swept along about 30 feet by the water when they became caught in a tree. Simon lost sight of Kenwood, so he called out to him. There was no response.

‘We need the boat!’

At this point, officers on shore had lost sight of Kenwood too. Officers tried to pull the rescuers in but were not able to. Simon, concerned that Kenwood had been trapped underwater, pulled out his knife and cut Kenwood free. Simon estimated that two minutes had elapsed since their initial fall. Three more minutes passed before Kenwood was pulled from the water.

Back on shore, officers saw a yellow life vest being swept downstream. The life vest traveled about 175 feet in the water before it was caught on debris. Officers and EMTs ran toward the yellow vest. As officers got closer, they realized it was one of the rescuers. He was about 30 feet away.

Cpl. Marla Montague shouted into the radio, “Face down in the water! We need the boat over here, boat over here!”

Maurer tried to wade into the water, but Toole ordered him back. It was too dangerous. Officers grabbed a rope and tied it to Plough, who swam into the water, grabbing Kenwood. Attaching the rope to a tree, the officers on shore pulled the two to safety.

Officers found that Kenwood was very pale and had no pulse, and they began performing CPR. Kenwood was transferred to an ambulance. That ambulance broke down on the way to the University Medical Center at Princeton after hitting debris. Kenwood was placed in a second ambulance and taken to the hospital. He was initially

listed in critical condition. He was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit.

By this time, the Volvo had been washed away by the flood waters.

Meanwhile, Simon was still in the water clinging to a tree. Units on shore were in radio contact trying to devise a plan to rescue him. Rescuers ultimately decided to wait for backup. Trenton Department of Fire and Emergency Services and two other departments couldn't respond, but finally rescuers from Rocky Hill, N.J., arrived on scene.

In the meantime, firefighters tried to extend the boom on the Princeton Fire Department's ladder truck to get closer to Simon, but wound up 30 to 40 feet short.

Simon's rescue proved harrowing. A team of rescuers tried twice to get to Simon, but dangerous waters forced them to turn back.

Meanwhile, Simon realized he was in trouble. He felt that the retrieval line — the line that was supposed to rescue him — was beginning to be pulled downstream and he had to break off of the line. He eventually was able to stand up by holding onto a tree. The water level, which had begun at mid-shin, had risen to above his knee.

Rescuers from Rocky Hill, anchored to a nearby telephone poll, finally threw Simon a rescue line and he could climb to safety.

Rescued from the water, Simon headed to UMCP. Simon spent that morning at the hospital with Kenwood's family, and was alongside Kenwood when he died that evening.

The next day, on the crackling radio that first dispatched Kenwood to the submerged car on Rosedale Road, a Mercer County 911 dispatcher

announced the news: “Michael selflessly gave of himself that early morning so others may live. May Michael rest in peace with the rest of our nation’s fallen heroes.”