

The U.S. Coast Guard & Hurricane Katrina

**By Scott Price, Sr.
Deputy U.S. Coast Guard Historian**



I hope our people really understand just how significant it is what they've done because this is not a once in a career event. This is not even a once in a lifetime event. This is a once in the services' lifetime event. . . Whenever they close the books on the Coast Guard there may be half a dozen things. . . in that entire four or five or six hundred year period that would go down as 'major events' and this is going to be one of them.

Captain Joe Castillo, USCG

We had over 5,000 Coast Guard people serve here. At peak we had 3,400 on one day. That's over ten percent of the U.S. Coast Guard that served in Katrina. Forty percent of the Coast Guard helicopters were here. Every Coast Guard air station from Barbers Point to Kodiak to Cape Cod provided relief air crews, and on and on. This is a defining moment, from my view, for the United States Coast Guard. I've said for a number of years now that the Marines are making combat veterans in Fallujah and Ramadi and Anbar Providence, and it's painful, it's awful, it's a national treasure that we're losing, but they're a better fighting force, they're a better Marine Corps for having combat veterans in the 21st century that will be with them for a long time. That's what I think this did for the Coast Guard. Ten years from now second class petty officers, lieutenants, you know they're going to be the chiefs and the commanders that are in positions of significant responsibility around our service. They're Katrina veterans. They know how it was done. They know the kind of centralized command, decentralized execution that worked very well here that gave us international acclaim and we'll be a better Coast Guard for that.

Rear Admiral Robert F. Duncan, USCG

"You know a couple words pass between a couple of sailors and the job gets done."

CWO3 Robert Lewald, USCG

KATRINA WILL LIKELY BE RECORDED AS THE WORST NATURAL DISASTER IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES...PRODUCING CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE AND UNTOLD CASUALTIES IN THE NEW ORLEANS AREA AND ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST...AND ADDITIONAL CASUALTIES IN SOUTH FLORIDA. THE EXTENT OF THE PHYSICAL AND HUMAN DEVASTATION FROM THIS HURRICANE CANNOT YET BE ESTIMATED.

National Hurricane Center, 1 September 2005



Nearly one-half of the land mass taken up by the city of New Orleans sits at an average of six feet below sea level. The only reason New Orleans stays dry is that the city is protected by a series of levees. Engineers calculated that these levees could theoretically stand up to a Category 3 hurricane without sustaining damage and they had up until 2005. In fact the New Orleans area had suffered through and survived dangerous hurricanes before, including Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and Hurricane Camille in 1969, both of which caused flooding within the city and large-scale displacement of the local populace but the levees were only topped, never breached. But the storm that came ashore near the city in August 2005 was unlike any previous storm in this region.

The governments' response to this disaster at the local, city, state and federal levels came under intense scrutiny and criticism. Certain government officials were vilified while the nation was transfixed by the carnage wrought by this terrible natural disaster. Nevertheless, during the chaos, fear, and uncertainty of that time there was one shining light, one government agency that received nothing but accolades for its efforts to respond to the devastation: the United States Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard's experience in dealing with natural disasters stretches back through the core history of two of its predecessor agencies, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U. S. Life-Saving Service. One of the first hurricanes they responded to was the infamous storm that came ashore near Galveston, Texas in 1900. Revenue cutters

quickly transported tents, food and medical supplies to the leveled city while the Life-Saving crews managed to save only a few of the inhabitants that survived the storm's fury. The Revenue Cutter Service responded immediately after the 1906 earthquake that destroyed much of San Francisco, sending ashore landing parties to assist local law enforcement, protect federal buildings, and help fight the many fires burning throughout the city's waterfront.



The nearly annual flooding of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers also saw the Life-Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service respond with personnel, rescue craft and supplies, and each service began to build their experience and expertise in dealing with natural disasters and their consequences. After these two federal agencies merged in 1915, creating the Coast Guard, the personnel continued that response tradition. Two later Mississippi River floods generated rescue statistics that boggle the mind. During the 1927 Mississippi River flood Coast Guardsmen "removed from perilous positions to places of safety" a total of 43,853 persons, saved 11,313 head of livestock and transported 72 persons "in need of hospitalization." Ten years later the Coast Guard accumulated statistics that set records still held today. During the 1937 Mississippi River flood 1,848 Coast Guardsmen operating 351 boats and 11 aircraft "rescued from imminent peril" 839 persons and "transported to safety" 67,613 flood victims. Besides saving 1,993 head of livestock the Coast Guardsmen transported Red Cross officials, carried mails, helped restore communications, assisted in preventing looting, and "otherwise extended all aid within its power to be of assistance."

Two years after that historic flood another federal agency joined the Coast Guard -- the U.S. Lighthouse Service. This old federal service, first established in 1789, had a long and distinguished history of guiding mariners at sea to safety. Keepers of the nation's lighthouses saved storm victims themselves and frequently opened up their station's

buildings to provide food and shelter to storm and shipwreck victims. Their humanitarian culture fit perfectly with that of the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard continued to respond to floods and hurricanes during the next seventy years, gaining operational experience with each. The Coast Guard district commands wrote hurricane plans and practiced them annually. The Coast Guard also participated in inter-agency drills on a regular basis and one of these proved to be frighteningly prescient. During July of 2004 emergency officials from parish, state, and federal government agencies, including the Coast Guard, as well as volunteer organizations participated in a five-day exercise held at the State Emergency Operations Center in Baton Rouge in which a fictional hurricane came ashore over New Orleans. Hurricane Pam, as it was called, struck with winds up to 120 mph, 20 inches of rain and a storm surge that topped the levees, destroyed 600,000 buildings, killed 60,000 people and forced the evacuation of one million residents. The Hurricane Pam Exercise pointed out numerous problems such a hurricane would present and gave planners some ideas as to how to improve the government's preparedness. Later that summer Hurricane Ivan made landfall on the U.S. mainland near Gulf Shores, Alabama as a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 130 mph. Both Pam and Ivan gave the Coast Guard additional contemporary experience in responding to hurricanes but the monster that came ashore in August of 2005 was something not seen in the country before. It led to one of the worst natural disasters and one of the largest forced migrations of people in the nation's history.



The commanding officer of the Eighth Coast Guard District, RADM Robert F. Duncan (**left**), one of the critical players in the unfolding drama, discussed his experiences in dealing with hurricanes and in particular how Hurricane Hugo in 1989 impacted him: "I know that we very much took hurricanes seriously. They did, as a cultural thing here in the 8th District I think, but in my case I had been the Group Commander in Charleston, South Carolina when Hurricane Hugo hit and I led

the Coast Guard response. . .that was a formative experience for me. I take hurricanes very seriously. . .We take hurricanes seriously.”

Tropical Storm Katrina

The National Hurricane Center first detected the tropical depression that would become Katrina on Tuesday, 23 August 2005 nearly 175 miles southeast of Nassau, Bahamas and identified it as Tropical Depression Twelve. The next day the tropical depression strengthened to a tropical storm, which meant that it got a name and the next name on the list at that time was “Katrina.” So Tropical Storm Katrina became the eleventh named storm of the year 2005. Katrina then moved through the Bahamas towards the Florida coast. The Center issued a hurricane watch later on the 24th and at 2100 EDT declared a hurricane warning for the area. Early the next morning, 25 August, the Seventh Coast Guard District [D-7] activated its Incident Management Team [IMT]. Liaison officers were assigned to county Emergency Operation Centers to assist in the coordination of relief efforts. The Coast Guard’s ability to coordinate effectively with local, state and federal authorities was a key aspect of the service’s success during all disaster relief efforts in general and most especially during the response to this oncoming hurricane.

Katrina strengthened to a Category 1 hurricane by 1700 EDT on Thursday 25 August and it came ashore at 1830 between Hallandale Beach and North Miami Beach with sustained winds of 80 mph. Heavy rain and the high winds caused some flooding and damage and killed 14 people. D-7 assets conducted four rescues, hoisting nine persons to safety off three vessels in distress and recovered two bodies off another vessel that capsized at Dinner Key. Damage to Coast Guard facilities in the District was relatively minor. The hangar at Air Station Miami lost part of its roof while a 41-foot utility boat was badly damaged by a fallen tree. There were power outages and communication and navigational systems also suffered minor damage but overall the District escaped without serious problems.

On Friday, 26 August, as Katrina made its way into the Gulf of Mexico Air Station Clearwater began a search and rescue [SAR] operation that would last 27 hours. At

0700 that day the air station received a report of an activated Emergency Position Indicating Radiobeacon (EPIRB) from the fishing vessel *Mary Lynn* 85 miles west of Key West, Florida, very near the eye of Katrina. A HH-60 Jayhawk under the command of LCDR Craig Massello made the 210-mile trip to save the three persons on board the sinking fishing vessel in the midst of the hurricane. After being forced to refuel at Key West when the hurricane's winds made the flight last longer than expected, Massello located the *Mary Lynn* in 40-foot seas and put his rescue swimmer, AST3 Kenyon Bolton, in the water off the vessel's stern. During a harrowing thirty minutes that included a brush with a shark, Bolton got the three crewmen safely on board the helicopter. They touched down at Clearwater at 1000 on Saturday morning.

While that rescue occurred there was an afternoon morale party in the Eighth District [D-8] celebrating the 18 August establishment of the "new" Sector New Orleans. Sector New Orleans was formed by combining three of the largest commands in the Coast Guard: Group New Orleans, Marine Safety Office [MSO] New Orleans and MSO Morgan City into a Sector command only 12 days before the hurricane hit. The Sector's commanding officer, CAPT Frank Paskewich, hoped it would give everyone a chance to relax and mingle. But the latest information regarding Katrina showed continuing strength and computer modeling projected its probable course as heading directly towards Louisiana. Katrina "was making a beeline at that point for New Orleans or close to it. . .so from that point on it was ready, set, go" recalled Paskewich. The Sector immediately began implementing their Continuity of Operations Plan. The Captain explained: "Sector New Orleans relocated to Alexandria, while the D-8 command shifted to St. Louis. The D-8 commander, RADM Duncan, decided to stay forward-deployed during the response." In the interim RADM Duncan contacted the governors of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama to inform them of the Coast Guard's capabilities and plans.



Katrina in the Gulf

At 1100 on Saturday, 27 August D-8 stood up its Incident Management Team while CAPT Kevin L. Marshall, the District's Chief of Staff, was sent to Integrated Support Command [ISC] St. Louis to stand up the District's "away" IMT in the Robert A. Young Federal Building. It was up and running by 0800 Sunday morning, 28 August. CAPT

Marshall and his staff planned to stay only a few days before returning to the New Orleans area but ended up staying in St. Louis for over two months. Also that Sunday, Sector New Orleans established their Incident Command Post [ICP] at the Louisiana Hotel and Convention Center in Alexandria, Louisiana and CAPT Paskewich was named as the Incident Commander while CAPT Terry Gilbreath became the Deputy Incident Commander. Atlantic Area stood up their IMT as well on Sunday afternoon. As the hurricane moved closer to landfall in Louisiana, the District's command and control capabilities were safely reconstituted out of harm's way but still close enough to the affected areas to respond quickly. RADM Duncan traveled to Air Station Houston and was prepared to follow closely behind the storm as it moved inland to assess damage and oversee the Coast Guard's response in his District.

CAPT Robert Mueller (**right-center**), the Deputy Sector New Orleans Commander, noted that "we had units scattered all over Southern Louisiana; patrol boats in Texas, because we were afraid if we had one safe haven or two safe havens and they got hit, they could be damaged beyond repair or we'd lose our resources. So we had them scattered." The



head of the District's search and rescue office, CAPT Artie Walsh, described what typically happened with the aviation assets under his purview when a hurricane approached. "Part of the planning was deciding which units went where: ATC typically goes eastbound and for this one they went over to Jacksonville. New Orleans ended up going westbound and it worked out good because we wanted aircraft on both sides of the hurricane-hit area. . . You need the people obviously; backup crews. You need the maintenance and maintenance support. . . The DARTs [Disaster Assistance Response Teams] need to be flown in." Preparations included ordering two D-8 DART teams to the area, one deployed aboard a C-130 from Scott Air Force Base and another to make the trip by vehicle.

The most important part of the pre-hurricane planning was to ensure that Coast Guard units survived the hurricane's impact and be instantly ready to conduct relief and rescue operations. Aircraft went to Air Station Houston and other airports out of harms way but close enough so they could follow the hurricane closely as it moved inland. Boats were moved up the Mississippi River to safe anchorages while personnel made sure family members were evacuated. The Coast Guard closed the Mississippi River from its mouth to Natchez, Mississippi, the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway or ICW, the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port, Inc., referred to as the LOOP, the ports of New Orleans and Morgan City and "all bridges, floodgates and locks" in the vicinity to all traffic on Sunday. Those vessels that were unable to make it out to sea had previously been ordered to find a safe anchorage, double up their lines and ride out the storm. Sector Mobile and Sector New Orleans set Hurricane Condition 1 early Sunday evening.



As preparations within D-8 intensified well before the hurricane came ashore, the Atlantic Area Commander [LANTAREA], VADM Vivien Crea (**left**), directed a surge of reinforcements from all over the country to the district. This included aircraft and flight crews from air stations Atlantic City, Cape Cod, Clearwater, Elizabeth City, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, Barber's Point, Astoria and even Kodiak. To assist Cape Cod in maintaining its complete SAR capabilities the Canadian Coast Guard dispatched two of its helicopters

to the Air Station in a magnanimous gesture on part of the country's northern allies. The Canadians also sent one of their buoy tenders to the Gulf of Mexico to assist in the restoration of aids to navigation [ATON] in the region. Coast Guard Strike Teams were dispatched to the area along with Port Security Units (PSUs), Marine Safety and Security Teams (MSSTs), Disaster Assist Teams (DATs) from three districts, and DARTs from D-9. Incident Management Assist Teams (IMATs) were stood up in Alexandria and Meridian, Mississippi while on the involuntary recall of Reservists was also authorized. Cutters, including *Spencer*, were ordered to the New Orleans area and control of those cutters was transferred from LANTAREA to the district. Requests were also made to U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) for either Navy E2Cs or Air Force AWACs aircraft to assist the Clearwater-based Coast Guard C-130s that provided communications and flight control assistance to the many helicopters that swarmed over New Orleans' skyline once the storm passed.

The two closest air stations to the affected area, Air Station New Orleans and Aviation Training Center (ATC) Mobile, had preparations well in hand. CAPT Bruce Jones (**right**), commanding officer of Air Station New Orleans, described his unit's hurricane preparations: ". . .we elected to stay onboard the unit until the day before Katrina hit; until about 1400 the day before, which is about 18 to 20 hours before landfall to ensure that we could respond to any pre-hurricane SAR, which turned out to be, there wasn't anything to speak



of. So we took off at 1400 on the day before Katrina, went to Lake Charles with three helicopters and I sent my other two to Houston, and I stayed with the first three helicopters in Lake Charles where we spent the night." CAPT David R. Callahan described preparations at his command, ATC Mobile, which played a significant role as a logistics and staging area for the incoming help as well as serving as an active air station during the coming days. He noted that ATC Mobile became the "largest Coast Guard air station" in history with over 40 Coast Guard aircraft operating from his command. He recounted that "it's kind of extraordinary how this place had to change from and morph from a training center into a full blown Coast Guard air station."

CDR Melvin Bouboulis, the Aviation Engineering Division Chief at ATC Mobile was instrumental in keeping the aircraft flying. The staff had prepositioned all of the spare parts they would need to keep a fleet of helicopters flying, and also stocked up on aviation fuel. In two weeks over 210,000 gallons were used -- normally enough for two months of Coast Guard aviation operations. Aircraft maintenance was given a priority before Katrina came ashore so that they would have as many helicopters as possible ready for SAR operations. CDR Bouboulis also flew SAR missions in an HH-60 for two days, ultimately saving 82 lives.

Other District officers were ordered to work as liaison personnel with various local, state, and federal emergency offices, again demonstrating how important such liaison operations are considered by the Coast Guard. LCDR Cheri Ben-lesau served as a Coast Guard liaison officer with the City of New Orleans and the Orleans Parish. She rode out the storm with New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and his staff on the ninth floor of City Hall in downtown New Orleans. She witnessed first-hand how the city degenerated into chaos in the aftermath of the storm. Barricaded in City Hall and protected by New Orleans SWAT officers, she maintained communications and coordinated response operations between the city and the Coast Guard. She also served as a conduit of information to the Sector command and she remained on duty from 26 August to 5 October 2005.

Other liaison officers were assigned to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the State of Louisiana's Environmental Office, the National Guard, the State Police, and the state's Fish and Wildlife Service, among others. After the storm senior officials commented on the importance and critical role of these liaison officers. RADM Duncan remarked that "Staffing the various Emergency Operations Centers at the state and local level with Coast Guard liaisons was a valuable lesson learned from previous hurricanes. . . They communicated directly with me, the Sector commanders and their federal state and local counterparts during this incident." Their ability to act as conduits for information and supply and to coordinate operations between disparate agencies proved to be one of the Coast Guard's many "shining lights" during Katrina.

Katrina made landfall in Plaquemines Parish just south of Buras, Louisiana on 0610 local time on Monday, 29 August as a strong Category 3 hurricane with winds reaching 127 mph. The area of Katrina's landfall was completely destroyed. The high storm surge that in this case reached up to 22 feet created further destruction. But what happened to the city of New Orleans was, in fact, two disasters laid on top of each other. The D-8 Chief of Operations, CAPT Joe Castillo noted that Katrina "was not your typical hurricane." Hurricane response was one thing,



dealing with a levee breach and an ensuing flooded metropolis was another. Reports on 29 August began to add the ominous statement that the levees may have been topped and at 1100 the first report of a levee breach at the 17th Street Canal began reaching authorities. That led to flooding of over 80 percent of the city to a depth of up to 20 feet, leaving 50,000 citizens who were still there trapped. The devastation overwhelmed and decimated local emergency facilities, as well as transportation and logistical support services that were critical for a successful response to the damage wrought by the storm.

Vice Admiral Thad Allen, the Coast Guard's Chief of Staff at the time and later the Principal Federal Official for the Katrina response, stated: ". . . a lot of people think this was a hurricane. I call it a hybrid event. What we had was a city that was impacted by a major hurricane, and that in itself would have been significant, catastrophic, on the order of Hurricane Ivan or Hurricane Andrew. But what you had then was the back-flooding of the city, when the water that got pushed up to the northwest shore of Lake Pontchartrain came back down when the wind reversed and was driven into canals, that caused the back-flooding in the city. At that point, in my view, I've termed it the equivalent of a weapon of mass effect that was used on the city without criminality. In other words, it was

Mother Nature instead of Al-Qaeda, but what you had. . . basically a city was taken down.”

CAPT Castillo continued describing what happened next: “I. . . ended up back in Alexandria and met up with the Admiral [Duncan] as he was coming back from Houston. And so we got on a plane about five o’clock [on Monday, 29 August] and did the first overflight. We’re fortunate that [Katrina] sped up towards the end. We didn’t think we were going to have any daylight whatsoever to be able to start the operations.” The storm and ensuing flooding knocked out all power and communications. Cell phone service also went down. CAPT Castillo noted, however that “I guess somebody who had a teenager was the first one who said, ‘Hey. . . my text-page is working.’ [so] text-paging worked well. . . So we’ve got a long history in the Coast Guard of finding that way of getting something through and this worked out pretty well for us. And then of course we got phones out of other area codes and that kind of thing. Improvisation came to the rescue.” Additionally the Coast Guard had taken the precaution of pre-staging mobile communication platforms as well. Also, as noted earlier, VADM Vivien Crea dispatched the CGC *Spencer* to provide command and control capabilities in New Orleans.

RADM Duncan described his first flight over the now flooded city in a HU-25 Falcon: “It was a Nantucket sleigh ride . . . and it was a very sobering flight. . . As we came up into the city I think we were all kind of stunned by what we saw. . . nothing was above water. You know we’d see steeples. We’d see roofs. And if you look closely you could see



where the telephone poles were and that would give you some indication of where the road was but there was nothing else that you saw. The entire Gulf Coast; from Mobile, Alabama to some point west of New Orleans was blacked out.”

The scope of the damage was almost inconceivable. CAPT Marshall

remembered that “We did break [our response] into two different problems because you know the folks over in Mississippi were wiped out but the rainwaters and floodwaters subsided very rapidly and then they were left with looking at nothing but rubble. So what do we do here? Well what we did is we gave some of the land area in Mississippi essentially to Sector Mobile and said, ‘Alright, you handle this.’ We extended the boundaries of Sector Mobile over and said, ‘Mississippi is yours,’ and then we said, ‘New Orleans and the immediate Louisiana area, Sector New Orleans, this is yours,’ all right, and that’s how we adapted. It was almost two different situations.”

CAPT Jones and his crews spent their time waiting to return to New Orleans watching the Weather Channel to monitor the hurricane’s passage and making sure they got enough rest to fly the next day. The two helicopters waiting at Houston and the three at Lake Charles departed Monday morning to Houma, Louisiana. Two other helicopters based at AIRSTA Houston also joined their compatriots from New Orleans and flew to Houma where they all refueled. They then launched in tropical storm winds at 1420 Monday afternoon and flew to New Orleans. CAPT Jones described his view of the devastation: “It just looked like an atomic bomb had hit the place: houses just shredded into bits; boats everywhere up on top of the levee, on top of bridges, in the woods; heavy, heavy flooding; none of the pumping stations were working; homes underwater.”

“Apocalypse Now” meets “Dawn of the Dead”



Making reference to the 1970s film on the Vietnam War RADM Duncan described his plans for post Katrina aviation rescue operations: “I wanted to replicate ‘*Apocalypse Now*’ with Coast Guard helicopters. Remember that movie with all those Hueys coming in all at once. I wanted to darken the sky with orange helicopters and I told [Louisiana] Governor [Kathleen B.] Blanco that on Sunday evening. I said that, ‘If there are rescues to be made after this thing hits, when the winds calm down enough for people to feel safe coming out of their house and if they feel that they need help, I want them to see a orange helicopter somewhere overhead that they can wave at and we’ll come get them,’ and frankly we did that.” Even as he flew over New Orleans at 800 feet, fighting 60-knot winds, he saw his orange helicopters already over the city conducting rescues.

CAPT Jones identified the rescue swimmer who responded to the first distress call of the storm as AST3 Laurence “Noodles” Nettles. Nettles, assigned to an Air Station New Orleans’ HH-65 under the command of LT David M. Johnston that had weathered Katrina at Lake Charles, was threaded down through some trees in Port Sulphur, Louisiana, to rescue safely three survivors along with their three dogs. Trapped aboard

an aluminum skiff they were able to transmit a Mayday call by the small radio on board the skiff. So by 1450, only a few hours after one of the worst hurricanes in the history of the country had devastated New Orleans, the Coast Guard was making rescues. RADM Duncan later related that: "It was like an electric shock through the community. It turns out it was three generations of women in Plaquemines Parish. . .a helicopter raised them; a mother, her daughter, and her grandbaby. And I'm telling you it was hard to keep helicopter pilots from running out to their aircraft and all converging on New Orleans at the same time. But that rescue wasn't in New Orleans. That was on one of the river parishes. . . It wasn't all just New Orleans although that was the place where the water stayed and that's where we ended up with levee breaches that caused a different level of horror."

RADM Duncan's description as being a "different level of horror" was apt. The Hurricane Pam exercise proved to be right on target when it came to describing the devastation of a flooded New Orleans. But there was not time to worry about the levees, they had given way and it was time to rescue those in need. RADM Duncan's vision of "a sea of orange" helicopters coming to the rescue was fulfilled. Coast Guard helicopters converged on New Orleans and its environs and began plucking survivors off rooftops. There was no need for a systematic grid system to adhere to as pilots that approached the area immediately saw those in danger spread across the rooftops of the city. CAPT Castillo noted: "Initially we are going to go to where the people are that need saving. We're not going to spend a lot of time to make sure we've gone through a grid when we can see people over there that need help. You've got to do them first and then it's your secondary effort where you're going through in a bit more methodical approach. The DOD is great at that. They've got the machine that grinds through that. Our people have the agility and the flexibility to do that first piece of it, which I think is what made this first piece of it so successful and then what came after that helped to add to that success." CAPT Jones noted that: ". . .most of the units out there were freelancing. They were very easily able to identify distress cases on their own. They didn't need to be coordinated."

First Overflight

CDR Mark Vislay, an HH-60 instructor based out of ATC Mobile, with LT Steven Cerveny flying as co-pilot, weathered the storm at Shreveport. On the morning of the 29th, they were ordered to fly to Alexandria to pick up CAPT Paskewich and CAPT Mueller to conduct the first overflight to assess the damage to New Orleans and the surrounding area. After picking up the two captains at Alexandria at 1600, they flew over the city. CAPT Paskewich related that “I saw my first damage -- that was three ships which looked like that had just been tossed [ashore]. Then as we cut across you could see the massive flooding and the city was completely inundated with water.”

After surveying the damage for 30 minutes or so, they landed at the Superdome to pick up a senior FEMA representative, Mr. Marty Bahamonde. They then flew over Lake Ponchartrain and over downtown New Orleans. Mr. Bahamonde asked for CDR Vislay’s assessment of the situation and the Coast Guard pilot stated that he needed to begin rescuing survivors since the HH-60 could carry more people and stay in the air longer than an HH-65. “We wanted to put the hoist down and save people,” CDR Vislay remembered. “I’ve seen enough,” replied Mr. Bahamonde. They then returned the Superdome and deposited the passengers there. CDR Vislay and his crew went on to rescue 15 survivors that night before they had to land due to the flight time restrictions. From 29 August until 6 September, CDR Vislay flew in excess of 44 day and night hours and along with his aircrews, rescued 167 storm victims, including 96 from a Days Inn hotel.

CAPT Paskewich (**right**) then ordered an HH-65 to the Superdome to pick them up for another overflight. He remembered “we had to get up on an overflight so that we could basically brief. . .the highest levels of the government. So the next ‘65’ that came in we . . .went up on that overflight and we needed to try to go see Slidell. And as we headed east you could see that New Orleans [to the] east was definitely impacted tremendously with huge flooding. I could see over in Chalmette, water just rolling from the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal into Chalmette, completely flooding it.



Then as we started heading towards Slidell you could see the Twin Span and as we got closer to the Twin Span you could see that it was just down. I'm pretty sure we were the first ones in the country to see the Twin Span just leveled like it was going to Slidell. Then we went all the way to Eden Isles in Slidell and you could see just the flooding there. Then we bee-lined it back to the Super Dome and at that point we started briefing on up. I could see the FEMA representative, that he was going to call [FEMA] Director [Michael] Brown. . .and that was his next phone call, and I certainly called up to Alexandria trying to relay the information that I could."



Rescue swimmer AST1 Willard Milam (**left**), a volunteer from Air Station Kodiak, noted the shock of seeing New Orleans under water and how all of the activity seemed like "bees in a hornet's nest." He conducted 15 rescues during his time in the area. On one of his rescues he was dropped at night into an open area and saw the surreal sight of coffins dangling from trees – it took him a while to realize that he'd been dropped into a cemetery. Since burials in New Orleans were above ground, the storm surge and flooding from the breached levees emptied some of the cemeteries. He referred to this hoist as his "*Dawn of the Dead*" experience. AST2 Gabriel Sage from Air Station Astoria, another volunteer, also noted that after being deployed near a cemetery the street "was clogged with corpses."

CAPT Jones described his first flight into the city after first checking on the condition of his air station: ". . .when we got airborne from Houma, before we did any search and rescue our intent was to assess the status of the air station and whether or not it was a viable operating base for recovery operations, because we knew if we couldn't use Air Station New Orleans and if none of the other surrounding airfields were useable. . .then we would have a real problem. . .As soon as we landed we saw there was significant damage. . .and then our other three helicopters got airborne and went to the city to check out the city."

He noted with pride: “The Coast Guard was absolutely the first folks on-scene; H-65s from Air Station New Orleans (**right**) followed quickly by H-65s and H-60s from Houston and Mobile, and then soon after that from other units around the Coast Guard. “



CAPT Jones also identified one of the behind-the-scene Coast Guardsman whose efforts were instrumental in keeping the helicopters flying: “EM2 Rodney Gordon; he helped restore power here. In addition to that, the Navy’s fuel farm which provides fuel for all of the National Guard, Air Force, Air Guard, Coast Guard, Navy/Marine Corps, Army Reserve units of this base, they couldn’t get [their pumps] to work and it was Petty Officer Rodney Gordon from the U.S. Coast Guard who went over and got that thing working again, thereby providing fuel to hundreds of aircraft over the next week.” Petty Officer Gordon remembered: “I only worked on it. . .at nighttime. So of course there is no light so you’re working [with] a flashlight pretty much stuck in your mouth just working. And so we got that joker fired off and going. And I’ll tell you what; there were a lot of smiles around because I mean that’s all the helos. You can’t fly without fuel and they pretty much put that all on me. But I figured, you know, me being in the Coast Guard, I’ve got a job just like everybody else does and that’s what makes the Coast Guard so good is everybody does their job and everything gets done. . . The most stressful thing I did - was having a meeting with the Commandant!”

“The risk was worth it!”

During the first hours of the rescue operations there were five HH-65s and two HH-60s flying over the city. One of the HH-60s was piloted by the aforementioned LCDR Vislay while CDR Patrick Gorman piloted the other. CDR Gorman determined that as the sun set they needed to continue making rescues. Despite all of the hazards the air crews faced flying in a flooded urban environment at night they believed that “The risk was worth it.” So the pilots donned their night vision equipment and continued to drop their

rescue swimmers onto the rooftops. In the first nine hours after Katrina came ashore, Air Station New Orleans helicopters rescued 137 people.

ATC Mobile served as a forward operating base but their helicopters also filled the skies, rescuing flood victims in New Orleans and also over the heavily devastated regions in Mississippi immediately after the hurricane's passage. CAPT Callahan recalled: "the sorties were. . .just around the clock. We just slapped new crews in the planes and sent them back out . . .but the untold story is the aircraft that responded to the Mississippi coastline those first 36 hours. And the devastation was as bad as New Orleans in the Mississippi coastal areas and nobody could get to them but us really at ATC Mobile. We were in the right position to get to them. In that first night and following day over half of our aircraft we sent out of here went to Mississippi and did rescues there and there were hundreds hoisted in the Mississippi coastal areas too."

CAPT Jones reiterated the importance of ATC Mobile. "Mobile was both a huge staging area for manpower and aircraft and equipment as well as an actual operational tasking unit. I guess I would describe the difference between the New Orleans Air Station and ATC Mobile as that Air Station New Orleans was sort of the battleground. We were the ones that were in the middle of the firefight and they were the large depot level operational and staging area in the rear echelon, you know a 50-minute flight to. . .New Orleans operations. Now keep in mind, ATC Mobile also had its own AOR [Area of Responsibility] that suffered severe destruction and they were conducting operations in the Mississippi and coastal Alabama AOR in addition to supporting New Orleans."

The environment for rescues in the New Orleans' metropolitan area was difficult at best. The city had completely flooded up to 20 feet. Upwards of 50,000 city residents were trapped in their attics or on their rooftops while fetid water lapped at their feet. Temperatures and the humidity were incredibly high, with the heat index reaching over 100 degrees. Although the Coast Guard air crews did not train for urban search and rescue, they adapted quickly to the circumstances. Some had experience in flood relief conducting rescues after the 2001 Houston flood while a number of personnel had trained to conduct cliff-side aerial hoists. Many of the pilots were Army veterans who

had transferred to the Coast Guard and they had experience flying in urban areas. But regardless of their background, all had to face the unique challenges of flying in a devastated urban environment that included downed power lines and trees and the debris kicked up by the helicopters' rotor wash.

Prior to the storm the Coast Guard began replacing the engines of the HH-65B helicopters. With their new powerplants they were given the designation HH-65C and three of the new helicopters took part in the rescue operations and performed brilliantly. The HH-60Js were also excellent SAR aircraft, able to carry considerably more survivors and had the fuel to remain on scene much longer than the older HH-60Bs. But the power-limited B models were the mainstay of the rescue hoisting operations and the pilots that flew them were always on the cutting edge of the safety envelope, pushing themselves and their machines to the limit of their performance, in large part due to the flying conditions and the limitations posed by the B Models' deficiencies.

CDR Gorman detailed the many difficulties the air crews faced in that environment. "The first few days I would say the most challenging part was wires. Wires are the worst thing that can happen to a helicopter. In fact they are referred to as 'helicopter catchers.' The whole [power] grid was supposed to be dead but the current doesn't need to be running through the wires in order for it to ruin my day. I start sticking rotor blades in the wires and we're done. . . Then with that; with the amount of wind damage that had been done, there was plenty of debris around. So you'd come up on an apartment building or something and there'd be enough damage done to it that while you were hoisting someone on this roof you were really abusing the house over here which might have a couple more people on it, and shingles would be flying and insulation, hunks of wood. I'm an H-60 pilot so it's the bigger of the two aircraft and we'd put down a lot of wind; a lot of rotor-wash coming off the blades in a hover. And then the next hazard was really concentrating on not injuring our swimmers. We were threading them into some pretty tight places and down into this debris that we're talking about. The roofs are sloped. You know in some places we were hoisting down to a flat roof or a balcony but a lot of times it was the pretty good peak of a roof and you've got to let enough slack out in the

cable to let him maneuver but not enough that he can fall off the roof. So we really were conscious of injuring the swimmer.”

Regarding the unique nature of urban search and rescue, particularly from the air, the air crews proved up to the task. When the rescue swimmers determined that many residents were trapped in their attics and were unable to reach their roofs, the swimmers began chopping through the roofs with the small crash axes carried aboard



the helicopters. When these proved to be problematic due to their small size, the swimmers would ask for an ax from any nearby firemen when they landed to offload their rescued passengers. CAPT Callahan noted: “You know we found out the first night out there that people were being trapped in their attics and we had no way to get into those attics. So we had

crews out there who adapted on-scene by borrowing fire axes from fire trucks and by using crash axes to cut through rooftops from the aircraft. And the extraordinary thing about it was that we realized coming back that night that, ‘Hey, we’re in a new ballgame here. We’re going to have to change our tactics,’ and we did. And I’m not sure who it was, I think it was the XO [Executive Officer], ordered folks to go out to Home Depot and that night we bought every wood ax and saw. . .we could find and started outfitting our rescue swimmers with those to adapt to this new urban rescue environment that we were in. So I may go to jail for buying all those axes and saws but I don’t think so.”

Trust within the chain of command in both directions and a willingness to do whatever was necessary to save those in need in an unfamiliar and dangerous environment was a critical aspect of the success of the Coast Guard’s response.

The Coast Guardsmen operated as highly trained professionals but were still impacted emotionally by the devastation. They made a connection to the human side of the disaster such as described by LT Iain McConnell, an HH-60 pilot from Air Station

Clearwater. He noted “when the survivors would come up it was possible to not feel a deep connection with them or to not even realize that you were saving their lives. But on that second flight when I got to sit in the right seat we picked some survivors up. We landed at the New Orleans International airport right at sunset and. . .one mom, and I think she had a little baby or just a little kid, she turned around; as soon as she got outside the rotor disc and she was safe she turned around and waved at me and I waved back, and then she gave me like a praying symbol like a ‘thank you, thank you,’ with her hands together like in a praying symbol, and that was my first time I connected the human aspect with a technical mission and really realized that, ‘Wow, we’re saving people,’ and that is a good memory for me.”

The ability to improvise on the spot was an important factor in the success of the Coast Guard’s efforts. LT McConnell added: “Yes, a lot of improvisation. But in general that’s what Coast Guard aircrews do best. . .We had things like hoisting to balconies, hoisting to rooftops, using a basic airman, or taking not just a flight mech and a swimmer but taking a flight mech, swimmer, and a basic airman in the back of the helicopter so that while the flight mech and swimmer are busy hoisting people the basic airman can be the person in charge of strapping the survivors into their seats and managing the cabin, and that turned out to be really, really useful. . .heck, I mean normally we train for ocean rescues where there’s no need for extra weight and extra people in the back, but here we’re over the land where we could pick up a load, go only two minutes away and drop them off and then come back for more. So that was a good improvisation. . .at first we used basket hoists for most survivors but then the swimmers found that the quick strop hoist technique was quicker so that was an improvisation, and the whole swinging like a pendulum to get a swimmer up onto a balcony underneath a roof, that’s definitely something you don’t practice to do. But those were fun.” LCDR Vislay remembered that “we did a litter, physical grips, butch drops, every recovery method we had we were doing them.”

AMT1 William B. Williams, a flight mechanic from Air Station Cape Cod, related how one hoist brought it all into focus for him. “I remember this one time I was hoisting. . .a father or maybe a grandfather with a child; an infant - it couldn’t have been more than

three or four weeks old – and he was so scared. I'm hoisting him up, I'm hoisting him up, hoisting him up, and before he even got to the cabin he's trying to get out of the basket. So he's below the aircraft and he's trying to get out of the basket and I'm pushing on the top of his head because if he gets out he's going to fall, and we're at 150 feet so obviously he's going to die. Then he sat back down and he just hands me the baby from underneath the aircraft and I've got one hand on the hoist button and one hand on the cable. So I'm trying to get him in and he's trying to hand me the baby so I had to drop the hoist thing, grab the baby, and I'm like, "Please God don't . . .", and I'm just grabbing the baby. And I had this other guy, he was like a trainee, just watching, helping me, and he grabbed the baby and thank God we didn't drop the baby."

What amazed many of the flight crews was their ability to work together as a team even if they had never met the persons they were flying with. With personnel from every air station represented, and as they increasingly intermixed, most were struck by how seamlessly they worked together. CAPT Jones noted the importance of standardized training to the success of the Coast Guard's Katrina and Rita responses: "And the fact that you can take a rescue swimmer from Savannah and stick him on a helicopter from Houston with a pilot from Detroit and a flight mech from San Francisco, and these guys have never met before and they can go out and fly for six hours and rescue 80 people and come back without a scratch on the helicopter. There is no other agency that can do that. I don't care if you're talking about a commercial outfit or DOD." AMT3 Talton described it as "You know I didn't think about it. I was just there. I was doing my job and what I was trained to do but it didn't really click in until I heard one of the Discovery [Channel] guys that was there filming it mention, 'You know it's so impressive watching you guys. You guys are all mixed up and you guys can still get the job done,' and it didn't really click until he said that and that's what the Stand[ards] Team is for; that's why they're there, you know going around the country making sure everybody's on the same sheet of music. So I mean that's why we're able to do I guess what we're able to do is because they're keeping everybody standing on the same sheet of music."

The Miracle

CDR Gorman described what has become known as the “Miracle of Katrina,” the fact that with so many aircraft from so many different agencies in the area combined with patchy communications that there were no major aerial mishaps. It was, he said, a case of “See and be seen. By the time all these additional assets had gotten there I think we were too far into the game to try to stop and formalize any kind of air plan as far as altitude restrictions or inbound on this and outbound on that, or what frequencies to be on. There were several different attempts and there were high birds out there; P3s and Customs aircraft that we had a lot of coordination going through but that was more or less diverting for known sites where there were people that needed help. . .by in large you were just watching out and hoping everybody saw you as well.” RADM Duncan said “I learned from them that the best way to spot a helicopter in New Orleans at the time was to look for the ripples on the water underneath them. The rotor wash was creating eccentric circles coming out from where they were and that was frequently more visible than the helicopter itself from certain angles of approach.” CAPT Jones also worried about a collision: “The sky was dark with helicopters; definitely very, very congested. And it was not possible to provide air traffic control to all of them because they were simply operating too close together. . .[We] really relied on the individual aircraft pilots and crew to keep their heads on a swivel; to keep alert to avoid a midair collision in that way, which they did.” It is a testament to the professional training and the capabilities of all the pilots and aircrews that there were no collisions or major mishaps.

D-8 reported on the morning of Wednesday, 31 August that Coast Guard helicopters had rescued 1,259 survivors off rooftops and that the skies from the Mississippi River to Mobile “ARE ORANGE WITH COAST GUARD AERIAL OVERFLIGHTS ACTIVELY CONDUCTING SAR IN EFFECTED AREAS.” The numbers of aviation assets that made the sky orange consisted of a reported seven HH-60s and eight HH-65s deploying out of Air Station New Orleans, three HH-65s deploying out of Air Station Houston, three HH-65s and two HU-25s deploying out of Air Station Corpus Christi, and two HU-25s deploying out of Tyndall Air Force Base at that time. D-8 reported on Thursday morning, 1 September that Coast Guard helicopters had made a total of 2,859 rooftop

rescues. By this time the District reported that there were 22 Coast Guard aircraft deploying out of ATC Mobile providing SAR operations in Mississippi and Louisiana and 35 Coast Guard aircraft flying SAR response to the New Orleans area.

CAPT Jones described what it was like at his air station during this time: “I think the mood at Air Station New Orleans was just phenomenal and indescribable. . .we were here at what we felt was the ground zero of a battlefield and I don’t use battlefield to imply shooting but just people working around the clock under extremely stressful and arduous conditions. So we had folks coming back from eight hours of flying, utterly exhausted, sucking down bottle of Pedialite to keep from passing out, and then yet somehow a few hours later those folks were out turning aircraft around. They were working. They were offloading pallets of food and water. After they got some sleep they were flying again. And the level of adrenalin and morale in the face of almost unbearable physical hardship the first four or five days here where the air conditioner wasn’t working consistently and its 98 degrees out and 95 percent humidity, so people were exhausted. And yet I’ve never, in that first week after Katrina, I’ve never seen either people that were more exhausted and more beat up and tired and at the same time had a higher morale in my life. It was just phenomenal to see these people from around the Coast Guard . . . every air station in the Coast Guard had people in the theater and every one of them was walking through my hangar deck.”

AST3 Robert R. Williams would earn the Coast Guard Medal for his actions on the roof of the notorious Days Inn hotel. He was a crewman aboard a Corpus Christi HH-65B that was deployed to begin to rescue a reported 150 persons trapped on the roof of a Days Inn near Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. As he was lowered to the hotel’s roof, he was approached by three men armed with knives. They told him they also had a firearm and demanded to be rescued first. As many of the rescue swimmers later testified, an important part of their job was crowd management where they had to practice a bit of psychology to get everyone to follow their orders – they had been trained in Rescue Swimmer school to handle a struggling person in the water but controlling a situation on a rooftop dealing with armed persons was not part of that training. Williams faced down the three men and organized the survivors’ rescue by

immediate need, ultimately getting all 150 victims off the roof safely. He would go on to rescue a total of 113 by “direct rescue” himself.



AST3 Sara Faulkner (**left**), based at AIRSTA Mobile, took part in early and memorable rescues. She remembered that “I was involved in at least 52 hoists. Forty-eight of those were in one night and then two were the day after. That Tuesday [30 August] I did two and then 48 and then I did two after that. The first two were in Mississippi. Those were both, well actually one was in a boat on land where it

just happened there and people used it as a search and rescue platform because it had a radio. . .I did a rooftop; the next Wednesday I did 25 off a second-story balcony and then I did about 25 in the water up to here in a tennis court.” Her concerns about the toxic nature of the flood water in the city brought about another innovative technique: “I didn’t hesitate going in the water because those people then, you know, and obviously they just needed to get out of there. So I made the decision that I would go down there and put them on the ‘Quick Strop’ because that’s the fastest thing and we only had a certain amount of time to get like all of these people out of there. . .and if you don’t know it’s a strap that hooks onto the hook and you can actually send it down so it’s by far the fastest one and you just put it under their armpits and cinch it.”

AST3 Faulkner described her most memorable rescue as “that first balcony that we went to we specifically picked it because we saw women and children there. So it took me a while to get lowered down and in position and as soon as I kind of straddled the balcony – I’d grab onto it and then I’d sit on it – they put a baby in [my] arms. And our rescue devices are too small for babies so I had to hold him in my bare arms, and just the look on the mother’s face. . .she just shoved him to me, you know, and I kind of kicked out from underneath the roof because I didn’t have any free hands to even give a signal, and you know they hoisted me up and we started spinning. And I was just so afraid of him wiggling and losing my grip on him because he maybe would start to freak out or whatever, but he didn’t thank goodness. But I actually had to check him and

make sure he was okay because I made sure I wasn't crushing him because I was holding onto him so tight. That was hard but I did three more [hoists] after that and I wasn't as nearly freaked out, but that first one was scary."

Flight mechanics too were an integral part of the rescue operations. AMT3 Matthew Dwayne Talton of AIRSTA Cape Cod, described one of his more memorable rescue hoists: "You know everything was pretty much standard as far as how we did things other than the circumstances or the things that you actually did where you were pulling people out of attics and stuff like that. I mean it was definitely different. I mean I've never done that before and I'm sure probably a majority of the people in the Coast Guard have never done that before, and it was definitely . . . I mean there were a lot more things to worry about; wires, trees, getting the cable caught on stuff, because I mean you're putting the rescue gear into places that it wasn't meant to go. I mean for instance one of the more memorable ones that I experienced was I put the swimmer down inside of a house where there was a hole blown out of the side of this attic. So the swimmer goes in and he calls back up and says that there are approximately six or seven people in this attic. So I put the basket down. He pulls it into the hole and he gets the person loaded and I would get a little tension on the cable and I would con the aircraft, 'Easy back', and that would basically kind of drag the basket up and then that's when I would take the load in and bring them up, and so it was different. It was way different."

The crews praised the abilities of their flight mechanics. LCDR Eric Johnson of AIRSTA Clearwater related: "And that was the level of these flight mechs. The flight mechs are kind of the unsung heroes. . .the way I see it. Pilots, you know they work great, everybody understands that. The swimmer, everybody loves them. But the poor flight mech is the one running the whole mission and we're responsible as pilots but the flight mech is the guy who has the entire picture. . .It's up to him to manage the entire situation and we have to trust him and he does a great job." LCDR Vislay also praised their abilities: "I also think the other thing is the program that we have that the people who basically fix our planes [and then] fly on our planes; our flight mechanics. . . the flight mechanics in the back that do the hoisting. I think that is just, first it gives me the

warm fuzzy every time I go fly that I know those guys have a vested interest in how well they repair this aircraft because their butt is in the back right now too. And secondly, they're good at what they do. They're the best. . .You know they're my eyes when I hoist because I can't see anything. Once I get to a certain point I have to rely on what they're telling me is right and they're really good at what they do." LCDR William Sasser, an HH-65 pilot credited with 160 rescues, commented on the importance of all of the Coast Guardsmen who worked behind the scene: "Behind every [air] crew of four, there were 400 [Coast Guard] people pushing that plane forward. . .this was a complete team effort. . .there are guys equally deserving of recognition that never got airborne."

The statistics that these air crews compiled are remarkable. CDR Gorman, who piloted the first HH-60 into New Orleans on the 29th, flew for six days and 38 flight hours, and he and his air crews rescued 370 victims. LT Jason Dorval, another HH-60 pilot who volunteered from AIRSTA Cape Cod, flew for nearly 50 hours over seven days and he and his crews rescued 332. LCDR William E. Sasser, Jr., an HH-65 pilot, rescued 160 and LT Olav M. Saboe, flying an HH-65B, was credited with rescuing 143. LT David M. Johnston, who along with AST3 Nettles conducted the first rescue in Louisiana, also flying an HH-65B, rescued 153 flood victims during 39 flight hours over a six-day period. CDR William F. McMeekin provided communications support in his HH-60 during the rescue of the *F/V Mary Lynn* off the Florida coast and then went on to rescue a fisherman from the *F/V Maria Rita* during the same flight. Flying to New Orleans beginning at midnight on the 29th, he and his crews rescued 55 victims during the next four days. LCDR Thomas F. Cooper, an HH-65B pilot, was given credit for flying the first aircraft on scene in New Orleans after Katrina's passage and was also given credit for the first rescue "in metropolitan New Orleans" when he and his crew rescued a pregnant woman. They also obtained the initial video footage of the flooded city. Ultimately LCDR Cooper was credited with rescuing 146 flood victims.

The rescue swimmers' actions were also impressive. The hoists typically took place anywhere from 100 to 150 feet. They improvised their way into buildings and through roofs to save survivors. AST3 William Lawson rescued 86 over 34 day and night flight hours in a six day period while AST3 Jaason M. Lehr rescued 151 directly and

assisted 300. AST3 David M. McClure, as did many rescue swimmers, faced down “unruly mobs” during his rescues of 224 victims. ASTC Martin H. Nelson dealt with 200 angry survivors on the roof of a school, ultimately calming them and facilitating their safe rescue. He rescued 60 others from the top of a “slippery dome-shaped structure” after they had taken shelter there to escape an armed mob that raided the building. He supervised their rescue “with the gang lurking below.” AST3 Matt O’Dell, another volunteer from AIRSTA Cape Cod, saved or assisted a total of 225 flood victims over a period of five days.

The Coast Guard established limits on the amount of time flight crews can operate. In between flights they are required to rest a certain number of hours based on how long they had been flying, restrictions that were known as “bag limits.” With the arrival of so many volunteer flight crews, such “bag limits” did not impede aviation operations. Pilots would show up and take the first flight mechanic or rescue swimmer on duty. AST3 Joshua Mitcheltree from AIRSTA Elizabeth City who arrived at Mobile on Tuesday evening, described the procedures that were used on the flight line: “When we showed up we had a bag time, which is just a timeframe where we aren’t allowed to fly anymore because we’ve already flown our mission-time for the day, which put us into a 12-hour bag, so we had to wait until the next morning before we were able to get back out and go flying. And the tasking we received was to just put our name in a rotation and help out wherever we could. They were sending as many flights out a day as they could. So we put our name into a pool and whenever our number came up we would go flying. . . . Pilots would come over and grab whoever they needed. If they needed one swimmer or two swimmers they would just grab whoever was available; whoever was next on the list to go, and you would just go with your crew and fly whatever mission was designated for you.”

Mitcheltree also made note of local heroes that assisted the Coast Guard crews: “When I went down into the water there were actually men and other people there helping. One kid, I think he told me he was 14 years old, and he just told me that he was walking around staging people. Wherever he saw a helicopter hoisting in his area he would grab people who couldn’t walk very well or couldn’t move through the water very well and he

brought me a lady that was in a shopping cart. She couldn't walk very well. She had a stone in her throat and so he said that he knew that she needed to get out so he brought her to where he could hear the helicopter, and so we were able to get her out of there and a couple other people that couldn't make it to the rooftop." Cliff rescue training was the most helpful, he also noted, in making rescues in a flooded city. He was surprised when he received a call from President George W. Bush on Thursday, 1 September and then had the honor of meeting him the following day. He recalled that "I let him know, 'We're picking up families; babies, kids, grandparents, mothers, dads, the whole family out of the house, every rooftop we went to,' and that there were so many."

"We Own You"

During the aerial operations on the first and second day the Coast Guard did not expect to have to do more than simply rescue survivors and place them out of harms way before heading back into the flooded city. But the situation in and around New Orleans was fluid. Most of the local responders found themselves trapped and unable to assist the Coast Guard, let alone the trapped citizens of New Orleans. The pilots had been depositing those that they had rescued at high and dry places, which they called "Lilly Pads," such as the I-10 Cloverleaf, the Convention Center, the University of New Orleans and the Superdome but it quickly became evident that no other agency was following through to get these people to more secure locations. Air crews noticed that persons they had rescued the previous day were still where they had dropped them off, standing in the baking sun and high humidity with little or no water or food.

RADM Duncan explained what happened next: ". . .there was some inertia, it seemed to me, and frankly I was very concerned about us taking people off roofs of houses where they were in immediate danger and putting them in places of relative safety and finding out there were staying there for longer than I anticipated that they would. So we did two things. We ended up purchasing water in bulk. The first day we purchased 60 pallets of water and that's about 70 thousand of those little bottles of water, and we moved them from St. Louis and Houston through Alexandria down to New Orleans. And I said, 'If we touch you we own you'. . .If we know we put you someplace we're going to come back and check on you. We're going to bring food. We're going to bring water."

CAPT Jones related how that purchase and delivery happened: “The Coast Guard officers, essentially using a unit credit card, bought water; pallet loads of water, and flew a C-130 from Clearwater to Dobbins Air Force Base, picked up pallets of water, and it was actually a Coast Guard C-130 that flew in the first water to the city; the first aircraft that landed at the international airport two days after Katrina – it was 8:15 in the morning on Wednesday the 31st of August – and that was the first water we brought it. And that water was then distributed by helicopter to people on rooftops and people in these areas. . .we then immediately established an SOP [Standard Operating Procedures] here at Air Station New Orleans that no helicopter, whether they came from Mobile or wherever, that came through our doors to get gas; nobody would take off without food and water. And so every helicopter that took off after Wednesday took off with food and water and the first order of business was drop off your food and water and then start picking people up.”

CAPT Jones described what happened as the first week of rescues was ending: “Air Station Houston did a phenomenal job of helping our crews out. So we rotated everybody out for 24 to 48 hours of rest, myself included. I went to Mobile for two nights. I was up for about 36 hours. The operations officer and the XO also got away for a couple of days, because frankly, by about the fifth or six day we were done; we were tapped out. I was well aware that I was losing effectiveness and functionality just from sheer exhaustion so I rotated out with the urging of repeated phone calls from my boss demanding to know when I was leaving.” The commanding officer of Air Station Houston, CDR Norman S. Schweizer, took over temporary command of Air Station New Orleans during the interim.

By the second week after Katrina the SAR operations were virtually concluded and anyone that wanted or needed to be rescued was safely out of harm’s way. The shift then was made to respond to the myriad of problems posed by the destruction left by the hurricane. The final Coast Guard aviation statistics regarding Katrina set service records that will probably not be surpassed for years. Aircraft served from every Coast Guard air station. AIRSTA Houston aircraft flew more than 164 flight hours and 106

sorties, saving 691 lives. The aviation effort based out of Aviation Training Center Mobile saved 4,812 people and assisted thousands more by delivering over 80 tons of food and water supplies to critical areas. ATC Mobile became the largest air station in the history of the Coast Guard, operating over 43 aircraft, flying 1,193 sorties and 2,202 flight hours. AIRSTA Clearwater aircraft saved 1,165 lives and assisted 49 others. They also deployed 708,000 pounds in 236 “sling loads”, dumping sand bags on the breached levees and transported 100 buoys from D-9 to Sector Mobile. A total of 12,535 flood victims were saved by Coast Guard helicopters after Katrina came ashore. It truly was the greatest aerial search and rescue mission ever conducted by the service.

“The Wild West at Dunkirk”

One unheralded yet equally compelling Coast Guard rescue operation during Katrina was the small fleet of river tenders, aids-to-navigation boats and other small craft that quickly answered the call to save lives in what RADM Duncan

called the “Dunkirk Option.” He related that “*Pamlico* was a big part of that as you know and so was the 270 [*Spencer*] that came into port. . .We moved a lot of people. At peak we were moving 750 people an hour by boat [more than was happening through



the air]. . .[Additionally] people who were a bad element in town, this is the first operation I’ve been involved with where we had to provide security for lifesavers. That’s new and I put out a Special Use of Force Policy.”



CWO3 Robert David Lewald (**above**), commanding *Pamlico* (**left**), a 20-year old 160-foot construction tender homeported in New Orleans, was one of the instrumental

players in the unfolding drama. CWO Lewald followed the news regarding Katrina as it

headed across the Gulf of Mexico and by Friday, 26 August, he began making plans “to gather up our fleet and head up river.” His fleet eventually included cutters and craft from stations and ANT teams from New Orleans, Gulfport, Venice, Dulac and Grand Isle, including the cutter *Clamp*, commanded by BMCM Warren E. Woodell, eight 41-footers (one which was out of commission), three 55-foot aids-to-navigation-boats [ANBs], and the construction barge from the cutter *Axe*. On Saturday, 27 August the small Coast Guard fleet traveled up river to ride out the hurricane and tied up at 2200 Sunday, 28 August in Baton Rouge Harbor at Mile Marker 235, a location known “as Devil’s Swamp” according to BMCS Steven Noyes, OIC of ANT Dulac, who joined the small fleet aboard the ANB 55119.

After checking in with a Coast Guard representative at the Emergency Command Center in Baton Rouge, who suggested that, as Lewald remembered: “Why don’t you go on back downriver,’ obviously, ‘and see what you can do’. . .And so being a good Coastie I just took that as find a mission of opportunity and that’s what we did. That’s the nice thing about the Coast Guard; we don’t really need to talk a lot. . .Our culture is a little bit different. You know a couple words pass between a couple of sailors and the job gets done.” So after loading up with all the supplies their holds could store, Mr. Lewald ordered his aptly named “Mississippi River CG Armada” to get underway. They departed Baton Rouge on Tuesday and headed down the river towards New Orleans.

CWO Lewald described the voyage down the Mississippi: “Obviously the further downriver we got the worse things were with barges up on the banks and ships up on the banks; on the levees, so you could see how much of a surge there really was. All the trees . . . on going up Saturday . . . the river is beautiful and especially that time of year it’s very green and, well it’s just the trees are all 30 and 40 feet high. It was completely different. It was like coming down in the middle of the winter and all those trees that were 30 and 40 feet are now ten feet because they’re all broken over. So it went from being very green to being very brown and then all the, like I said, all the tugs and barges and ships up on the levees. And as we got further down to town we pulled in, it was about 1800; six o’clock in the evening Tuesday night, and you could start to see all the blown out windows in downtown. We call the downtown area the CBD;

Central Business District, you know Crescent City. You know the river does that nice little loop there. You could just really see what was going on and you could start seeing smoke and fires and whatnot.”

Senior Chief Noyes remembered what the city looked like as they approached it that Tuesday evening: “When we first arrived in New Orleans we came up under the Crescent City Connection and there was complete darkness, you know, and I’ve been in this area for a long time and that was kind of eerie to see total darkness. But the 55108 had forged ahead and were looking to see the status of the West Bank Navy Base and suitable moorings there.” They located a New Orleans Police Department command post and established contact and let the locals know the Coast Guard was there. The local Navy command also requested Coast Guard assistance in transporting about 100 persons from the east bank of the river to the west bank and the small fleet complied.

They then asked permission from the Navy to moor the fleet near the west bank facility but did not hear back from them. They then anchored for the night south of that facility. At 2130 CWO Lewald received a request from a Crescent City Connection ferry captain to assist with an evacuation of residents from Chalmette on the east bank to Algiers Ferry Terminal on the west bank. CWO Lewald agreed, stating “Absolutely -- Like I said, a mission of opportunity, you know, search and rescue, that’s what we do.” They commenced the evacuation the following morning, utilizing three ferries and a large



barge. The operation proceeded smoothly and on Wednesday they safely evacuated 2,000 displaced residents to the Algiers Ferry Landing. The Coast Guard Armada acquired hundreds of life jackets off nearby grounded ferries and passed those out to the persons transported aboard the barges—every

person transported by water had a life jacket—a point of pride among the Coast Guardsmen who participated in Operation Dunkirk. The cutters and boats then escorted each ferry and the barge across the river during daylight hours. But nighttime

operations were another matter. Another problem lay in obtaining transportation for the refugees from the Algiers Terminal to the evacuation centers further inland.

The Coast Guardsmen were forced to provide security for the evacuation as armed gangs were seen in the area, many of the evacuees were angry and some were armed, and gunshots frequently rang out in the area. CWO Lewald recalled how the Coast Guardsmen armed themselves: "Well Station Venice, when they evacuated the 41 [footer] they put their armory on [board] so we actually had a fair amount of weapons. At Algiers we set up a perimeter. . . Each end of the road we put sentries and then we had roving guards going through the crowd and then we also had a couple sharpshooters placed. We only operated at daylight. We did not own the night there. And so at nighttime we had to shut down operations, bring everybody back on the boats and move the fleet off the bank and slid back down and in the morning go retake the pier."

Security and force protection were a primary concern for the rescuers. CWO Lewald described how he and his team handled the situation: "We set up. . . amnesty boxes and we said [to the incoming evacuees], 'Alcohol, illegal narcotics and weapons go into the boxes, no questions asked'. . . So those boxes filled up quick and it's just a conservative estimate of probably 5-600 weapons, you know, firearms. I'm told a number of knives. And the booze, you know, it's New Orleans. . . a lot of drugs. . . the pistols went with *Clamp* over to Texas. The reason why I was so hot and heavy about keeping those pistols and what not, besides the obvious, was I wanted to let the police departments or ATF, some of these guns might get linked to crimes later on down the road. . . at least maybe it would answer a question or something, so pretty hairy stuff. It was the Wild West." He was even threatened personally, as he recalled: "There were roving gangs, especially on Thursday and Friday going through the crowd because we were waiting on buses. And I'm the oldest, grayest and I had the most radios so I looked like the authority figure and there were some attempts and threats on me."

Later on Thursday members of MSST 91112, based in New Orleans, arrived via four small boats to assist in the evacuation and establish security in the area. Lewald remembered: "Thursday night we got. . . MSST NOLA. . . a 9/11 baby, and those kids are

good! And the Chief parked a guard on me and he said, 'You're with the Warrant,' and so I had my own little bodyguard there for a while and it was kind of cool because what I was doing was moving through the crowd to try to calm folks down because, you know 100 plus degrees, no shelter, no food, no water. We were just a way-station on their next step and we were waiting for buses." From that point forward the MSST personnel assumed responsibility for security.

The situation in New Orleans kept deteriorating as CWO Lewald noted that the 12 foot flood waters in New Orleans proper necessitated the evacuations of "the Lower 9th Ward, Chalmette and the lower portions of St. Bernard Parish." On Thursday, 1 September, the evacuation operation safely transported 1,200 displaced persons but could not move more due to the lack of buses on the west bank. Some resourceful Coast Guardsmen, including the *Clamp's* Officer-in-Charge, BMCM Warren Woodell, ordered his Executive Petty Officer, BM1 Thomas A. Faulkenberry, and SN Justin Witt, to find "alternate transportation." With the assistance of a few New Orleans police officers and local sheriffs' deputies they commandeered abandoned city and school buses and safely evacuated over 100 survivors from the ferry landing to safer collection points further inland. Faulkenberry also established a medical triage center at Algiers Landing to assist basic medical needs of the evacuees and to prioritize their evacuation order. On 4 September Faulkenberry, under BMCM Woodell's order, went on to rescue five elderly patients from a nearby medical care facility.

On the night of 1 September, the tired boat crews saw a welcome sight when the 270-foot medium endurance cutter *Spencer* (**right**), under the command of CDR Robert Tarantino, arrived on scene.

On 29 August 2005, while on a mid-Alien/Migrant Interdiction Operation [AMIO] patrol break at Guantanamo Bay, the



Spencer was ordered to proceed to “at best speed” to New Orleans to help re-establish communications and become the on-scene commander of the boat forces operating on the Mississippi. CDR Tom Crabbs, Chief of Atlantic Area Operations Oversight for Planning and Scheduling of Operational Forces, described the role of the *Spencer* in relief operations: “. . .they became a surrogate Sector. With their command and control capabilities they were able to be on-scene where the Sector normally would be and provide that command and control assist to the Sector. . .we chopped the 270 to District 8. District 8 chopped the 270 to Sector NOLA.”

Spencer's crew assisted in the relief efforts in many direct ways, including acting as a mother ship to the many small craft in the area. CDR Tarantino recalled that his crew augmented the “Coast Guard forces over in Algiers with law enforcement personnel; giving them a little bit of a break because they had been working very long hours. . .[and] we also put together about a six to seven man team that we would send ashore to make contact with other command posts. And then we also put together humanitarian teams, so rather than trying to have the security guys provide humanitarian support we augmented so the humanitarian teams really focused on the medical care and helping the folks. So we were able to, all told, probably 50 percent of the crew ended up leaving the ship [to help ashore].”

Since the tenders did not have the most up-to-date communication systems, *Spencer* also assisted in establishing and maintaining communication links between the armada and the Sector and District commands and the activities on the river as well. CDR Tarantino praised the tenders and their crews: “the river tenders were unique -- highly capable. I would say [they are] some of the most innovative guys that we have. And not only that but very knowledgeable when it comes to the river. . .they had local knowledge. . .they talked with the locals everyday.”

On Friday, 2 September members of the Armada were startled to hear and then see explosions and subsequent fires coming from the city. As the wind shifted and toxic smoke from the fires approached the fleet, *Spencer* ordered the armada to cease the evacuation and head down river to safety. As soon as the wind shifted in another

direction, the evacuation operations resumed. Frustrated by the lack of buses and seeing the helicopters pass overhead, they decided to construct a temporary landing pad, first clearing an area and then using the ATON construction paint aboard the tenders to clearly mark the new helicopter landing area. They then contacted helicopters flying overhead and on Friday Air Force Para-rescuemen or “PJs” dropped into the area and arranged the aerial evacuation of over 1,000 stranded evacuees at Algiers Point. Again, the Coast Guardsmen demonstrated that the Armada’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances and situations was a key factor in their success.



On Saturday, 3 September the CGC *Greenbrier* (**above**) arrived on scene with the Lower Mississippi River DART team. *Spencer* ordered them to operate from the Chamlette Slip and begin searching for survivors. CDR Tarantino remembered that: “we took the *Greenbrier* and I just told the officer in charge, ‘Go over to Chalmette. You’re our contact there. Support the D-9 boat guys and engage the command center. Do good things.’ I didn’t have to go on to anymore. He was fully capable and prepared to go over, decide all the logistical issues, figure out who he was going to talk to, how he was going to manage his people. . .He knew if there was something urgent he could call. We didn’t have to go into anything further and I think the same can be said for our small boat guys and when we send a small boat somewhere or when we send a

boarding team somewhere. We don't have to tell them how to do it." The DART teams operating with *Greenbrier* located 75 survivors yet all but one refused any assistance.

By the 5th of September, one week since the hurricane came ashore, the evacuation was winding down and the "Algiers Point Armada" was disbanded. The desperate need for ATON work then began to take precedence. BMCS Noyes noted that "We operated there in New Orleans for eight days. At the end of the first four days the boat crews; the 41-footer crews that were there, got relieved by boat crews from the 1st and 5th District and then two days after that the *Pamlico* and the *Clamp* and the 55108 got chopped off that mission and were sent down to Venice down river to start restoring the [aids to navigation at the] mouth of the river. I was left behind to run this flotilla of small boats, which by that time the *Spencer* was in port and the [USS] *Tortuga* [LSD-46] had shown up, and the plan was that our boat crews would be berthed on the *Tortuga*."

On 5 September *Pamlico*, *Greenbrier*, *Clamp* and two 55-foot ATON boats, the 55114 and 55108, were released to Sector New Orleans and ordered to begin ATON restoration. The day before the *Tortuga* had arrived to assist in the continuing boat operations in the Algiers area and became the "mother ship" for the small craft. *Spencer* was relieved by the CGC *Harriet Lane* on Wednesday, 7 September and the cutter departed New Orleans to continue the AMIO patrol. The *Harriet Lane*, commanded by CDR Steven A. Banks, had been serving at the mouth of the Southwest Pass as a "gatekeeper" to the area, inspecting the merchant vessels waiting to enter the Mississippi and guiding the incoming relief vessels. Along with the *Northland*, which conducted "High Interest Vessel" (HIV) boardings in the Gulf, and later provided personnel in cleanup efforts after Hurricane Rita, these Atlantic Area assets maintained a much needed Coast Guard presence in the waters off the coast.

CDR Tarantino estimated that Coast Guard surface forces in the area had assisted in the evacuation of a total of 5,849 displaced residents by Sunday, 4 September. All told by the end of evacuation operations a total of over 6,600 to 7,000 had been safely evacuated. These intrepid rescuers successfully accomplished under the most trying of circumstances, including a lack of power, fresh water, food, medical supplies, resistance

from some local law enforcement officials and the constant threat by armed and dangerous gangs roaming the streets the successful mass evacuation of a city. As CWO Lewald's armada broke up to begin ATON restoration duties or to work from the *Tortuga*, he told his crews "Make sure you remember what you did and keep those mental pictures because it will stay with you for your life, and it should."

Station New Orleans

At 1500 on Monday, 29 August, ten members of Station New Orleans, including the station's commanding officer, CWO3 Daniel L. T. Brooks, returned to their station after evacuating the previous day where they weathered the storm at his home. What they found once they arrived paralleled what was happening throughout the city of New Orleans in Katrina's aftermath. Many of the reports noted that "civilized society had temporarily ceased to exist." Armed gangs roamed the streets, while looters stole what they could. Law abiding citizens armed themselves to protect their property since it appeared that local law enforcement was overwhelmed or non-existent. Rumors flew through the area, including an ominous story that a gang had broken into a New Orleans Police Department SWAT van and had taken automatic weapons. It was reported that shots had been fired at passing rescue helicopters as well. To say it was a dangerous situation was quite an understatement.

The station, or what was left of it, had been overrun with over 50 people, some of whom had begun looting. BM2 Jessica Guidroz, the "senior unit coxswain for the area" and the others quickly restored order. She remembered that "all of our stuff had been destroyed." She and the others then ". . .set up some security and maintain[ed] some kind of stronghold on these people so they realized that this was our place." They searched the evacuees at the station and confiscated their weapons and also found narcotics and alcohol, which was also confiscated. She told them that "This is our home and you're going to respect our home while you're here." Those that chose to stay at the station were given shelter, food and water. They had to ration the food and water at first and toilet facilities were non-existent so it was a trying time but at least these people were safe. After securing the station's perimeter, they launched their boats and began conducting urban search and rescue operations through the flooded city streets

that were littered with downed electrical lines, broken sewage pipes, ruptured gas lines and innumerable submerged obstacles, including cars and debris.

Station New Orleans became a forward operating base for rescue operations. CWO Brooks oversaw the operation that including facilitating the support for 400 Coast Guard personnel and first responders from 20 different commands. That first day station personnel evacuated over 300 citizens from the south shore of Lake Ponchartrain and the east shore of Slidell as Coast Guard helicopters flew overhead, rescuing those trapped on their roofs. The next day station personnel rescued over 400 persons from low-lying areas to the station and then transferred them to a safer location inland. All local commands assisted in these rescue efforts, including MSU Morgan City personnel who dispatched a 23-foot and a 24-foot boat along with armed crewmen. Their personnel took over the security of the station for the first night. On Wednesday their 23-foot boat rescued 26 evacuees and 4 dogs from a neighborhood adjacent to the 17th Street Canal.

BM2 Guidroz was given command of ten Coast Guard and two Auxiliary craft operating out of the command and in the next six days they rescued over 2,200 flood victims. Some of the rescues got to be quite dangerous, including coming across a group of unruly survivors that rioted and turned on 18 New Orleans' firefighters trying to maintain order at the University of New Orleans. After threatening to leave the crowd to their own fate, they calmed down. She then continued with the rescue operations. Dealing with unruly and possibly dangerous crowds of desperate survivors was one of the major challenges faced by all the Coast Guardsmen involved. It was a testament to their training and individual makeup that there were no violent incidents taken against them.

After working straight for 14 to 18 hours a day for 19 days, BM2 Guidroz was finally relieved for a few days. She, like most of the personnel who lived in the area, had lost her home and her belongings but disregarded their personal loss and continued with their rescue operations. She noted that "I lost everything. . .and even though I wanted to break down. . .I had to try to maintain my composure to keep these guys. . .focused."

MSST 91112 New Orleans

There were times during the early hours and days of the rescue operations in the air and on the ground that they were halted due to the threat of lawlessness. Roving gangs of looters, many armed, made the situation surreal and very precarious. The rescuers needed protection and once again the Coast Guard supplied the answer. MSST New Orleans, under the command of LCDR Sean Regan, deployed to the area in the immediate aftermath of Katrina. CAPT Mueller remembered that “Lieutenant Commander Shawn Regan; we desperately needed security down here. . . So I grabbed him and said, ‘I can’t tell you what you’re going to do exactly but go down there and do it because we need security. You guys are the heavy hitters in the security game. You’re highly trained for this. Go down there and take care of our people,’ and he came down here and did a magnificent job because the Comms were so bad.” While he reported to the Incident Command Post at Alexandria, he deployed six Surf Rescue Boats (SRBs) with 37 crewmen under the command of CWO Randall Ryan to the downtown New Orleans area. RADM Duncan approved a use of force policy that permitted the crews to use less than lethal munitions ashore if the situation warranted it.

The MSSTs did not work alone either. Other Coast Guard personnel armed themselves with weapons from the stations, including those in the armada. PSUs began arriving and these forces assisted in establishing security for rescue and recovery operations. But the impact of the first MSST members and others such as the Coast Guardsmen from MSU Morgan City and MSO Port Arthur to enter the city was substantial. Their initial efforts to assist and support the first responders, including the New Orleans police and fire departments, prevented complete chaos during those early hours after the hurricane had passed. Their work escorting supply convoys and providing armed escort to the boat crews kept the rescue operations functioning smoothly. They even went on to assist the local FBI office with logistics support and guarded the levee repair personnel and the crews that were dewatering the city, tasks they were not trained for but quickly and effectively adapted to and accomplished successfully.

Zephyr Field

LCDR Daryl Schaffer, assigned to ISC New Orleans, weathered the hurricane at Loran Station Grangeville. He returned to New Orleans with a couple of small boats, including the Grangeville's morale boat, to assess the damage to ISC New Orleans but when he told the Sector staff about his plans, they ordered him to ignore the station for the moment and ". . .'Go pick people off rooftops.'" So just over a day after Katrina struck, he remembered, "we were down at the I-10/610 split in New Orleans. . .we launched a boat and made our first rescue. And as far as I know. . .ISC New Orleans had the first surface rescue from a Coast Guard unit. . . We set up a unified command and started running full operations there. . .We had about 40 boats that were launched and about three to four hundred rescue personnel on site and probably 300 units as far as cars, vehicles and everything else in that area. And the first day we concluded at sunset; around 7:30, and we had counted up 340 personnel that we had rescued from all the Coast Guard and FEMA units there." As for the technique of these rescues, he explained that "It wasn't just pulling people off the roofs. . .you're patrolling along in your boat and you turn the motor off and you stop and listen, and you listen for cries for help. You listen for knocks on a building, on a roof. You look for hands sticking out of a hole in the roof or out of a window from an attic. That's what you do."

LCDR Schaffer then went on to help establish a joint command center at Zephyr Field, the home ballpark for the New Orleans Zephyrs, who at the time were the AAA affiliate of the Washington Nationals. The practice field, which survived the hurricane virtually unscathed, became the primary staging area for FEMA, DoD, state and National Guard small boat relief operations. LCDR Shaeffer was the first to organize the Coast Guard units that came into Zephyr Field and acted as the principle Coast Guard liaison officer for those other agencies, a position known as the Unified Command Representative (UCR) while the area was designated as Forward Operating Base Zephyr Field (FOB Zephyr Field). On Thursday, 1 September LCDR Shannon Gilreath, Commanding Officer of MSU Baton Rouge, arrived and took over the duties as the UCR after first participating in the ferry operations with CWO Lewald's armada with two of his boat crews from MSU Baton Rouge.

CAPT Mueller described how LCDR Gilreath got the job: “We hand picked. . .Lieutenant Commander Gilreath to go to Zephyr Field. He had a strong command presence and he would fit in with the operation down there. So we picked him and I said to him, ‘I can’t tell you what you’re going to be doing exactly but when you get there you’re going to understand what needs to happen with the boats and the search and rescue. So go there and do the best you can and we’ll send you everything we can,’ and those were his orders because we had almost no communication with him at all. It was extremely difficult because all the cell phones were down, the land lines were down and the radios were kind of ineffective. So we sent him off saying, ‘Do the best you can and we’ll be in touch as soon as we can.’”

LCDR Gilreath continued to marshal all the federal, state and local response agencies to the task at hand. The unified command eventually numbered 720 persons including personnel from the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division, FEMA, local area law enforcement and fire department personnel, and the Louisiana Fish and Wildlife Service. One hundred and sixty seven Coast Guardsmen from 49 different Coast Guard units from across the country were among those persons serving with the unified command, including personnel from six MSSTs, PSU 309, TACLETs, and a D-9 SAR Detachment. They deployed on average 46 boats for urban search and rescue operations every day and provided security for those operations as well as other commands. CAPT Mueller recalled “it was obvious from that first overflight the first day that we didn’t have enough. So we had logistics immediately put out the call, ‘We need more coxswains. We need the flood punts from St. Louis. . .We put in our request. They gave them to D-8 and they made it happen. You know D-8 was awesome.”

A boat coxswain and veteran of FOB Zephyr Field, MK1 Steve Bates, discussed the circumstances of this phase of the rescue response: “Just the whole thing was unique basically. I mean I never had to drive a boat down the city streets and pick up people from their houses.” ENS Clint Townsen of MSO St. Louis described it as “This was nothing that we ever expected—getting people out of houses, driving over cars, dragging and walking boats through shallow areas to get to deeper water. Most of us have never gone into a house and picked up a wheelchair and figured out how to get it

into a boat.” GM2 Oliver Haeske, of MSST NOLA 91112, described the conditions for the boat crews that entered New Orleans on a daily basis on board a flood punt or small boat: “. . .there wasn’t a reasonable amount of rest or recuperative time for the first week down there. For the first probably like four days or so we were also short on MREs so we were only allowed to eat one MRE a day. So a lot of people were pretty hungry. And a lot of us were volunteering for missions and we were working from 6 to 10 o’clock at night and then just getting whatever sleep we could. You know from days like that you want to wind down for an hour or so, so you’re not really in bed until 11, maybe midnight, and you’re up again working in the heat. It’s just hard to . . . I know everybody there was suffering from heat exhaustion but they wouldn’t admit it and they just kept going.”

One of his rescue operations pointed to the problems many of the responders were facing—the stubborn intransigence of the people who chose to remain in New Orleans. GM2 Haeske remarked that: “In one area it was a project area and we found a family that was just living in the second story of their house. They had a balcony. We just called in a Coast Guard helicopter and they got airlifted out. People were, at that point, had been either talked to or seen the rescue helicopters but they just didn’t want to leave and so we had to actually spend time convincing them that it was in their best interest to get out of there, you know, ‘You’re not going to be given water forever and you’re not going to be getting food dropped to you forever,’ you know, ‘We’re not coming back. This is your last chance.’” Many did listen and took the offer of evacuation but many refused to leave regardless of the danger.

Most of the responders all expressed their concerns about the flood water and its toxic ingredients. BMCS Noyes put it succinctly: “When you see cockroaches dying in New Orleans in the water you know it’s not good.” LCDR Schaffer stated that “You tried not to get in the water if you didn’t have to. You tried not to touch the water. . .But if you’re pulling somebody in out of the water you’re going to get wet. During the first day maybe there weren’t quite as many contaminants out there but you could still smell the raw sewage. The scent was in the air. The rotting food hadn’t really started out yet. That came a couple days later when the waters receded. The oil spills; remember there are

cars underwater there, oil is going to leak and you could see the sheens on top of the water. So there were contaminants in the water.”

The water itself and concerns about what was in it led to one change in operations. D-9 had contributed small boats and shallow draft ice boats and crews from Sector Detroit. The ice boats were “air boats” such as those used in swamps. They were powered by a propeller mounted above the boat’s stern for propulsion – they were ideal for rescues on frozen lakes but as RADM Duncan noted: “. . .about three days into it you’ll see that we stopped using air boats. . .Because they’ll aerosolize whatever is in that water and now you’re going to breathe it.” Nevertheless many Coast Guardsmen, boat crews and rescue swimmers, voluntarily exposed themselves to the risks the contaminated water posed in order to keep saving lives. No one knows what the long-term dangers of that exposure might be.

Developing procedures on the fly, as it were, including force protection issues, these small boats and their crews ventured into the city on a daily basis. SAR operations came to a halt on 1 September, however, due to concerns about rescuers’ safety. LCDR Gilreath then devised the tactic of having one command and control boat with two armed crew and one unarmed coxswain escort three other DART boats on each mission. Due to the limited number of firearms and body armor available during these first few days, his tactic effectively “enabled us to deploy all DART boats with some form of armed escort and at the same time maximize space available for evacuees.” The armed escorts were “free to defend themselves if required [although they were] strongly encouraged to safely withdraw from situation as quickly as possible should self defense actions appear likely.” Other issues included obtaining accurate intelligence on possible threats and on the numbers and location of survivors still in the city that needed evacuation.

Those SAR operations got underway again on Friday, 2 September. Attempting to get a DART into the Chalmette area which had been difficult to reach, they conducted the first ever “air insertion” of four DART boats via Air National Guard Chinook helicopters, an operation planned by LT Alfred E. Jackson, the commanding officer of an 18-person

DART from Sector Upper Mississippi River. Although the 85 persons located in the area refused to evacuate and were simply resupplied with food and water, the operation was nevertheless successful because it provided accurate intelligence of the area and also proved that air insertion of DARTs worked.

Monday, 5 September, one week after the Gulf landfall of hurricane Katrina, saw a “dramatic drop off in rescues” although miracles still happened. Most experts stated that any persons still trapped and helpless in their homes would not have survived past Thursday, 1 September. But on Tuesday, 6 September a rescue team made up of Coast Guard MSST, TACLET, and PSU personnel found and rescued a 70-year-old man trapped in an attic in East New Orleans while another team saved three puppies in lower St. Bernard. On Wednesday 7 September LCDR Gilreath organized a “partnership” with the newly arrived 82nd Airborne and deployed all 24 Coast Guard DART boats to support their Army comrades. At the time LCDR Gilreath was relieved by LCDR Brad Wallace of PSU-307 on Thursday, 8 September, the forces deployed out of Zephyr Field saved a total of 12,310 persons, 5,825 of which were saved by the Coast Guardsmen assigned to FOB Zephyr.

Mississippi & Alabama



While the tragedy of New Orleans received most of the media’s attention at the time, the coastal areas of Mississippi and Alabama (**left—Gulfport, MS**) too suffered catastrophic damage. The Coast Guard responded in these areas even though many stations were damaged or destroyed. As Katrina approached the Gulf coast, Sector Mobile, under the command of CAPT James D. Bjostad, established the Mobile Incident Command Katrina (MIC-K) on Friday, 26 August. On Sunday he evacuated the command center to the Aviation Training Center where they rode out the storm. CAPT Bjostad, along with his deputy, CAPT Edwin M. Stanton, then oversaw the reconstitution of the Mississippi and Alabama coast. CDR Barry Compagnoni, as the MIC-K Operations Section Chief, directed the operations of the stations under the Sector plus Station Gulfport, the cutters *Razorbill*, *Pompano*, *Shamal*,

Tornado, Decisive, Saginaw, Wedge, Oak, Joshua Appleby, Barbara Mabrity, Cypress, MSST Kings Bay, PSU 308 and 309 along with four ANT teams.

CWO Steve Lyons (**right**), the commanding officer of Station Gulfport, secured his station and evacuated his personnel to safety on Sunday, 28 August. Prior to departing though they responded to two search and rescue calls on Casino Row, saving two lives before Katrina's landfall. They returned to their station by 1900 Monday evening to a scene of total devastation -- Station Gulfport no longer existed. Disregarding their personal



discomfort, complete lack of communications, no restrooms, water or food, they immediately began search and rescue operations from Ocean Springs, Mississippi to the Pearl River, expanding their area of operations to include Bay St. Louis, Bayou Caddey and the coastal barrier islands. Assisted by personnel from PSUs 308 and 309, they were underway for 396 hours during 36 vessel sorties. They saved two lives, conducted three medical transports, and assisted 275 persons. The latter were Vietnamese-American fishermen who had weathered the hurricane on their fishing vessels and were stranded without food or water. These fishermen were supplied daily by the Coast Guard.

CWO Lyons also assisted in the establishment of the ad-hoc Mississippi Coastal Recovery Task Force (MCRTF) in Gulfport, commanded by CDR Compagnoni. His command was instrumental in integrating resources that began to pour into the area, including other Coast Guard units such as CGC *Decisive*, *Razorbill* and *Pampano*. Both Compagnoni and Lyons worked closely with the nearby Navy Seabee Construction Battalion in building temporary structures for his command. Within ten days, the Seabees constructed three temporary office buildings, station communications were reestablished, an enclosed mess was operating and 20 travel trailers were on scene.



The CGC *Decisive* (**left**) had been ordered by LANTAREA on 26 August to get underway to avoid Katrina. On 31 August the cutter was ordered to proceed up the Mississippi River to assist in relief efforts. D-8 IMT then ordered *Decisive* to Gulfport where it arrived on 3 September after following a channel cleared and marked by the CGC *Harry Claiborne*. CDR Compagnoni designated *Decisive* as

the on-scene commander of the MCRTF on 5 September. *Decisive* carried out duties much like those undertaken by the *Spencer* in New Orleans, serving as a command, control and communications platform. Other operations included supporting the smaller boats and cutters operating in the area, providing force protection, sending crew members to assist with operations ashore, food distribution, helicopter support and coordinating operations with other responding agencies.

Principle Federal Official (PFO)

The national visibility of the Coast Guard reached new heights again when on 5 September Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff announced the appointment of then-Coast Guard Chief of Staff VADM Thad W. Allen (**right**) as the Deputy PFO for Katrina operations. Then on 9 September Secretary Chertoff announced that VADM Allen was replacing Michael Brown as the PFO for Katrina. During this time VADM Allen became one of the more highly visible Coast Guardsmen in recent memory, appearing at news conferences and on national talk shows, demonstrating his promise to offer hope to the residents of New Orleans and to the country. His efforts, along with those Coast Guardsmen he brought along with him to serve as staff members, to coordinate and



lead the Federal response, led directly to a quelling of media and public criticism and an immediate turnaround in the morale of the responders and workers. Working closely with Louisiana Governor Blanco, Mayor Nagin, and the JTF under LTGEN Russel L. Honoré, Allen successfully got the Federal relief efforts functioning effectively. His priorities included the continued dewatering of the city, repairing the levees and the pumping systems, and checking each and every house and building in the city to assess its condition as well as recover any remains. From that point on the task at hand was to completely rebuild a major metropolis from the ground up, a task of monumental proportions that had not been done to a city at this level of devastation in the United States since the 1906 earthquake destroyed San Francisco.

Restoration and Response

This region of the Gulf Coast is one of the most important maritime economic areas in the country. It is host to four of the nation's top 10 ports, and serves as the maritime economic gateway to the nation's mid-west. Katrina proved to have global economic implications by disrupting this "gateway" and significantly threatening the heart of the nation's economy. The storm impacted 255 miles of the Mississippi River and more than 200 miles of the Gulf Intercoastal Waterway. Over 1,900, or 80 percent of the aids to navigation below New Orleans, were swept away. Hundreds of barges, fishing vessels, and other floating craft were sunk or grounded, with some blocking safe navigation while others had been tossed inland like so many toys. There were hundreds of oil spills, including seven "major" and five "medium" spills, totaling over 9.4 million gallons from storage tanks, refineries, pipelines and marine facilities across 130 miles of area waterways. Of the 2068 oil and gas platforms in the Gulf, 52 were reported lost and another 58 were damaged. To deal with these catastrophes, the Coast Guard established the Maritime Recovery and Restoration Task Force (MRRTF) in Saint Louis, Missouri, to coordinate and oversee the service's response.

With the nation's grain harvest ready to move from the heartland to New Orleans and then onto the world, the restoration of the waterways was a national priority. The Captain of the Port for New Orleans, and therefore the officer who oversaw the marine safety response, was CAPT Paskewich. Keeping the country running by restoring these

waterways was the Coast Guard's responsibility. CAPT Paskewich explained what his command did: "Seventy percent of the aides below the city of New Orleans were destroyed. It was in the hundreds. We restored all the critical aides, what we consider critical. All



aides are important but there are certain aides that are absolutely critical that you can't move the ships if you don't have them. We've tried to focus on that just for expediency purposes to get the waterway open. Plus we had the Inter Coastal Waterway opened. Even before the deep draft channel we had to reopen the Inter Coastal Waterway, so we surveyed that to get barge traffic moving. . .We opened up the upper part of the river first because there was no damage and that allowed barge traffic to head up north into the Heartland and from the Heartland down through the Morgan City area. Then we opened up the Inter Coastal Waterway within the city of New Orleans. Then we opened it up for deep draft traffic up river but that doesn't do you a whole lot of good if you can't get out of the river. Then finely on the third or fourth day we opened it up to deep draft traffic."

One of the most significant hurdles to getting the port of New Orleans back up and running was not the damage to the port's infrastructure but what became problematic for the whole city, convincing the workers to return. As CAPT Paskewich noted, the problem was "bringing workers back; truckers, stevedores; those stevedores are those who do the work, who offload the cargo, getting people back into the city to do the job to move the cargo off the ship and then drive it away, that's the limiting factor."

To handle the sunken or grounded vessels in the area, the Coast Guard brought together a team of experts from the public and private sector, including the Navy Supervisor of Salvage and the American Salvage Association. CAPT Paskewich later

testified to Congress that: “we went out and took the action that we needed to bring in the right contractors to exercise leverage against the owners of the vessels and have them do an immediate removal of that particular asset.” The aids to navigation teams (ANTs) began by restoring those aids that were absolutely critical to safe navigation. But there were problems. The restoration of the area’s aids to navigation was significantly impacted by the devastation wrought at the ATON stations. ANT Venice, ANT New Orleans and ANT Gulfport were virtually destroyed as was the ATON office at Sector New Orleans along with the ATON equipment at ISC New Orleans.



Replacement ATON equipment was shipped from other ANT teams around the country while useable equipment was salvaged from the damaged stations. ATON boats and buoy tenders from other commands also lent a hand. Prepositioned assets also assisted, including the CGC *Cypress* which had been pre-staged to Houston. RADM Duncan noted that he ordered the tender loaded “with as many Aids to Navigation supplies as she could physically carry.”

CDR John Little, in charge of ATON oversight for the Atlantic Area, explained the importance of the other Districts in assisting D-8, in particular the responsiveness of D-7 ANT teams: “. . .the 7th District was really joining on the spot with a lot of backfill from not only cutters but ANT teams. . .every District surveyed their various OAN programs to determine Tiger Teams that could be in the cue and be responsive to their needs but D-7 launched right away because they really have it down there and not only did they send equipment but they sent people right behind [the storm].” Remarkably the Coast Guard opened the Mississippi River to surface traffic within 5 days of Hurricane Katrina’s landfall. All of the aids to navigation that were destroyed were rebuilt or replaced within six weeks.

The response to this disaster brought 750 pollution responders into play, including 90 persons from each of the three Coast Guard strike teams. CDR Meredith Austin, the

National Strike Force commander, noted that the response was eased somewhat by the conditions of many of the spills: "You know it's interesting because for what we do, the problem with . . .the coastal pollution piece. . .most of the major oil spills were big above ground storage tanks that were breeched somehow, and luckily most of the oil stayed in either the secondary containment or within the canals - it did not get out into the river." But the challenge was still immense. She also noted that ". . .this event definitely is the greatest use of Strike Team assets." As Hurricane Rita approached the area, the response had to shut down to move personnel and equipment out of harms way again but only briefly stopped the restoration and recovery efforts.

LCDR Richard Campbell, the maritime pollution response deputy incident commander at FOB Baton Rouge, catalogued other problems the responders faced: "Lack of available berthing, unreliable communications, impassable roadways and remoteness of response sites all significantly hamstrung our efforts. . .Just one of these hurdles at just one major spill would pose a significant challenge to any unit. Remarkably, these folks overcame all of them. . .The Coast Guard continues to set the bar in numerous facets of this catastrophic incident."

CDR Ronald Cantin served at the Federal On-Scene Coordinator and Incident Commander in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. He coordinated and led the response to thousands of oil and hazardous material operations. CDR Cantin's unified command consisted of more than 20 federal, state and private organizations in the clean up effort, including the recovery of 3.4 million gallons of oil from six major, three medium and more than 140 smaller oil spills. His forces, consisting of over 1,000 responders, 35 contractors, helicopters, three Maritime Administration vessels, 34 oil recover barges and over 100 small boats, recovered "over 17,000 abandoned hazardous material containers throughout the environmentally sensitive wetlands of South Louisiana." They also responded to over 600 grounded vessels in the Alabama and Mississippi coastal zone.

Within a little over a month after Katrina and Rita, the Coast Guard completed shoreline and waterway assessments throughout the region. They deployed more than 31,300

feet of boom and recovered more than 3.3 million gallons of oil as well as supervised several controlled oil spill burns. By December of that year they resolved 4,225 out of a total of 4,984 pollution cases reported to the Coast Guard and the EPA. They assessed the condition of a total of 504 vessels that were grounded or had been deposited inland to determine if they were discharging fuel. They recovered or disposed of 17,000 hazardous material containers and assessed the condition of more than 200 refineries or processing plants.

Hurricane Rita

As the clean up and restorations operations for Katrina was in full gear, another hurricane, Rita, threatened the region. It too was an incredibly strong storm, reaching a Category 5 while in the Gulf on 21 September. The next day the Coast Guard gained more national visibility when Secretary Chertoff appointed another Coast Guard officer, RADM Larry Hereth, as the PFO for Rita in Texas while VADM Allen was appointed as the Rita-PFO for Louisiana. As with Katrina, the Coast Guard positioned assets out of the hurricane's direct path but close enough to either fly or sail in behind the retreating storm.

Rita came ashore at 0238 CDT on the Texas-Louisiana border as a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 115 mph. Although still a terribly dangerous storm, its effects were in no way comparable to Katrina. CAPT Jones explained the planning for Rita: ". . .with Rita what happened was the Coast Guard forces recognized the night before that, 'You know what, it's not going to be in Texas. The SAR is going to be in coastal Louisiana. There's going to be destruction in Texas but there aren't going to be people that need to be rescued there. And so we had our game plan set up to immediately fly into Southwest Louisiana and start plucking people out of floodwaters, and guess what happened? That's what happened. Rita came in, it flooded heavily and we sent all of our helicopters in tropical storm force winds; 60-70 knot winds, and they started plucking people off rooftops. . .the initial response really is the province of first responders and that's sheriffs, fire departments, police and Coast Guard. . .It's flexibility, on-scene initiative, on-scene judgment, a clear objective which empowered search and rescue units. The field commander has delegated them the authority to make the

decisions without getting permission and that's what spells the difference between a quick and effective rescue operation and a slow and laborious response.”

BMCS Noyes described the heroic actions of one of his petty officers, BM1 Karen Boxwell, in the response to Rita: “[she] got on the phone with the Sector. She was designated as the On-scene Commander for Coast Guard response to the flooding of South Terrebonne, coordinated helicopter rescues, coordinated boat rescues, and in the first day alone contacted 250 to 300 people asking them did they want to be rescued. . .and they brought out three special needs victims. That's all that would leave and they were all helicopter rescues.”

Some of the “lessons learned” from Katrina were put into place for the response to Rita. RADM Duncan explained: “When Rita threatened, DOD. . .established a joint task force early. They had notionally established a JTF [Joint Task Force] or were thinking about it for Katrina. It didn't get on the ground until some days after Katrina. In Rita they stood up their joint task force early. . .and in the event the division of labor that we agreed upon was that the Coast Guard would take from Corpus Christi to Louisiana, wherever this thing hit from the coast to 15-miles inland.” Much to everyone's relief, though, the search and rescue operations after Rita's passage were almost anti-climatic. Overall the Coast Guard saved 138 lives and conducted 53 medical evacuations during the response to Rita.

“They Really Hit a Home Run”

The Coast Guard's response amongst all of the involved agencies was universally lauded as being a model of efficiency and effectiveness. At the peak of this response the Coast Guard was rescuing 750 people an hour by boat and 100 people an hour by air. Coast Guardsmen evacuated 9,409 more from 11 hospitals for a total of 33,544 rescues during Katrina operations. During the Rita rescue operations, the Coast Guard saved an additional 138 lives and conducted 53 medical evacuations. A total of 76 Coast Guard and Coast Guard Auxiliary aircraft took part in the rescues during both hurricanes. They flew a total of 4,945 sorties with a flight time of 4,291 hours. The air crews saved or evacuated a total of 12,535 while 42 cutters and 190 small boats that

participated in rescue and evacuation operations saved another 21,200. This brought the total of lives “saved” and “evacuated to safety” for both hurricane rescue operations to 33,735. Over 5,000 Coast Guardsmen served in Katrina and Rita relief operations. CDR Gorman summed the Coast Guard’s response succinctly: “They really hit a home run.”

Although the rescue and restoration efforts were highly successful and there were no aircraft crashes or serious casualties amongst the Coast Guard, there was a serious cost. Hurricanes Rita and Katrina took over 1,800 civilian lives and caused upwards of \$100 billion in damage. That damage extended to the Coast Guard. A total of 582 Coast Guardsmen lost their homes during Katrina and another 69 lost theirs during Rita. Station Gulfport was completely destroyed while stations Grande Isle, New Orleans, Dauphin Island, Pascagoula, Venice, as well as sectors Mobile and New Orleans, AIRSTA New Orleans, ATC Mobile and ISC New Orleans all sustained damage. While most of the repairs are now complete, Station Gulfport only recently held a groundbreaking ceremony for its new replacement station.

Some of the lessons learned from both hurricane responses have been or are being implemented by the service. The upgrades in material, particularly communication equipment, engineered by the Deep Water program proved their usefulness but the smaller boats and tenders still need their communication suites upgraded. Units learned the value of becoming more expeditionary, so that they could set up operation virtually anywhere after an event and have everything they need on-hand, much like the PSUs. The stations developed a movable chest to carry their equipment and tools with that they could pack up and take with them when they evacuate, much like they use on the NASCAR circuit, whereas before that material was left at the station and was invariably destroyed by the storm. The aerial insertion of DART teams and equipment by helicopters proved its usefulness. Most importantly the liaison officers assigned to the various emergency operations and command centers proved their worth time and again.

The Coast Guard's success was due to a number of factors. One of the most important keys with both Katrina and Rita proved to be the standardized training that service members undergo, including both the aviation and boat force community. VADM Crea explained "And that's what happened at the station with the MSST that popped in. What becomes so incredibly important at that point is standardization; standardized training, standardized equipment, a standardized expectation of command and control, and then the core values; the devotion to duty and the unquestioned commitment to doing the mission.

Another key reason for the Coast Guard's success, repeatedly referred to by those interviewed, was the service's culture. CAPT Callahan explained "Our culture is one of first response, and that culture, we empower our coxswains and our aircraft commanders to go out there and make decisions on-scene and we empower our chief petty officers. . .to make those kinds of decisions at the lower levels, especially during a crisis like Katrina and that's exactly what happened. That culture that we have; that culture of first response, actually paid off I think. We had people making the right decisions on-scene, making the adjustments and being flexible and adaptable and I think that's exactly what we should be doing, and that's why we are valuable in the first response arena in these kinds of storms and these kinds of events." RADM Duncan, in testimony to a Congressional committee, also referenced the service's culture: "Our culture is one of service—it's always our top priority. Over the years, we've adapted to multiple missions, and do them with skill. We're a multi-mission organization, and see ourselves as service oriented. We can shift mission priorities in the middle of a flight." CAPT Paskewich noted that "We are well-honed first responders. These are missions we do everyday. We're trained to respond, so it's ingrained in our culture."

VADM Allen also identified what he thought was the core reason for the service's success: ". . .we expect that our operational commanders will exercise 'on-scene initiative.' When we were cut off from higher echelons and communications weren't working down there, everybody knew how to do their job, and they did the right thing and they did what was expected of them." Most of the senior officers testified to this "can do" attitude, referred to officially as "The Principle of On-Scene Initiative," whether

it was the pilots flying at night through power lines, rescue swimmers swinging axes on rooftops, or a deck hand from a buoy tender commandeering buses to evacuate victims, each Coast Guardsmen “knew how to do their job” and they went out and did it with little or no direction. As CWO Lewald pointed out, “You know a couple words pass between a couple of sailors and the job gets done.” Standardized training, solid command and control, adaptability, versatility, excellent equipment along with that “can do” attitude were all keys to the Coast Guard’s success during Katrina and Rita. The women and men of the Coast Guard did all that the nation expected of its oldest continuous-going federal sea service, and more.

Author's Note:

I was tasked last year to write an overview history of Coast Guard operations during Hurricane Katrina. But I was only given a limited time to research and write it before it was to be submitted for publication – I therefore decided to write a narrative concentrating almost exclusively on what happened with the Eighth District command staff and the Coast Guard's SAR operations along the Gulf coast. My main source of information were the oral histories collected by the KART team, some of which were conducted as the remnants of that deadly hurricane left the continental U.S. As such, this is really a history of what the Coast Guard did from the view of those who were there on the ground, in the air and on and in the water along the Gulf Coast during this horrific natural disaster.

This history is dedicated to those responders' devotion to duty, selflessness, humanity, and most of all their bravery.

Since this is strictly a look at the Coast Guard's response to the hurricane and its immediate aftermath, I only wrote briefly about Admiral Thad Allen's tenure as PFO and the Coast Guard's long-term clean-up operations but both subjects deserve their own publications as well.

