

Pride and Honor: LDWF Enforcement Agents on the Front Line

by Sr. Agent Joe Chandler

In August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck, the comparisons immediately and inevitably followed concerning America's other recent great tragedy, Sept. 11, 2001. Although the tragedies were similar, in that there was great loss of life and property, they were also fundamentally different, as were the men and women who had to deal with the aftermath.

I think the comparison was used by the media merely as a reference point, to try and give those who weren't there some basis for comparison, because with media saturation being what it is today, everyone thinks they know what it was like on 9/11.

I wasn't there, so I can't pretend to know how New Yorkers felt or what they thought,

but I was there during Katrina and Rita, so I believe I can certainly contrast the response of the nation.

On 9/11, you had an immediate and overwhelming response from the rest of the nation. You had a similar response to Katrina, but the help had a hard time getting where it was supposed to be, due to impassable roads, no communication and a distinct lack of knowledge concerning what rescuers would be facing.

The damage of 9/11 was relatively localized, mainly two large buildings and the area immediately surrounding them. The damage of Katrina was overwhelmingly large, affecting several thousand square miles, including areas it was hard to get to even when conditions were perfect.

This article isn't meant to be a bash piece on anyone, but with Katrina, the complaining and finger pointing began immediately. People started blaming the federal government, FEMA, state government and anyone else they could lay their problems on. They didn't take into account they could have—and should have—left before the hurricane ever hit. With 9/11, the first thing that happened was people got to work to help. The blame came later. That process seemed to be reversed with Katrina.

Our department was among the first on the scene. I dare say our department, along with other wildlife agencies, rescued more people and did more absolute good than all the other agencies involved combined. From the first, we

were pulling nine or 10 people out of flooded areas into boats designed to carry three. I know for a fact we worked the first 37 hours straight, with no breaks.

Who got the credit? The Coast Guard. I'll be the first to admit that a helicopter rescue is much more dramatic, and makes better TV, than piling a family into a boat so that they could be shuttled the half mile or more to land, but helicopter rescues also less efficient for large groups of people. I even heard the state police mentioned more than the LDWF on television and radio, when I got a chance to listen. Of course, that was probably because my fellow agents and I were in isolated areas away from "civilization," rather than near a radio

PHOTO GALLERY



microphone or a TV camera.

And that brings me to the real point of this article. On 9/11, the police and firefighters in New York became national heroes. I wouldn't even want to venture a guess as to how many FDNY and NYPD caps and T-shirts were sold, not to mention the highly flattering journalistic pieces done on individual officers. Heck, even my favorite knife company, Spyderco, released a model named after a fallen NYPD officer. That's not to say the acclaim was undeserved or unwarranted, but none of that has been forthcoming in the aftermath of Katrina.

Despite the fact that we saved a lot of people, and did a lot of good, we got very little recognition. Our agency, and the other conservation-related agencies, were almost ignored by the media, and we were on the frontlines. We were among the very first on the scene, helping people. We

pulled security details for medics' tents in the city, when some of the more disreputable elements decided they'd rather shoot at rescuers than allow people to be rescued. We were there when a large part of the police force of New Orleans turned tail and ran. We worked longer, harder and more consistently than any other law enforcement agencies we worked with. We had agents who lost everything they owned, their families displaced, and all their worldly possessions destroyed, yet they showed up and helped others.

I'm not a glory hound. I don't want credit I didn't earn, but I believe our department acquitted itself admirably during this tragedy. And I want credit for our department. We showed up, never quit and did our jobs the best we could. And that was pretty damned good.

Will we ever get the

widespread acclaim I feel we deserve? No, probably not. People don't understand that we're not just "possum cops" or game wardens. We're law enforcement officers. We're the primary search and rescue agency for the state. We're the people who operate in environments others don't, or won't. We're Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Division agents, and we have every reason to be proud.

In a lot of ways, it was easier on 9/11. You knew what had happened, if not necessarily why. You knew what had to be done and how to go about beginning the process. Katrina threw a real curveball at us, in the sense that so many things were happening at one time. We went from a nasty storm, to broken levees, to flooding, to a horrible evacuation problem, to looting, to shooting and finally to a sort of balance, where people could be moved

and had somewhere to go.

It took forever just to figure out what needed to be done first. Communication was gone, so it was tough to coordinate efforts. When you knew where help was needed, it was sometimes impossible to get it there. That being said, we worked our way through it, and got the job done.

I would like to take this opportunity to say how proud I am of our department and the things we were able to accomplish. I would also like to say thank you to all of the other agencies that assisted us in this trying time. Your help was necessary and very appreciated. I would like to particularly thank the conservation agencies that assisted.

A lot of the time we don't get the recognition that other, more visible agencies, do, but we know who we are and what we do. When it counts, we're at the front of the line, forcing everyone else to catch up. ■

