

FOREWARNED IS FOREARMED...or is it?

Jim Segerstrom, Consultant Editor
Technical Rescue magazine



It was a broiling August afternoon in New Orleans, Louisiana, the Big Easy, the City That Care Forgot. Those who ventured outside moved as if they were swimming in tupelo honey. Those inside paid silent homage to the man who invented air-conditioning as they watched TV "storm teams" warn of a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. Nothing surprising there: Hurricanes in August are as much a part of life in this town as hangovers on Ash Wednesday.

But the next day the storm gathered steam and drew a bead on the city. As the whirling maelstrom approached the coast, more than a million people evacuated to higher ground. Some 200,000 remained, however-the car-less, the homeless, the aged and infirm, and those die-hard New Orleanians who look for any excuse to throw a party.

The storm hit Breton Sound with the fury of a nuclear warhead, pushing a deadly storm surge into Lake Pontchartrain. The water crept to the top of the massive berm that holds back the lake and then spilled over. Nearly 80 percent of New Orleans lies below sea level-more than eight feet below in places-so the water poured in. A liquid ranch wall washed over the brick ranch homes of Gentilly, over the clapboard houses of the Ninth Ward, over the white-columned porches of the Garden District, until it raced through the bars and strip joints on

Bourbon Street like the pale rider of the Apocalypse. As it reached 25 feet (eight meters) over parts of the city, people climbed onto roofs to escape it.

Thousands drowned in the murky brew that was soon contaminated by sewage and industrial waste. Thousands more who survived the flood later perished from dehydration and disease as they waited to be rescued. It took two months to pump the city dry, and by then the Big Easy was buried under a blanket of putrid sediment, a million people were homeless, and 50,000 were dead. It was the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States.

The above is not from a recent issue of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, but from the October, 2004 issue of National Geographic magazine! The author continues:

When did this calamity happen? It hasn't-yet. But the doomsday scenario is not far-fetched. The Federal Emergency Management Agency lists a hurricane strike on New Orleans as one of the most dire threats to the nation, up there with a large earthquake in California or a terrorist attack on New York City. Even the Red Cross no longer opens hurricane shelters in the city, claiming the risk to its workers is too great.

"The killer for Louisiana is a Category Three storm at 72 hours before landfall that becomes a

Category Four at 48 hours and a Category Five at 24 hours-coming from the worst direction," says Joe Suhayda, a retired coastal engineer at Louisiana State University who has spent 30 years studying the coast. Suhayda is sitting in a lakefront restaurant on an actual August afternoon sipping lemonade and talking about the chinks in the city's hurricane armor. "I don't think people realize how precarious we are,"

Suhayda says, watching sailboats glide by. "Our technology is great when it works. But when it fails, it's going to make things much worse."

The chances of such a storm hitting New Orleans in any given year are slight, but the danger is growing. Climatologists predict that powerful storms may occur more frequently this century, while rising sea level from global warming is putting low-lying coasts at greater risk. "It's not if it will happen," says University of New Orleans geologist Shea Penland. "It's when."

In view of the calamity of Katrina, stuff written 10 months before that is so close to the mark is beyond scary. And there is very little satisfaction in having written in these pages that such events were not only inevitable, but would occur more often.

Regardless, myself and most of those notable in the "swiftwater rescue" education business have been prophesying so for some time. Many of you have heard us say, read it, even been taught it in courses. And it all remains hypothetical... until it happens to you. I am here to say, once again, that it will.

During the course of this last week, (I am writing this on September 8, 2005,) I have started to ground down my back molars, because every time I run into somebody new, before they even say hello I get, "I thought you'd be in New Orleans!"

I was in New Orleans.

Stacking irony on irony, I had been

part of the faculty of a swiftwater rescue conference on 9/11, and ended up driving halfway across the country to get home.

This time, again, I was in New Orleans teaching sections on swiftwater/flood, rope, and helicopter rescue at the EMS Expo, and swiftwater/flood rescue awareness and operations to several agencies including the New Orleans Fire and Police Departments.

Again, I ended up driving out of town.

We had completed the first half of the classroom day and drove to Lake Pontchartrain to check out the area we were going to use this next day. When we arrived there we were met by the harbor master, who reported he had been ordered to close the area and close the flood gates at 6 a.m. the next day.

Katrina had veered north and was some 40 hours from landfall at that point. By the end of the day it was clear we were not going to get the second day taught. All local personnel had been recalled to duty, so we decided to postpone. That postponement now appears to be sometime in the far future.

I felt particularly sad in my discussions with police and fire personnel. It was clear that NOFD had no swiftwater rescue capabilities and the police dive team had only limited gear, and only three boats. After suggesting that they raid one of the river boats for keyhole lifejackets, and wishing them luck, I returned to our hotel in the French Quarter.

My second instructor had flown in at noon, and fortunately I had him grab a rental car. I immediately contacted him, told him to return to the terminal and try to get out of town. My wife and I grabbed a cab and moved to a hotel closer to the airport so we could make our escape the next morning on our scheduled flight.

But in the first of many fiascos attributable to Katrina, most of the



airlines cancelled all of their flights, stranding the 3000 attendees from the EMS conference and every other tourist in town. To their credit, American and Southwest continued to operate until the airport closed. All the others flew their planes out without passengers, for "safety reasons." A pleasant woman at the call center in India assured me that we were re-booked for a flight Monday at noon. When I told her that a Category 5 hurricane was going to make landfall at that time, she advised that "the airlines don't make mistakes about these things."

I was not reassured.

The mayor was then calling for "mandatory" evacuation, saying that this was the "big one" those emergency planners had been dreading. The Superdome was listed as a "refuge of last resort," and he made it plain that officials had no idea if it would even weather the storm. Only two hotels in the downtown area were rated to withstand a Category 4 storm and his honor and staff retreated into one of them.

Sunday morning at 4 a.m. the three of us jammed all of our gear in our rental, and started what is normally a six hour trip, but that would take 15 hours. To their credit that portion of the evacuation plan worked, as police and National Guardsmen funneled the cars on to the freeway.

Behind the scenes, however, the local response started to collapse, in a second contributory factor: The Louisiana State Emergency Plan called for local government to direct the evacuation, including utilizing all school and transportation buses to move the estimated 100,000 people who didn't have cars out of the metro area. The City failed to utilize that resource, trapping many of the estimated 40% of the urban population living below the poverty level in their homes.

For our friends in other lands a brief lecture on civics and emergency response in US Government: We believe in federalism, that is the dissemination of power to the local constituency. Indeed, if one was to split hairs, the United STATES is made up of 50 separate "states," who agreed through our Constitution to cooperate in the matter of basic civil rights, the common defense, a common currency, and other matters of similar interest. In short, we are a bit like the EU. We tested the power of the national theory in our civil war, and have maintained an uneasy peace ever since. The power to deal

with disasters rests with the municipalities and then the states. The Federal government steps in only when the scope increases, or when requested by local government.

FEMA is the national administrative body that handles disasters and emergencies. It has long maintained education, preparedness, and



response functions, as well as funding relief operations. Since 9/11, however, it has largely been submerged in a new "super" agency, the Department of Homeland Security, and its preparedness powers have been stripped away.

Many of us in the rescue community have noted our concern, in the pages of this magazine in fact, as the war on terrorism has become the global focus, at the cost of local preparedness for the growing number of large-scale, weather-driven, natural disasters.

FEMA administered the National Disaster Plan. Part of that responsibility was to "pigeon hole" those facets of the Federal government that could be utilized in the event of a disaster into Emergency Support Functions. For instance, the Coast Guard and the US Department of Health each have components that could be used, and they are detailed in the specific ESFs. ESF 9 is the search and rescue function. Within that "function" there is only one resource on which the Federal government can utilize, the 28 Federally funded Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces.

The USAR system was created 15 years ago as an asset to respond to major building collapses, thus the "urban" handle. Each task force is maintained at the local level with matching funds, and can be utilized in its locale.

In the years since the creation of the system however, no Federalized USAR task force has ever saved a single US citizen in a building collapse. As the result, those involved in the system, including some FEMA employees and fire service management who have staked their careers on the concept, have

to the citizens in those locations. Since the areas were designated as "refuges of last resort" the official line was that they would move out as soon as the storm passed; but that if they were supplied with food and water they would stay! So, for four days, the locations became increasing scenes of violence and squalor, with those trapped having no food or water to relieve their suffering.

Farther afield, the fourth factor was the failure of EMAC leadership in the affected states to pre-position rescue resources so that they could quickly move in to help after the storm. I contacted several swiftwater and flood agencies with which I have worked to see if anybody was moving. At that point there was still a full 24 hours before landfall. What I learned was that some teams had been "alerted" to the possibility of deployment.

The fifth factor is that it has become clear that at both the state and Federal level many officials remain cheerfully unaware and oblivious of the capabilities of swiftwater and flood rescue teams. Similarly none of the affected states utilized swiftwater/flood rescue personnel to help at the planning level in their emergency operations centers, something that many of us have been urging for several years. In short, Louisiana and Mississippi officials had no idea what they needed to order; and since FEMA only had USAR task forces to send, trained and equipped to the "awareness" level only, that is what FEMA sent.

The one bright exception was that Texas sent its well equipped and trained swiftwater strike force through an EMAC request, which got them out of the FEMA system and enabled them to deploy quickly and effectively, assisting some 5000 residents using their boats, swiftwater teams, and helicopter rescue-trained personnel.

In New Orleans what few water rescue resources the harbor police had went unavailable when the harbor police chief released all of her officers from duty, advising them to flee to high ground. In the immediate aftermath, nearly a third of the New Orleans Police Department simply disappeared. Firefighters couldn't leave their stations because of flood waters. Hundreds of volunteers with boats were requested by authorities, but no plan for their use was available, so most ended up "freelancing" in the flood zone. Gun stores were looted and random shooting broke out.

By Monday the scope of the

continued to "massage" the system, most lately with the concept of "light" task forces, and "dipping their toes" into what FEMA refers to as "defensive swiftwater rescue."

Simultaneously the US Government has recognized EMAC, or the Emergency Management Advisory Compact, a mandate by which signatory states can support each other by utilizing each other's resources in times of need. Currently every state but California and Hawaii are signatories to the Compact; Hawaii simply because of the distances involved, and California because lawmakers felt they would be giving far more than they could ever get.

Thus endeth the lesson.

Back in New Orleans, the evacuation sped up on Sunday morning as the Mayor's demands for those that could to leave, and for "special populations" and wheelchair and bed-bound citizens to muster at the Super Dome.

The evident intention was to move those in the Super Dome out of town immediately after the storm, but in the event, the breaching of the levees made that impossible. At that juncture a third contributory factor kicked in. The Red Cross had moved truck loads of food, water and hygiene kits close to both the Super Dome and the Convention Center. But local and state officials repeatedly refused permission for the supplies to be given

disaster was pretty evident, but the bureaucracy continued to grind slow and fine. I missed our Office of Emergency Services conference call, as we were on a plane-finally-from Houston home. So I missed the discussion that sent all eight California swiftwater strike teams heading for Louisiana. Meanwhile I left several Disaster Medical Assistance Teams sitting in comfort in the Hyatt Regency at the Houston Airport, and various USAR task forces mustered up in hotels throughout the southeast region.

While all these recourses poised in the wings, the citizens of the New Orleans and the Mississippi gulf coast were left pretty much fending for themselves, or waiting for the help of self-dispatched volunteers.

Finally on Wednesday the military arrived in increasing numbers, nearly 40,000 ground troops from the regular Army, the National Guard, the Marine Corps, and even some units from our various state guard units. The US Coast Guard had deployed over half of its entire helicopter fleet, and after they were initially refused by Louisiana state authorities, the Navy sent in hospital ships, giant hydrofoil landing craft and other support vessels. As soon as a three star general hit the ground in New Orleans it was evident that control was being regained.

However, at his writing, ineptness at the local, state, and Federal levels continues to manifest itself in an ever increasing series of reports. When the United States Fire Administration requested two thousand firefighters for 30 day periods of "arduous" duty, many of them reported to Atlanta with survival and swift water rescue gear. They discovered that they were being trained as FEMA disaster workers.

The firefighter culture was so strongly imbued in many emergency agencies, that offers of help from highly trained swiftwater rescue teams that were part of the search and rescue response were never acted upon or ignored. As the result there is now a groundswell in the US SAR community to get the Federal government to-finally-recognize that civilian volunteer and law enforcement rescue teams throughout the country should be part of the national disaster response system.

So much frustration resulted that many such teams "self-dispatched." There were so many self-dispatched teams in the flood zone that the Chief of Staff of the Governor of Virginia, speaking on behalf the Governor of Louisiana published a notification advising such teams to first contact their state emergency operations centers, and the National Guard started turning fire trucks and ambulances that were arriving without authorization around at check points. Still, others succeeded: The mayor of Baltimore sent a task force at the specific request of the Mayor of Gretna, Louisiana. And a Santa Cruz, California man was one of many who showed enterprise. He flew to Nashville, Tennessee, bought a used school bus, filled it with disaster supplies and drove directly to the Super Dome. By Thursday he was ferrying survivors from the New Orleans airport to shelters in nearby Covington.

As the first week ends FEMA is coming in for increasing criticism. And indeed some of their decisions are bizarre. FEMA officials turned down

assistance from Amtrak in evacuating stranded residents, and refused Wall Mart permission to bring in several trailer trucks of supplies. Delivery of diesel fuel by the Coast Guard, desperately needed by the City of New Orleans to run its pumps, was refused by FEMA officials. A flotilla of 500 volunteers with boats requested by Louisiana state officials was turned away by FEMA overhead staff. However, FEMA is doing what it was designed to do, and that is support local government during a disaster, and the response is gearing up.

The sixth factor was simply that the coordination between local, state and Federal disaster officials was simply inadequate. In the event, our new and highly vaunted National Incident Management System (NIMS) worked largely as advertised, but several agencies didn't effectively utilize it, leading to confusion, mixed signals, and conflicting orders.

The seventh factor will become more evident as

the months go along; and that is the infamous "cult of non-responsibility" endemic among public safety officials in ALL countries. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible in the culture for officials to admit they screwed up. Protecting one's pension at all costs comes before all other issues, and those brave souls who point out mismanagement, or make suggestions for improving performance find themselves victims of "shooting the messenger." As I write this I am screening e-mails from frustrated responders-paid and volunteer, fire, EMS and search and rescue, who want to comment, but know that it would be professional suicide to do so.

There will certainly be hearings and many of us hope that we can comment in such a forum, and even more, that someone will listen and that real change will occur.

Worse storm events are coming, have no doubt of that.



THE EXPERTS RELY ON CON-SPACE...



... FOR THEIR TECHNICAL RESCUE COMMUNICATION NEEDS

shouldn't you?

CON-SPACE is a world leader in rescue communication and its products are used by the British Army and Fire Service in addition to over 1,500 Rescue Teams in North America. Our two-way voice communication systems are rugged, reliable and designed to meet your harshest environments. Contact us today to arrange a demonstration or to receive an information pack.



Tel: + 44 (0) 1795-410820
www.con-space.com

CON-SPACE
COMMUNICATIONS

Safety in Communication®