

# Hurricane Katrina Response: There We Were...

by Sr. Agent Wayne Parker

## Day One: Aug. 29, 2005/ There We Were...

... listening to the radio as Hurricane Katrina makes landfall.  
... arriving at Woodworth for briefing with agents from northern regions of the state.  
... at Louisiana State Police Cafeteria eating what was described by supervisors as our last hot meal for a few days.  
... waiting for the bridge inspectors to clear the I-10 into New Orleans.  
... sitting just east of Causeway Boulevard, where floodwaters covered I-10; some agents were dispatched locally while others awaited damage reports and task assignments.

... driving down a bicycle path on top of the Mississippi River levee toward downtown New Orleans, and removing trees from the road before the convoy could pass.

... launching vessels from the St. Claude Bridge into the Ninth Ward. I remember seeing a flounder struggling at my feet as we launched.

... pushing power lines and traffic lights to the side as we navigated each street. No street signs were visible.

... rescuing children and parents from the roof of a school.

... watching a passenger whimper, forced to leave his yellow lab behind so we would have room for more persons.

... helping one victim into the boat as he questioned, "Did they catch them?" "Catch who?" we replied. "The ones who blew up the levee!"

... listening to victims describe the floodwater approaching



Eight days after Katrina hit New Orleans, floodwaters are still high in the Garden District area of the city. As Sr. Agent Wayne Parker searches for victims, he stops to display the depth at the intersection of Louisiana Avenue and Galvez. Agents launched search-and-rescue vessels near St. Charles Street.

an intersection from all four directions. They reported that the water rose approximately 6 feet in the first 15 minutes. One lady described the water rushing in the front door and sweeping her young daughter out the back door. Her husband went out the back door to rescue the girl and never returned.

... escorting a police officer into Arabi following his last cell phone conversation with his dad, who indicated the water was coming into his house and that he would be leaving by boat shortly. When we arrived, only three feet of the two-story house was visible. The boat was still attached to the trailer and floating beside the house.

... idling eye-level with a Walmart Supercenter sign hanging on the storefront.

... not wanting to leave when ordered to take out to refuel and regroup.

## Day Two: Ninth Ward/ There We Were...

... drifting off to sleep while awaiting my turn to hand pump fuel into my unit and vessel.

... launching again into the Ninth Ward with hardly any room to park a unit and empty trailer.

... motoring past a barge that apparently came through the breach in the levee and rested on some houses.

... hearing the cries for help from a lady stuck in a roof vent. She had retreated to her attic and disconnected her oven vent pipe from the roof where she could cry for help. She did not realize that a gas leak had filled the vent pipe with gas. At some point, she decided to smoke a cigarette. Unfortunately, the gas ignited and she suffered second-degree burns to her face. When we rescued her from the roof, her hair was gone

and her facial skin was charred and hanging. We peeled the roof back to make the opening large enough for the rescue.

... seeing a red shirt on a broom stick being used as a distress flag flying above a residence where we wrapped a quadriplegic woman in a sheet and lifted her into the boat. As the floodwaters entered the house, her husband had lifted her onto a mattress atop a dresser.

... assisting agents with one man who had been caught between two houses when the levee broke. The houses had been removed from their foundations and were grinding along at different speeds.

His head and face were badly cut. His tongue was swollen from dehydration and was protruding from his mouth. His eyes were dried shut from his injuries. Agents placed him on a folding closet door and transported him to the St. Claude Bridge, where an hour later he was still lying on the bridge under the shade of an open ice chest.

... getting weak and sick to my stomach.

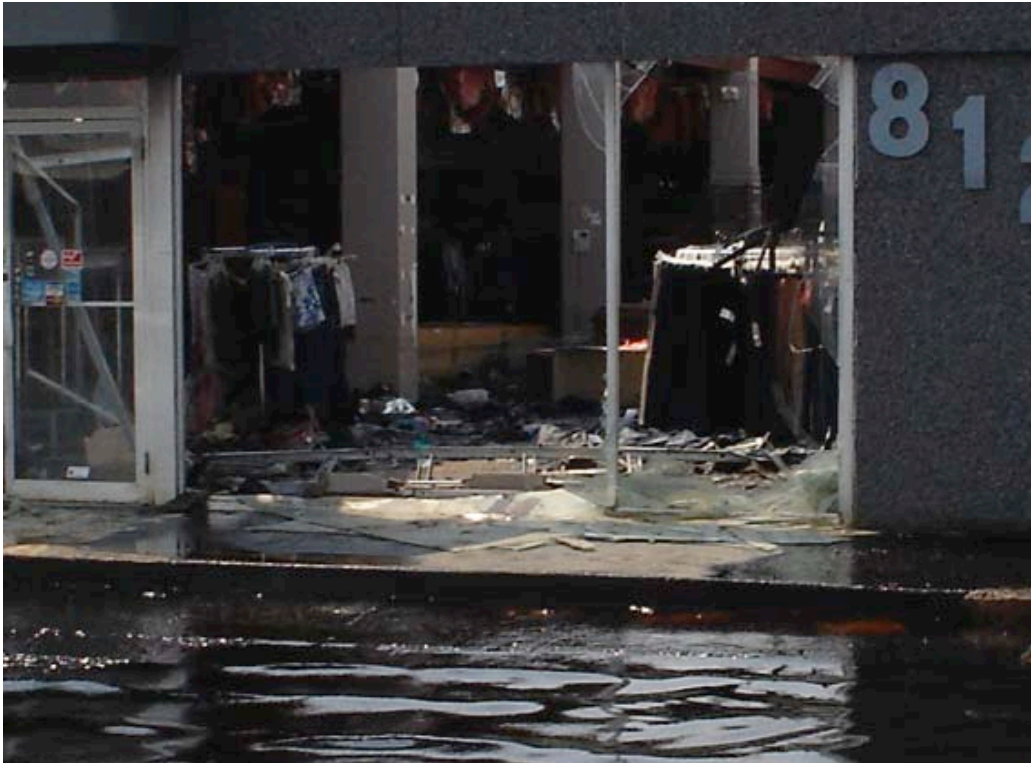
... handing out my water and drinks to children and the elderly, and having others beg for it.

... helping a victim open a can of corn found floating in the debris. He drank the contents straight from the can.

... having the contents stolen from the bed of my truck.

... coming face to face with a violent grieving victim whose dead aunt had just been accidentally delivered to the launch area at St. Claude

PHOTO GALLERY



Bridge. Apparently, the volunteer rescuer did not know that we were only transporting live passengers. When they arrived at the drop off, one of the other volunteers coarsely blurted out to throw her back into the water. This caused a confrontation with family members that lasted some time. We eventually covered the deceased and respectfully placed her on a balcony near the drop off.

... lifting nursing home victims onto the tailgates of our trucks. One man was blind and had only a collapsible cane in his rear right pocket. As we placed him on the tailgate, we told him he would be riding between two beautiful elderly ladies from the nursing home. He replied, "Oh boy! I love beautiful women." He continued, "But really, son, everybody is beautiful to me." I remember seeing his face in the crowd as we departed past the foot of the bridge. I feel certain he was still there the next day. However, because of the large number of persons on the bridge, it became almost impossible for us to access that area.

... arriving late at Carville, appreciating a shower, but waking up during the night

wishing for the comfort of my truck seat as cold concrete was all that was available when we arrived.

### **Day Three: Downtown New Orleans/There We Were...**

... assembling at Tanger Mall to find out that tensions were high and shots had been fired.

... wearing a lifejacket over body armor.

... going over my waders as we launched from Loyola.

... waiting and waiting for the ambulances to arrive to transport some 150 patients and family members from Tulane Medical Center.

... avoiding the spray of helicopters landing on the roof to transport patients needing oxygen.

... responding to an alleged hostage situation on the upper floors of the hospital.

... asking where the doctors were. According to the nurses, some of the doctors had been on the roof where the cell phone communication was better. Apparently, some of the doctors were lining up new jobs at hospitals across the country.

... confronting a looter with six hairdryers and asking him what he needed with six of them. He said they belonged to him personally. The tags

and plastic indicated that they were just out of the box.

... watching as looters busted through glass and pried bars apart to enter businesses on Canal Street.

... transporting firefighters to a burning building on Canal.

... witnessing one male subject operate a front-end loader pulling a bay boat loaded full of victims. He had to have rescued more persons that day that all of the other rescuers at our location. He tied the bay boat to the loader using water hoses. I would like to know his name.

... loading a large female recovery patient into the bed of my truck and hauling her 47 miles around through Butte and back to the command centers at Causeway and I-10. When we stopped on the top of the "Crescent City Connection" to regroup, I asked her if she was OK and she replied, "Are you kidding? I have always dreamed of being able to ride in the back of a truck. And to stop on the bridge to see the city of New Orleans, it is just beautiful."

We dropped those patients and their wheelchairs off on the I-10 East onramp. Unfortunately, there was no one there to meet them except

thousands of others waiting for help.

... parking under the Crosses at Bethany and finding something to be thankful for.

### **Day Four: Thursday, Sept. 1/There We Were...**

... gathering with other agents at Tanger Mall in Gonzales to find out that more shots had been fired. Texas Wildlife Enforcement Agents arriving to assist in rescue efforts.

... passing hundreds of parked buses near a truck stop in Manchac and wondering....

... parked on Highway 90 West overpass watching dark clouds gather overhead. Efforts were suspended for safety concerns and agents were called back to the staging area on Clearview.

... traveling downriver by vessel to a warehouse in Chalmette where gang members threatened to raid the provisions for some 1,500 people sheltered there.

... returning upriver after dark and witnessing downtown New Orleans in a complete blackout. There was a small fire burning at the aquarium and at one or two other locations.

... leaving the command center for home around midnight. ■

### **Post-Script**

Upon returning to New Orleans on Sunday Sept. 4, the resources for rescue had overcome the need for rescue. Few contacts were made, and of those, most could not be convinced to leave. Some of those staying included foreign college students in housing complexes, and residents who were well prepared with little to no damage to their elevated homes.

Loyal agents from Texas, Tennessee, Missouri, South Carolina, Kentucky, Alabama, Ohio, Arkansas and other states arrived with eagerness to assist. However, frustrations were obvious as assignments were handed out less frequently than they anticipated.

Launching continued to be difficult and the water was severely contaminated. By this point, the deceased had become obvious to

the senses. Nonetheless, agents continued search and rescue efforts in all of the affected areas. Agents were able to assist the media with transportation so that the news could be communicated to the world. In addition, agents took the opportunity to feed hungry animals and even give some of them a ride to safety.

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Department agents gave what they could in the early stages of this disaster. With each passing day, search turned into security and rescue changed to recovery. As our role transitioned and eventually returned to normal, I knew all of us would never be the same. We can all say we saw enough to last a lifetime. For myself, I was glad to have been a part of the aid rendered to so many. I just hope it never happens again. ■