

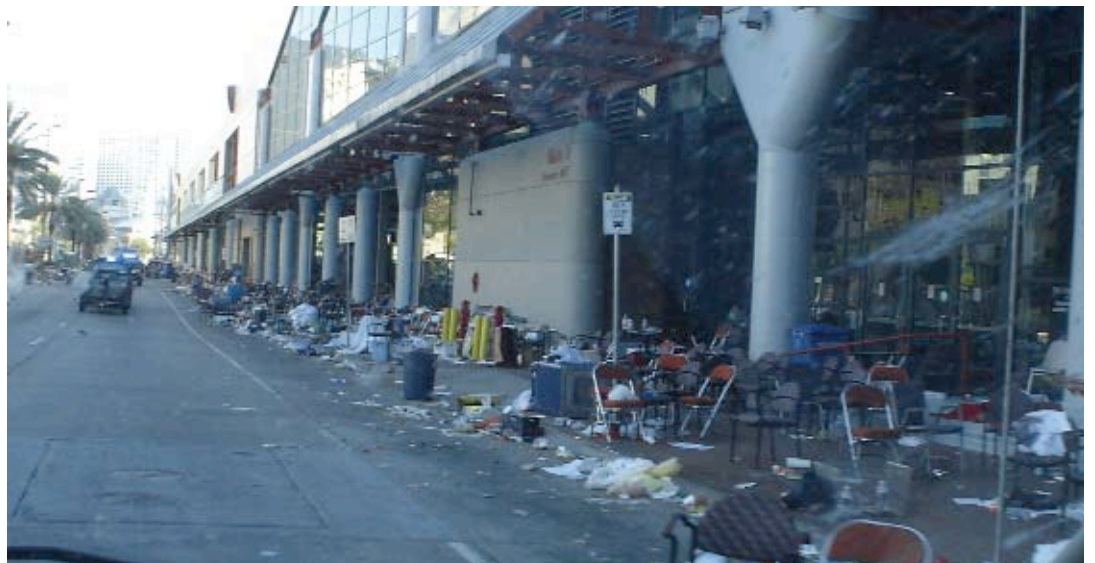
Memories of Katrina (And I Am Not Talking About an Old Girlfriend)

by Maj. Sandy Dares

For the most part, we go about our jobs, and our lives, in a very orderly fashion. Now I know it does not seem that way. We are all leading very busy lives, figuratively juggling a lot of balls, for sure many more than our parents and grandparents did. We have work obligations, home obligations, family issues, always the unexpected commitment and the incessant frustration of being tugged in multiple directions. We suffer from information overload and our stress levels are fairly high.

While every day might bring a new challenge, these are usually of a mundane nature—figuring out how to pay an unexpected bill; getting a repair done on your home, auto or a major appliance; dealing with illness, that sort of thing.

And although our jobs as wildlife agents afford many opportunities for a broad diversity of activities, when you step back and look at the big picture, our days are usually fairly routine. We move from hunting patrols in the fall and winter to boating safety and fishing work in the summer, with the same predictability of the changing seasons themselves. Heck, we even deal with the same people doing the same thing in the



same place year after year! While new laws, new activities or new outlaws may present new challenges, as the years go by it is, to quote a popular catchphrase, “same old, same old.”

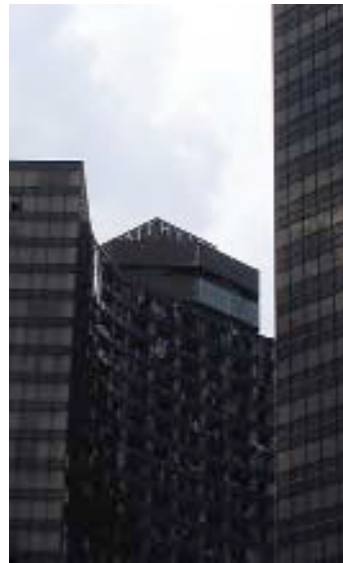
Until we met Katrina and dealt with her aftermath.

I believe it is safe to say that this hurricane brought all of us a set of challenges that our profession has never

before had to face, at least not on this scale. It resulted in the largest and longest mobilization of Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Division agents and equipment that any of us had ever seen, and this goes back to the 1960s when even Hurricane Betsy doesn't compare. In fact, there is no precedent for what we did. And it changed all of us in some way.

After Betsy, wildlife agents

helped with search and rescue and body recovery—they worked for about a week, mainly in the Lower Ninth Ward, bringing people to safety and pulling bodies from attics. The rescue effort after that storm was mainly in a small geographic area, and there were fewer than 100 casualties. There was significant damage in parts of New Orleans and in some outlying



areas, such as lower St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, and many homes, and lives, were devastated. But Betsy's "footprint" was much smaller than Katrina, the areas impacted were not nearly as developed and populated and the overall damage was on a far lesser scale.

In contrast, Katrina was a huge storm, and her impact covered thousands of square

miles. Hundreds of thousands of citizens were displaced, similar numbers of homes and businesses were destroyed and several times as many as in Betsy were killed. Most of a major city was flooded, and much of the flooded area remained so for weeks. As with Hurricane Camille, parts of the Mississippi Gulf Coast were simply wiped from the face of the earth. Similar dam-

age occurred in lower St. Bernard, Lower Plaquemines and eastern Orleans parishes. Entire forests were decimated in Louisiana and Mississippi. From Alabama to LaPlace, the storm's broad impact was felt. The entire country continues to feel the effects of this storm in the form of displaced residents and financial repercussions. This was a national disaster that will continue to

cause problems for the United States for many years.

I will never forget the flight I took on Katrina Tuesday—by helicopter with a general from the National Guard. That was the day I realized the full extent of destruction. Everywhere we looked we saw flooded buildings and severe wind damage. We saw hundreds of people on their roofs, frantically waving to us. Some were pointing to other houses, apparently trying to inform us of persons needing help. As we received more reports, we learned that the North Shore, all of St. Bernard, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, most of Plaquemines below Belle Chasse, parts of east and west Jefferson and Kenner, and just about the entire city of New Orleans were devastated.

Being a local who has lived and worked in the area for my entire life, it was terribly disheartening to see New Orleans in such a plight. Like most big



cities, New Orleans has its share of problems, but it is also a wonderful, exotic and historic place. The realization that it would never be the same again, that some of its oldest and most treasured businesses, neighborhoods and attractions were ruined was tough to see. And now we are realizing that many of its displaced citizens will never return—the very culture of the place is irrevocably changed.

A very troubling memory is driving the route through the west bank and across the river back into New Orleans—seeing hundreds of stranded citizens struggling to survive in brutal heat, with no food, water or shelter, baking on the concrete of I-10. And even worse, seeing the bodies of those who were not strong enough to survive.

I spent some time at the Superdome and Convention Center, and saw human misery beyond comprehension. I remember thinking how I

would feel if I were there with my family, trying to protect them and provide for them. Seeing those sights, smelling those smells and having some inkling of how terrifying it must have been, especially at night, I can only be grateful that my loved ones were safe and secure.

I heard some law enforcement officers complaining about evacuees who were drinking beer. I gave it some thought and decided that if I had been rescued and brought to high ground, only to be abandoned there for days—remember again, no water, food, shelter or hope—well, maybe I would have wanted to drown my sorrows too.

We saw the ridiculous—people walking with electronic equipment in a city without electricity—and the ludicrous—apparent looters carrying fishing gear in a flooded city with no fish. And how about driving the wrong way on I-10 and coming head-



on at 60 mph with another emergency vehicle—talk about getting your attention!

We encountered New Orleans Police Department officers who had stayed at their posts, without communications or backup, and had battled thugs who were trying to overrun their position to get their meager supplies. It was truly a war zone and a survival situation for the first few days.

I will never forget how good that first Outback burger tasted, and how sick that ham

sandwich made me. And the night we brought more than 200 evacuees in from lower St. Bernard, and were able to give them their first decent food in four days, get them onto buses and trucks and carry them to safety—well, that was a really good night, long and tiring but one that brought a sense that we had done some good.

I will also never forget the sick feeling deep in my stomach of walking through the destroyed homes of some of our agents, homes in which I



had socialized, visited as families, sat around the table and done paperwork. Seeing the stoic looks on their faces but the terrible sadness in their eyes, and thinking about how they must be falling apart inside was not easy, and something I hope I will never again have to witness.

I learned a few lessons: don't rely on cell phones or satellite phones, 800 radios or anyone saying the buses are on the way. Don't evacuate pump operators, or anyone else for that matter, into the path of the storm. Port-a-lets are not a luxury, but a necessity. Don't depend on a levee to keep you dry, a hospital to take in the injured or the government to bail you out.

When a Category 3 or greater storm approaches, evacuate your family and prized possessions. Don't forget cash, important papers, pets and food and clothing for at least a week when you go. And for God's sake, if you live outside the levees or in a vulnerable outlying area, get out and get out early!

We discovered that when someone drives up, with no paperwork, and tells you that FEMA sent him, be careful. These types of people may

claim to be volunteers but they are probably looking for a quick buck and may not necessarily be there for altruistic reasons. And don't trust volunteers to keep their hands off of your supplies—most are good people who ask before taking, but some will haul away anything that is not nailed down.

Many of our citizens learned what we ourselves already knew—you can depend on wildlife agents—they will be there with you and will do all they can for you.

I will always carry with me some strong emotions and feelings from those dark days—tiredness, stress, hunger, frustration, sadness, pity, anger, but most of all pride—pride at the work of our agents and their brother officers from other states. Pride at watching them go out each morning, highly skilled and capable professionals, needing little more than some bottled water, a tank of gasoline and a general idea of a destination.

One thing about this profession is that it must be composed of the most independent, self-sufficient and self-motivated types around. They show up from a distant part of

Louisiana, or even another state, and immediately get to work and get things done.

I am especially proud of our agents who suffered the greatest impact from the storm—agents who literally lost almost everything they owned. Yet day after day they showed up for work, eager to go out and help others. We would try and give them time off, but most refused—their families were elsewhere, their homes destroyed, so they just wanted to work. Maybe it was in the spirit of helping others, maybe it was for want of something else to do or maybe it was just to forget their own troubles for a while, but they were there standing tall and doing what they had to do.

When you realize that we had hundreds of agents and volunteers working under hazardous conditions for weeks, it is amazing that no one received more than a very minor injury. I am also unaware of anyone we rescued suffering injury while in our care. We tore up quite a few pieces of equipment, lost some and put some serious wear and tear on our gear, but our agents, somehow, made it through physically unscathed.

The volunteers were also great, at least the vast majority of them. There were crews who slept under their boats for a week, without showers or beds, but ready each morning to take on another mission. They must have been bathing with wet wipes because each morning they looked cleaner than they had the night before. Same for some of the other volunteers who gave it their all. We had an attorney, a state senator, numerous police officers and fire fighters and a whole bunch of Joe citizens, all of

whom were there to help out.

We also had a great support system back at DWF headquarters in Baton Rouge. They will never know how much we appreciated the supply runs of food, snack bags, water, personal items and ice.

I will always wonder—could we have done more? Could we have done a better job? Could we have saved more people?

I guess you can always do better. Maybe we could have been more organized, and we probably should have figured a way to keep better track of who was assigned to work each area. There has been some criticism that there should have been better coordination with other groups doing search and rescue. I am still trying to figure out how we could have coordinated better with almost non-existent communications.

But when considering our main task, that of getting into flooded areas and bringing stranded people out, I do not see how we could have done more than we did with the resources we had. Our goal each morning was simple: go to the most flooded areas and bring out everyone we could. This we did, saving thousands. I am comfortable that we used our resources for the most necessary work, and did not divert them to record keeping or other routine tasks. We did not spend a lot of time planning, or carrying the media around, we just went out and did what wildlife agents do every day—perform a tough job in difficult conditions without a whole lot of notice.

I am extremely proud of the job we, as a division and an agency, did, and I am deeply grateful to the agents and others who contributed. ■