

Louisiana Gulf Coast slammed by two major hurricanes in less than a month

By Trent Angers

Ushering in the worst natural disaster in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina came ashore over the wetlands of southeast Louisiana on the evening of August 29 then veered to the east and mowed down hundreds of homes and businesses on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The storm's massive tidal surge raised the water in Lake Pontchartrain, causing the failure of the levee system that protects New Orleans. The city flooded and panic ensued as thousands were trapped in their homes by the rising water.

Less than a month later, on the evening of September 24, a second major storm named Hurricane Rita mauled and flooded the southwest corner of Louisiana, annihilating the towns of Cameron and Grand Chenier and causing extensive damage in Lake Charles and Sulphur. The storm also ravaged southeast Texas, shutting down oil refineries and disrupting people's lives in a profound way.

The tidal surges from these two storms caused floods in every parish in coastal Louisiana, destroying homes and camps; drowning people, pets and livestock; ruining sugarcane and other crops; and damaging or sinking sailboats, yachts, shrimp trawlers and workboats of every description.

The hurricanes brought down trees and power lines; wiped many homes and businesses off the face of the earth, literally; shut down schools for days or weeks or

longer; disrupted businesses totally and in many cases permanently; and sent tens of thousands of people to the food stamp and unemployment lines. Many were left homeless, jobless, hopeless and penniless.

For many, the emotional trauma was compounded by the death of family members, friends and/or pets. Hundreds of families were separated during the post-hurricane evacuation from New Orleans.





The storm displaced people of every age, every race, every occupation: school children and their teachers; college professors and students; business people; football players; Jackson Square artists; jazz musicians; famous chefs; strippers, bartenders and bouncers; priests and religious sisters and brothers; cops, robbers and prisoners; newlyweds and the newly separated; already-homeless men and women and children; the rich and well-heeled, as well as the poor and downtrodden.

Hurricane Katrina flushed all of them out of New Orleans, some for awhile, some forever. Some left on buses or trains; a small number went by plane; but the masses left by car in the bumper-to-bumper traffic that was a nightmare in its own right.

Images of destruction

Television news programs broadcast memorable images of the destruction and

aftermath of these massive storms: splintered houses, missing houses in Biloxi; sailboats stacked up in a pile, like so many sardines; people in New Orleans wading through chest-high flood water, heading for higher ground, children on their shoulders, pets in their arms, all the people carrying plastic bags containing their belongings.

There were unforgettable pictures of people standing on rooftops, baking in the sun, desperate to be rescued, waving white towels or T-shirts, scrambling for life, trying to get a ride. And there were throngs of people, people who couldn't or wouldn't get out of town before the hurricane, waiting for a bus to come for them at the Superdome or at the Convention Center.

The news shows presented haunting images of drowned cattle floating in the floodwaters somewhere south of Lake Charles and somewhere south of Abbeville, as well as pictures of flooded and crippled oil refineries in the Lake Charles-Beaumont area.

Hurricane Rita's flood waters covered 75 to 80 percent of New Orleans, with water reaching to the ceilings of houses in many neighborhoods, and even higher in others. It was a flood of biblical proportions; for many, it was indeed the end of the world as they knew it.

As the water rose, thousands of New Orleans area people made their way into their attics, only to find that the water was continuing to rise. Even in the attic, the water was knee-deep, then waist-deep, then chest-deep, then chin-deep. Some kicked their way out through the air vents at the peak of the roof; others didn't have the strength to do so. Some had the presence of mind to bring axes, hammers or crowbars with them into the attic, and they knocked holes in their roofs and escaped through them.

Heroic rescues by boat, airboat and helicopter

Many thousands avoided the attics altogether and climbed onto their roofs from outside of their houses. They were subsequently rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard or others. Using helicopters, the Coast Guard lowered men on wire lines to the rooftops; they would secure the people in a basket or on a seat and signal those in the helicopter to hoist them up. Thousands were rescued in this fashion.

Thousands of others were rescued by boat or by airboat. Participating in these heroic efforts were the Coast Guard, National Guard, New Orleans police, various sheriff's departments and civilians.

Acadian Ambulance Service and Air Med, with the help of ambulance companies from several states, evacuated patients from seven New Orleans hospitals, including Tulane



Hurricane Katrina's massive storm surge collapsed bridges, wrecked houses and businesses, and caused the failure of the levee system designed to protect the greater New Orleans area. The flood left New Orleans underwater for days; it was a foot or two in some places, 5 or 6 feet deep in others, and 20 feet deep in others.

Medical Center, Charity Hospital, Touro Infirmary and Children's Hospital. The airlifts had to be stopped temporarily because of reports of sniper fire in the immediate area.

As rescue efforts continued, thousands of citizens were crowding into the Convention Center in downtown New Orleans. Some were dropped off by helicopter after being rescued from their flooded homes; others waded out of their neighborhoods and walked the rest of the way to the facility. Thousands of people made their way to the already-crowded Superdome, while others were brought – by boat or helicopter – to the raised spans of Interstate 10, Interstate 610 or Causeway Boulevard.

The breakdown of law and order

Unfortunately, food and water were slow in coming to these stranded and desperate people – on the interstates, in the Superdome and at the Convention Center. Federal, State and local governments – which seemed unprepared, out of focus and not in sync with one another – all bore responsibility for this ineffectual response to the



– AP Photo / Paul Sancya

Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré and his troops played a major role in the evacuation of New Orleans citizens from the Superdome and Convention Center after Hurricane Katrina. They were instrumental in the restoration of law and order after the city descended into chaos and anarchy following the hurricane.

needs of these increasingly desperate, increasingly angry people.

The poor response on the part of government at all levels – a response that President Bush referred to as “unacceptable” – contributed to the breakdown of law and order in New Orleans. For a while, the city was in a state of anarchy, with rampant looting, reports of arson, murders, rapes and unbounded civil unrest and chaos. Then came the sniping.

Rescue workers who were evacuating residents from their houses and helicopter pilots airlifting critically ill patients from downtown hospitals were fired upon while on their missions.

When the sniping started and the looting became widespread and totally out of hand, New Orleans police had to be pulled off of search-and-rescue operations and reassigned to simple law enforcement duties in an effort to restore law and order in the city. But the problems were too much for the local police, who were already overextended, exhausted and distracted by reports of fellow officers

deserting the force in an hour of extreme need.

Subsequently, additional National Guard troops were brought in – under the command of Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré (a Louisiana native) – and the anarchy subsided the soldiers fanned out across the city. The Guard helped to restore law and order and assisted in the rescue effort.

Human kindness overflowing

This disaster, like many others, was a time of death, destruction, depression, confusion and high anxiety. While it brought out the absolute worst in some people, it clearly brought out the very best in many more. It revealed the depths to which some people will sink to serve their own interests or to violently express their anger and frustration, and the heights to which others will rise to serve their fellowman.

Aside from the massive and much-publicized humanitarian relief effort spearheaded by the American Red Cross and FEMA, countless acts of kindness and compassion toward evacuees continue to be observed in these trying times.

“Our altar has never been adorned more beautifully than it is with these people and their animals seeking the sanctuary of God.”

- Rev. Jim Morrison

For instance:

- A five-car caravan with 12 people, four dogs, two cats and two turtles stopped at a Breaux Bridge gas station off I-10. Headed by a 74-year-old widow named Bobbie Spiers, they were attempting to sleep in their vehicles after a grueling 10-hour drive away from the path of the coming hurricane.

A man from Parks, in St. Martin Parish, walked up to one of the cars and asked the driver, “Do y’all need a place to stay?” The driver answered in the affirmative, and the local man said, “Follow me.” So he led the caravan to his house, where they were able to relax, sleep and eat.

Mrs. Spiers and her group were amazed at the kindness and trusting nature of their host, Chad Lavergne.

“Oh, my God, I didn’t know people like that existed anywhere in the world,” Mrs. Spiers remarked.

- Fifty evacuees from the New Orleans area were crowded into 14 of the 19 rooms at Beno’s Motel in St. Martinville. The news traveled quickly around the community, and soon the evacuees were enjoying free meals from Joyce’s Supermarket Cafeteria, Durand Grocery and the St. Martin Parish Sheriff’s Office.

The room rate, ordinarily modest, was reduced further for these special guests. Owner Reuben “Beno” Talley marked on each of the 14 bills “N/C” – no charge.

- A shelter on the campus of Nicholls State University in Thibodaux wouldn’t allow pets in, so those with animals were hanging around outside the building with their furry friends. The priest with the St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Center on campus, Rev. Jim Morrison, observed the dejected-looking people with their pets and invited them – all 130 people and all their pets – to the Catholic Center.

The invitees included all sorts of dogs and cats, plus birds and a pot-bellied pig. Fr. Morrison, a dog owner himself, proclaimed at the sight (which looked very much like Noah’s ark): “Our altar has never been adorned more beautifully than it is with these people and their animals seeking the sanctuary of God.”