

A Surreal Experience at Algiers Ferry Landing

by Sgt. Cliff Ortis

It felt as though it was 120 degrees, and everywhere I looked, agents' class B uniform shirts were wringing wet with sweat. We were waiting at Algiers Landing for a ferryboat crossing the Mississippi, and loaded with New Orleanians. The water was still high and some of the people had finally conceded that the water wasn't going anywhere anytime soon and that they had to bite the bullet and leave their most treasured possessions behind not knowing where they were going.

The ferry arrived and the passengers started pouring onto the landing area. There were elderly, sick, confused, distraught, and even unconscious, people all looking for answers. Unfortunately, we weren't able to give them many answers. You could see the desperation in their eyes and

the frustration in ours. We were trying to aid the sick and elderly, comfort the distraught, all while trying to figure out how we were going to get these people to a transport area.

Everywhere you looked—when you had time to—agents were running to the aid of someone. It all became overwhelming and surreal: who to help first, whom to give the limited supply of water to. We needed to get these people to a triage area. Hundreds of people all asking the same questions, all wearing the same clothes they'd worn since the day Hurricane Katrina hit and all soaking wet. Finally we found a schoolyard with several buses on premises, and several agents went over and drove the buses back to the landing area. Somehow we were able to contact a convoy of National Guard with the large transport trucks. Then

the task came to determine who would get on first and who would have to wait for the next transport. We had the elderly and the sick, infants and children—all distraught, all with special needs and all needing to be moved and treated. Who would make the decisions?

The people piled up in front of the bus doors in unorganized lines. Sometimes you were lucky and could find your supervisor, who was already overwhelmed, and let him make the hard choices. And sometimes there was no time to find him; you had to make the decisions on your own. You could see the frustration in the refugees' eyes as one would get on and the other would be told to wait. Transports for the people were a rarity, and we knew it.

You could see agents picking up people who had been in

the rancid water for days without any hesitancy or reservations, literally hugging them as they helped get them into a seat or moved from one seat to another. The storm victims had no sense of balance and would lean on another who was too weak to bear the weight. At times you thought you were in a dream, and it seemed as though there was no end to the chaos.

Then someone had to be assigned to drive the buses, which most of us had no experience doing. Finally we were moving some people and things started to feel a little bit better.

This small recollection is only of one time during one day of one week that I and other agents experienced face to face—with uncertainty about what was to come as well as what we had just been through. ■

