WILL POWER
The Story beneath Katrina in New Orleans
Hurricane Katrina was the most devastating disaster to ever hit the United States. Its path of destruction in Mississippi and Southeast Louisiana is unparalleled, only to be compounded by the near total inundation of the City of New Orleans. The challenges facing the New Orleans Fire Department (NOFD) during the storm and response in the aftermath are unprecedented. Our preparedness, training, skill, and determination allowed us not only to respond but also to excel under the most adverse conditions, conditions which seemed to overwhelm most other governmental agencies.

The following narrative of life-changing events attests to our deep pride in being firefighters and members of our remarkable profession. The assertive thinking and courageous actions of the firefighters we have had the pleasure of working with is very humbling. Although every heroic story may never be told, the many unsung heroes in our department deserve to have their story told. This narrative is our effort to tell their story.

The following accounting is our recollection (with the assistance of several officers whose actions were above and beyond the normal call of duty). The difference between success and failure is not always a lack of strength or a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will. Their will to step up and take on managing this huge incident defined who they are and the purpose they serve. It became our starting point of achievement.

“The difference between success and failure is not always a lack of strength or a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will.”
Hurricane Katrina’s path was predicted to turn northward and a safe distance eastward of New Orleans. Although awareness is always heightened when there is a hurricane in the Gulf, no one realized the devastating threat that would soon emerge. In fact, as Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) Chairman for Firefighter Local 632, Chief Hampton proceeded with the press conference and kickoff of our annual fund-raising drive scheduled that morning for 10:00 a.m. at Engine 1’s quarters. NOFD Superintendent Charles Parent, several city council members, MDA regional officials and poster children, along with the news media, all attended. We were oblivious to the coming catastrophe. The event went well, and an aggressive fund-raising week had been kicked off.

So many storms have entered the waters of the Gulf of Mexico in recent years, and the New Orleans area has been fortunate to have escaped time and time again. When Hurricane Katrina made its way across the Florida Keys, it was hardly noticed. On Friday, August 26, while sitting in the Superdome watching the Saints battle the Ravens, Chief McConnell received a phone call from a friend in New York telling him the odds that the storm would hit New Orleans had increased. He assured his friend that we were safe; all the while knowing he needed to find a television and update the coordinates of this killer storm. The City of New Orleans had been spared the impact of a storm of this nature for many years, and, as fate would have it, our luck was about to run out.

The New Orleans Fire Department (NOFD) had an extensive plan on how we would prepare for and react to a catastrophic hurricane hitting our city. The research we had done in preparing for such an event told us that the potential for severe flooding and wind damage was great in a city where the majority of land is below sea level and the Historic French Quarter has buildings nearly 300 years old. Although hundreds of its buildings were lost in two great fires in the late 1700s, anyone who has visited the “Quarter” can attest to the beauty and charm of the city’s crown jewel.
SATURDAY, AUGUST 27:  
PREPARING FOR THE WORST

The first platoon reported for work. Discussions that morning were focused on the newest storm coordinates and the anxiety that comes with a Category 5 threat. Especially the one that was now knocking at our door. The storm now had our full attention. The department’s plan called for placing all members and equipment in areas of “last refuge” on high ground. Each engine house was contacted to ensure that all of its storm preparations had been finalized, including contacting representatives at target occupancies such as hospitals, nursing homes, and evacuation shelters that had been identified in pre-hurricane familiarizations. Each engine company topped off its fuel tanks and touched base with established contact personnel at their preplanned areas of last refuge. These preparations along with each member’s bringing enough provisions for three days made the department confident that we were ready to handle anything Mother Nature could send our way.

That morning the 8th District responded to a one-alarm working fire in a single-family residence. With the exception of Chief Hampton, who strained his shoulder and back as a result of slipping on a slick surface, the fire was basically uneventful to everyone else. He chose to remain on duty. The chance that Hurricane Katrina would hit New Orleans was becoming incredibly likely. Little did he know at this time that his choice would pave a path of personal destiny given rise to managing an incident of historical proportions.

Late that evening, an all-station message announcing that all first platoon fire department members would be held over the next morning came across the radio. Chief Hampton awoke at 0500 hours with considerable pain. He already knew how important it would be for him to stay on duty. He felt his firefighters needed him and that he could make a difference. The thought of leaving never entered his mind.

On Sunday, August 28, third-platoon members reported to duty at 0700 hours, and the majority of second platoon members reported throughout the day, well aware that if they waited there would be little chance to report on time Monday morning during the predicted height of the storm. Throughout the course of continued preparation, everyone closely monitored the television as the storm strengthened and set a course directly for the Louisiana-Mississippi Gulf Coast.

The three platoons worked well together, strictly adhering to the hurricane guidelines we had already begun the day before. The NOFD has a formal hurricane guidelines book that was developed by a committee chaired by District Chief Gary Savelle with the assistance of District Chief Tim McConnell. These procedures would serve as an excellent guide to give the NOFD the ability to survive and respond to a storm that
destroyed most of the city’s services.

A staff meeting was scheduled for 1000 hours at fire headquarters for all chiefs and fire department division heads. At the staff meeting, we were informed of the storm’s forecast as a Category 4 or 5 with the storm closely following Hurricane Betsy’s path. Predicted as the “Perfect Storm,” it was expected to create a dome of storm surge of 16 feet that could flood eastern New Orleans, the 9th Ward, and Mid City; swamp much of the West Bank, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard Parishes; and flood North Shore areas. At the time, no one knew how deadly accurate this prediction would be. Although in the final analysis, the disaster proved to be caused by a civil engineering error instead of the sole wrath of Mother Nature. We were to prepare our districts for the worst, closely adhering to NOFD hurricane guidelines with close attention to preparations for our safe place of last refuge.

**PLACE OF REFUGE**

Chief Paul Andrieu and Chief Hampton returned to their assignment in the 8th District and received a status update from all our company officers. They confirmed a report that personnel at the Naval Support Activity stationed in Algiers had all bugged out without warning. This was particularly disturbing news at this late time, especially since the department had a letter of commitment to allow the NOFD to use the Naval Support Activity as the 8th District’s last place of safe refuge. They immediately began searching for a new location.

Fortunately, after extensive search, they found the Little Sisters of the Poor nursing home at Woodland and General DeGaulle. The home was six stories high and had a backup generator with a four- to six-day supply of fuel. Bob and Rich, the two maintenance men, said the home could easily accommodate the 8th District. This West Bank site later turned out to be a very fortuitous selection. Everyone was relieved to find such a favorable location on such short notice. The District began preparations for the move and continued securing the flood-prone firehouses which would later be abandoned for everyone’s protection. Before dark, all companies were able to relocate apparatus, personnel, and necessary provisions and equipment to the Woodland location.

The area of last refuge for most of the 2nd District is a Hilton hotel located at the foot of Canal Street on the river. By early Sunday evening, the winds had increased to a point where it was no longer safe to respond, and the companies moved their apparatus to the elevated garage in the hotel, which could house 14 pieces of apparatus from the second district. The “new quarters” consisted of a conference room on the second floor that overlooks the pool area. The floor to ceiling glass didn’t seem very reassuring, and an inquiry with security for other arrangements revealed that the hotel was over capacity and this was the only space available. Everyone was assured that since the hotel formed a U-shape around the pool area, they should be safe from flying debris breaking the glass. The
New Orleans Police Department and Levee Police shared the adjoining rooms, and all began to settle down and familiarize themselves with the surroundings.

Sometime between 1900 and 2100 hours, wind gusts began to exceed 40 mph. Under the hurricane guidelines, this wind speed automatically triggered companies to go out of service and stage apparatus to higher ground. Eighth District apparatus were all staged on the high-rise bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway. Members also parked their personal vehicles on the bridge. We continued to hear companies go out of service across the city, with the exception of some 5th District companies that were fighting a working fire. We later heard the fire was brought under control and companies had retreated to their last place of safe refuge at Mercy Hospital. The entire NOFD was now in a position to ride out the storm and wait for the winds to fall below 40 mph, at which point we could again respond to calls.

That evening 8th District members met and congregated in the hallways at Woodland. A media report predicting 50-foot storm surges and high-rises toppling created a great deal of anxiety. On seeing the uneasiness growing to a serious concern, Chief Hampton promptly called for a District meeting. Several members, including a couple of officers, felt everyone should leave the building and evacuate from the city. Chief Hampton made it very clear that he was staying and that leaving was not only more dangerous but also unacceptable. He didn’t believe anyone was really going to leave. This type of emergency is what firefighters train for. This is who we are, and this is what we do. This is what we are all about. Anyone who did leave would be considered deserting. No one left. They just needed some reassurance that someone was in control and that they were going to be okay.

Hurricane Katrina pounded the building. Power was knocked out before midnight. Windows were busted. Driving rains pierced frames and cracks. The skylights were blown off. Roofing materials and debris filled the stairwells. Water poured in from all directions. Some say they felt the building sway. Outside, trees and telephone poles snapped. Nearby homes, buildings, and roofs were ripped open. This building apparently could bend but would not break. The generator kicked on, and the entire building operated pretty efficiently under emergency power.

Having survived the night, radio reports had the storm wobble just enough to the east. New Orleans would not take a direct hit. This welcome news, along with the storm’s eye’s passing during daylight, seemed to ease a great deal of tension. NOFD members began to feel the worst had passed. Although the eye did not actually pass New Orleans until around noon on August 29, the weaker side of the storm felt far less threatening than that which loomed the night before.
COMMUNICATIONS DOWN

Although the adjacent canal filled to the brim, the surrounding streets and the parking lot remarkably did not flood. This was in stark contrast to what was happening on the East Bank.

In the 2nd District, most members had settled down sometime after midnight knowing that immediately after the storm they would have their hands full for quite some time. At 0500 hours on Monday morning, all hell broke loose. The glass wall that stood between them and Katrina shattered. It probably took all of 15 seconds for the 20 or so captains and chiefs sleeping on the floor of the meeting room turned dorm to gather their possessions and evacuate to the hallway. Thanks to the quick thinking of one of the captains, the rest of the 75 members were spared having the suspended ceiling in the adjoining room which served as their quarter’s crash down on them as they lay sleeping.

From this point on, things deteriorated quickly. Glass windows and skylights had shattered throughout many areas of the hotel, and it wasn’t long before all power was lost. Most guests were relocated to the huge ballrooms on the second floor. However, many guests remained on upper floors, where windows had blown in, stranding them in the hallways. Firefighters spent the rest of the day assisting people with emergencies throughout the 29-story hotel. In many cases, they literally carried guests down 20 or more flights of stairs, retrieved heart medication from their rooms, freed them from stuck elevators, and simply comforted them and convinced them that the best solution was to remain in the security of the hallways outside of their rooms. Adding to the panic of the guests and frustration of everyone in general were reports we received from the radio around 1000 hours of levees breaking and causing widespread flooding throughout the metropolitan area.

By late afternoon, reports of flooding on the East Bank began to come into the 8th District. Yet, no one could fully comprehend to what extent New Orleans would be devastated. By 1400 hours Monday, the winds had died down enough to allow us to return to the streets and begin our initial windshield survey. This designates that each company return to its first up territory and size up damages, first, to target occupancies and then assess other hazards in their areas such as collapsed buildings, downed power lines, gas leaks, and blocked streets, and report them through their chain of command to headquarters. These explorations revealed a great deal of wind damage including collapsed buildings and fallen trees. However, after the reports we had received earlier, we were surprised that we encountered no flooding in the 2nd or 8th Districts. These geographic areas encompass central city, downtown, the central business district, the French Quarter, and the entire west bank of New Orleans, subdivisions of the city that run along the Mississippi River corridor. These sections were spared because the land is higher from silt deposited during millions of years of the river overflowing its banks each spring prior to the construction of levees. This was not the case in 80 percent of New Orleans, where catastrophic levee failures were causing the rest of the city to fill with flood waters.
Compounding our situation was the fact that we were losing communications rapidly. To add chaos to mayhem, the radio system for fire, police, and EMS went down between 1800 and 1900 hours. It would remain out for three days. The Federal Emergency channel became the only functioning channel for thousands of emergency responders from various jurisdictions throughout the metropolitan area. “Functioning” is a gross overstatement. Communication was sporadic at best. Telephone lines were down. Most radio and cell towers were severely damaged. Sketchy information came intermittently. To make matters worse, most of us were unable to get in touch with our families. A new level of anxiety set in.

Chief Hampton, sensing the need to get a more direct and closer feeling for the mindset of all of his firefighters called a meeting at 1900 hours. This could happen only in an open forum. Listening to and knowing the mood of all personnel would give direction on how strongly he needed to address them. We had to build a real sense of oneness, of depending on one another. Our collective strength would be derived only from complete unity. Only through discipline, direction, chain of command, and teamwork would we be able to get through this most chaotic time. Focus, cooperation, and determination would provide the keys to our success.

Our meeting went well. Members appeared more composed, and even encouraged, that we would survive on our own. Seeing the effectiveness in this form of management, an organizational and task-setting meeting was scheduled for every morning with the officers
and a district meeting with all members after dinner every night. It was important to continually assess and evaluate our situation as well as the emotional attitude and well-being of all personnel. With the district structure solidly in place, all members were now functioning extremely well.

Since dispatch was down, there was no system for notifying the fire department of fires. Our only means of detection was to establish roving patrols and receive alerts from police and private citizens. Windshield surveys showed a need for establishing dedicated response routes and to continuously clear new routes to enhance our response capabilities. We divided the district into two platoons. We alternated duties into fire response and support. We had the dual responsibility of running and supporting a mini-city as well as a mini-fire department in Algiers. We were cut off from the rest of the world. All roads in and out were under water from swollen and overflowing drainage canals. We were entirely on our own, but our firefighters were absolutely up to the task. Accepting the disconcerting challenges in front of us would later yield an inner pride of our exemplary accomplishments.

**REPORTS OF LAWLESSNES**

Rumors of civil unrest, looting, and a city out of control came to us by way of the multiple police jurisdictions that began to take refuge with us in the evening. They appreciated having a comfortable, safe place to stay and had no problem assisting us in keeping it that way. Many say the news media grossly exaggerated the state of turmoil in the city, but the direct personal accounts we were hearing confirmed even worse. We hadn’t experienced any lawlessness problems at Woodland to this point, but we weren’t taking any chances. We established a 2200 hour curfew: Everyone had to be inside, and all doors were to be kept locked. All outsiders would be considered a threat. A 24-hour watch was set up in the lobby, assigned as the only point for entering or exiting the building. Police snipers set up on the roof each evening and held their positions throughout the night.
Rescues

Captain Tommy Meagers, assigned to the flying squad in the 2nd District, had reported to work with his own boat, as did many forward-thinking members of the department, knowing full well that their watercraft probably would be needed. He assembled a crew and immediately headed out to start water rescues in areas of the city less fortunate than those in close proximity to the river. These crews returned just after dark. Late in the evening, 2nd District Chief Chris Mikal received a cell phone call from one of our captains who was trapped in his attic with his 83-year-old mother in Lakeview, an area of the city inundated with more than eight feet of water. A plan was formulated, and Captain Meagers immediately set out to attempt a rescue. They were unable to locate this officer because it was impossible to locate specific streets or residences because of darkness and the height of the water. In addition, progress was extremely slow because of underwater hazards and hanging phone, cable, and power lines, which, if not downed, completely loomed just above the water line. We later ascertained the stranded captain and his mother were rescued. These firefighters, along with hundreds of others spread throughout the city, were, however, able to facilitate the rescues of thousands of other citizens.

Fire department information was still difficult to obtain. Reports of flooded areas and fire companies being isolated trickled in. Numerous companies and portions of districts were doing exactly the same as the 2nd and 8th Districts. They were responding to fires, water rescues, and calls of distress within their given areas of capability, establishing their own mini-fire departments across the city. Many firefighters, exercising shrewd foresight, had brought in their own boats. Other boats became available. Firefighters relentlessly traversed the hazardous flood waters to rescue thousands of people off roofs.
and out of attics. To rescue those lives at greatest risk first, many times, firefighters were forced to dodge angry civilians who were waving guns and sometimes firing, to rescue those lives at greatest risk first. When given the option to retreat to secure comfortable places of safe refuge, each and every firefighter elected to stay where they were needed most. Many would later receive awards of commendation for their heroic and persistent actions.

**Flood Waters Rising, Staging Area Relocated**

As flood waters began to rise citywide, there was a growing concern that the entire city would soon be under water, threatening the apparatus we were able to save to this point. Our effectiveness was now at risk. Later that day we relocated all available apparatus to Woodland. We identified Our Lady of Wisdom, located next to Holy Cross College, and adjacent to Little Sisters of the Poor, as a very suitable staging area. The building was large enough to house the remainder of the fire department, and there was a large enough area to stage all the apparatus. This building also had a generator and would serve as an excellent base for emergency responders. This compound, which we designated as “Woodland Base,” would serve as our home for the next 45 days.

At 0400 hours on Tuesday, the hazardous materials unit showed up at the 2nd District headquarters and alerted us to the reports from the federal government that they were expecting the water to continue rising throughout the city because of the numerous levee breaches. They informed us that we could expect as much as nine feet of water to inundate even the downtown region. The decision had been made at headquarters to begin planning to evacuate the entire NOFD to Algiers. We began notifying companies by sending runners; this was the only reliable means of communication.

When Chief McConnell arrived at Engine 16’s quarters, the firefighters were on their apron, and the smell of smoke was heavy in the air. It wasn’t long before we found ourselves at the first major post-Katrina fire; a large pawn shop that had already been looted was heavily involved. En route to this fire, one of our district chiefs encountered a murder victim who had been shot in the head lying in the street. After the fire was extinguished, we drove toward the uptown area and were surprised to find there was no flooding at the intersection of Napoleon Avenue and Claiborne Avenue near Baptist Hospital, a section of town notorious for flooding even in heavy rains. Twenty-four hours later, as the city filled with water, this medical facility would find itself in a desperate situation, surrounded by nine feet of water with patients and staff scrambling to save lives and evacuate.

The rest of that day, the 2nd District spent responding to incidents when we happened upon them or someone managed to report them to us, then we prepared to evacuate to the West Bank, where a facility had been secured by 8th District personnel. District members were busy with varied tasks. Some crews were out in their own boats rescuing people, including some who knew where their own family members were located.
Others were assigned to gather provisions, as we knew we were in this for the long haul. The three day provisions we had when reporting for duty were no longer enough to sustain what we knew was an “extended operation,” to say the least. Fuel and flat tires were fast becoming critical issues for the fire and police departments, and we found ourselves using a generator to “hotwire” fuel pumps at gas stations to keep both divisions operating. Plugging tires became second nature even to those who had little mechanical knowledge.

The decision to relocate the NOFD was based on several considerations. Water, which the day before had been noted some 15 blocks from the 2nd District headquarters was now only one block away. Chief McConnell began marking the edge of the water to monitor its pace. Although the water’s progress was slow (six inches over 12 hours), the earlier reports had us on edge. This was combined with the ever deteriorating security issue. The NOPD was stretched beyond any reasonable capacity performing water rescues, running from incident to incident on dry land, cars inundated or with flat tires and many of its members trapped in areas of the city by flood waters. They could ill afford to assign personnel to protect firefighters on rolls. We were forced to perform our own security, literally assigning a member to ride “shotgun” on apparatus solely for the purpose of security, no suppression duties. All of this fueled the decision to move to Algiers. We waited for all members to return from boat rescues; by late Tuesday night, we had assembled the entire district and began to head to the West Bank. As we drove up on the ramp to the Crescent City Connection Bridge, we had a great view of the city steeped in total darkness except for a large fire in Central City. We turned and headed for what turned out to be an old large residential structure that had collapsed during the storm and was now burning. Water pressure, although low, was still available, and the fire was brought under control within an hour.

On Tuesday evening, August 30, a convoy of NOFD apparatus crossed the Mississippi River over the Crescent City Connection and proceeded down General DeGaulle with lights flashing. The scene was awesome. One by one, the impressive parade of fire companies entered their new home, having given a full day of responding in their respective jurisdictions. The redeployment was monumental. A full night’s sleep and a well-earned rest awaited them at Our Lady of Wisdom. The Superintendent determined that it would be too dangerous to respond at night. Our response would resume at dawn.

Early Wednesday morning, the Superintendent summoned Chief McConnell to City Hall to attend a meeting between the Louisiana National Guard and the City Office of Emergency Preparedness, the New Orleans Police Department, the City of New Orleans Homeland Security, and other emergency response agencies to help devise a strategy to deal with the ever-growing catastrophe. By now, the east bank of the city had no water pressure and the massive pumps normally used to keep this sub-sea-level metropolis dry had been rendered inoperable. Predictions circulating in the media states that it could take two or three months to pump out the city and efforts to repair the levees were underway but had failed up to this point. Each agency presented a list of their resources and the tasks for which they needed assistance. The National Guard lieutenant began to formulate how to best use the assets at his disposal. The highest priorities were identified as the following: to evacuate the hospitals, get food, water and shelter to stranded rescue victims awaiting transportation, and complete the evacuation of Orleans Parish Prison.

On Wednesday morning, August 31, the regularly scheduled 8th District meeting with the officers was held. Everyone had fully adapted to a normal daily routine, and things were going quite smoothly. The officers were informed that Chief Andrieu would take
charge of 8th District responses and Captain Richard Szymurski would be in charge of support while Chief Hampton visited Our Lady of Wisdom to get updated on the rest of the department.

Upon arriving at Our Lady of Wisdom, he couldn’t help but feel that a somewhat different level of intensity permeated the air. All chief officers were in service on the air on the East Bank in the response mode. One by one, company officers approached him and described a very different incident than what Algiers had been exposed to. He immediately called a meeting of all the officers present. The stress levels and uneasiness of this group far exceeded what he first experienced with the 8th District. They obviously had been exposed to a great deal more of adversity. Almost every firefighter carried a gun. Security and safety were a much larger issue on the East Bank than the West Bank.

Compounding the stress levels was the lack of communication available. Fire service communication was sporadic at best. Cell phones worked intermittently. Most members had not spoken to their families since Katrina had hit. Most families had evacuated out of state. No one on the outside knew that all our firefighters survived and were safe. National broadcasting made things worse, depicting nothing but total chaos and devastation. Complicating matters further was a local media report of an erroneous story that many firefighters could not be accounted for. It took us 24 hours to get the station to correct the report. There were plenty of reasons supporting the anxiety circulating at Our Lady of Wisdom. After addressing numerous comments and questions, the general consensus was that the firefighters were looking for someone to pull everything together and establish a command structure they could identify with and respond to. Chief Hampton scheduled a meeting for that evening for all company officers and chiefs. Although the meeting created some sense of order, there was still a great deal of uncertainty in the air.

When Chief McConnell left City Hall, he discovered that the NOFD was working a fire downtown on Canal Street. By this time, the department was reduced to drafting water from the flooded street or driving miles to refill booster tanks across the river. It was at this fire that a gentleman approached one of our District Chiefs, gave him his business card, and said he could get the department fuel in large quantities. As stated earlier, the department was reduced to acquiring fuel from any available resource. The members were quite ingenious removing the fueling pumps from the engine house and rigging them up with pipes and generators to siphon petroleum from any underground tank that was handy and pumping it into any container they could find. Although necessary, it was cumbersome and ate up manpower that was badly needed for suppression. Chief McConnell immediately contacted the fuel supplier and told him of our plight. With no means of getting a purchase order through conventional methods, he explained that he would pay for the fuel himself if necessary. The vendor said a fire chief’s word was good enough and that we would have fuel within the day. As promised, this unsung hero showed up at Woodland in the middle of the night with four pods containing 2,200 gallons of fuel. Through their resourcefulness, firefighters continued to keep these containers filled. Maintaining a steady delivery of fuel was a constant challenge. We would no sooner establish a supplier only to have it never show up or disappear after a few days of delivery, and we would have to search for another source. It turned out that our most reliable supply early on was the ingenuity of our members.

During the course of this day, a radio transmission came in from a working fire on the East Bank. An officer with his company in distress was frantically calling for help. The fire was out of control. Water supply was an issue. Crowd control and lack of security
added to the problem. As Chief Hampton started to assemble a response, a couple of firefighters challenged his decision because their safety could not be guaranteed. Not one who usually loses his composure, Chief Hampton became enraged at this most disappointing lack of will. “That’s your brothers screaming for help,” he shouted back! “How can you not respond?” Not wasting time arguing, he immediately called for volunteers. At least 50 firefighters charged forward. Their enthusiastic response had to be scaled down so as not to deplete the available manpower. The irresponsible comments made everyone realize the extent of the stress and anxiety that permeated the department. No action was taken against the faint-hearted firefighters. To this day it is hard to comprehend how any firefighter could make such an uncharacteristic remark. But such was life at that time in the post-Katrina fire department; not everyone could be courageous on demand. It is said that one of the most significant changes in a person’s life is a change of attitude. Right attitudes produce right actions. We could only hope that change for these firefighters would occur quickly. Thankfully, it was an isolated incident. No similar outburst was ever heard again.

**ESTABLISHING CONTROL & WOODLAND II**

Chief Hampton spent the rest of the afternoon gathering information and talking to the most level-headed firefighters and the strongest leaders he could find. He began to learn of all the numerous independent operations going on. Companies were scattered all over the city. For that matter, companies and personnel were scattered all over Our Lady of Wisdom. Before a plan could be formulated to gain accountability and control over those operations as well as an organizational structure for the whole fire department, command and control needed to be established at Our Lady of Wisdom.

On Wednesday evening, we had our first large-scale meeting of officers in the chapel at Our Lady of Wisdom, the only place big enough to house all the members in attendance. Most of the company officers and chiefs were able to attend. Collectively, we began to assess our situation and identify the span of control. We identified the operational needs by designating district chiefs and company officers to respective assignments. Chief Hampton assumed the role of “Incident Commander”, and Chief Tim McConnell became the “Deputy Incident Commander”. Because of the lack of staffing at the chief level, Logistics, Planning, Finance, and the coordination of operations also became their responsibilities.

Chiefs McConnell and Hampton began the huge coordination effort of all the logistical support needed to manage the newly created fire department city on the West Bank, now known as Woodland II. We requested help from any company offices willing to volunteer. This would be more than a full-time position and commitment. It would pretty much take them out of the fire response mode. Although we were
continuously understaffed, the quality of personnel was outstanding, and so was the job they performed. A number of firefighters also stepped up to fill several full-time logistical positions. You never hear about heroes coming out of Logistics, but without them operations would have to flat shut down.

The entire department was split into a two-platoon operation, just as had been done to the 8th District. Alternating on 24-hour shifts, one platoon responded to fires while the other platoon acted in a support mode. The days following became an arduous undertaking for everyone. There was no help from the outside. Firefighters had to rely strictly on their ingenuity to survive, and they did so admirably. We found a way to fulfill every need, procuring all the necessary food, water, provisions, and medical supplies to not only sustain life but to live more comfortably than anyone could have imagined. Captain Mike Gowland and Operator Antonio Degregorio assembled full-time cooking staffs to feed more than 5,400 firefighters three square meals a day. Besides nourishment, these meals provided emotional stability and fostered an attitude of teamwork that proved so crucial to holding our firefighter family together.

Fire responses were set up using a task-force concept. Several task forces were assembled to handle the numerous calls. No single company responses were allowed, nor could any company respond without security assigned on each apparatus (a group of parole and pardon officers had also joined our ranks). Fuel became a huge critical need. We had to find creative solutions to that problem daily. We never failed to answer a call. When mechanical failures and an endless number of tire problems (building debris was strewn everywhere) threatened to put companies out of service, we found ways to carry on. “BEG, BORROW, THEN PROCURE” became our motto.

**Water Supply**

Another critical need was water supply. The city’s pumping system on the East Bank was out. Fortunately, the West Bank had a separate operating water system, and we were able to refill and flush out our pumpers with a fresh water supply. We often drafted water out of the flooded streets to extinguish fires. When fires were too far from a water supply, we had to continuously refill and relay water to the attack pumpers. On several days, we shuttled companies from one fire to the next. At one point, we had only one company in the city not committed to a response. It was held back strictly to be available for a life-threatening call. Our tactics had to be revised to a confine-and-control mode versus extinguishment. Although our resources were challenged to the max, no reported call went unattended, and few fires raged out of control.
EMS

EMS was relocated to Woodland as well. Incredibly, fire companies located and rescued stranded EMS providers walking across the Crescent City Connection. They were very happy to join us at Woodland. We already had a great working relationship with them through our first-responder program. Dr. Juliette Saucy headed EMS and eagerly set up a clinic that provided excellent medical care for everyone. An EMS unit was assigned to each task force and responded on every call.

With the addition of EMS, our mini city now seemed to be complete. Our every need had been addressed and well tended to. Every day brought new challenges, but we held up extremely well. Starting at first light and generally ending near midnight by recapping the day and planning the next became a daily routine for the Incident Commanders. We worked continuously managing all our resources with little to no help from the outside. Frustration among the members created morale problems. We drew our strength and energy from the endless commitment, determination, and courage of the firefighters around us. We held daily meetings to keep everyone informed of the outstanding job they were doing and to help motivate anyone who became discouraged.

Mutual Aid

As the days wore on, so did the exhaustion. Not one firefighter showed any sign of quitting or letting up. Relief was sorely needed. This aid first showed up in the form of mutual aid from the Fire Department of New York. On September 5, an advanced team from New York, comprised of Mike Weinlein, Ed Kilduff, and George Maier, showed up at our doorstep. We were informed that NOFD Superintendent Parent had requested a contingent of 325 New York firefighters to replace us for the next seven days. There also would be a contingent of 500 Illinois firefighters and apparatus and 80 firefighters from Montgomery County, Maryland. Although help was welcome and sorely needed, our members had no intention of abandoning their duties. We stayed up all night drafting a standard operating procedure that incorporated the FDNY into the ranks of the NOFD and supplemented operations with the other two fire departments’ personnel and apparatus. This would allow NOFD to maintain command and rotate our members into a relief schedule to get them some much-needed rest. The Superintendent approved, much to the satisfaction of every member of the NOFD as well as the mutual-aid departments.

On September 6, 2005 at 0600 hours, FDNY firefighters climbed aboard NOFD apparatus and responded side-by-side New Orleans Firefighters. An instant synergism developed. We were truly brothers by profession and brothers in the heart. We worked together incredibly well in the field and in the command structure. FDNY brought a fully staffed well-trained and organized incident management team. It was a welcome addition to our severely understaffed team. The team
immediately improved the daily organizational and accountability needs for such a large-scale operation.

On the evening of September 7, we witnessed another awesome parade consisting of six engines and two ladder trucks from Maryland, joined by 22 engines and eight ladders from Illinois, proceeding down General DeGaulle and entering our Woodland base. The various colorful flashing emergency signals and bright headlights illuminated the clear, dark night with an almost Mardi Gras-type atmosphere. Only the sirens and marching bands were missing.

FDNY occupied Our Lady of Holy Cross College. Maryland took up residence with the 8th District at Little Sisters of the Poor. Since no other buildings were available, Illinois set up a tent city behind Holy Cross. Feeding everyone would be a big problem; a caterer was on order. In the short term, FDNY used the kitchen at the college. Maryland joined the 8th District in its kitchen. Illinois firefighters partly fended for themselves and partly joined the remainder of the NOFD for meals at Our Lady of Wisdom. Four days later, a “Funnel Cake and Sausage” truck showed up. Although all the firefighter chefs provided incredibly excellent meals for everyone, the logistics of feeding a campus of 1,200 was taxing manpower and resources. When a full-food service caterer arrived on the next day, it was a welcome relief to an exhausted, but most appreciated, cooking staff.

Logistical issues were still a large problem. Outside help was still not forthcoming to satisfy supply needs. The ordering and delivery system was not responding adequately to our requests. We were plagued with this issue throughout the entire incident. We found it necessary to continue working the same long hours to find solutions. The team always found a way to get the job done.

With the addition of the mutual-aid departments, we now had adequate manpower and apparatus to better protect the city and to keep all firefighters on a manageable rotation. We were also able to expand the NOFD management team. Chief Gary Savelle had already been assisting us with operations. We were joined by Chiefs Tommy Papa and Joey Lampard as well as several other captains including Captains Chuck Jonau and Richard Smith who are still with the IMT team today. The joint incident management teams met daily and continued to improve operational and logistical efficiency.

**Task Forces Created**

Planning was a key component as we expanded our response capability on the East Bank. Three separate task forces were created, each consisting of one New York/New Orleans staffed engine, four Illinois and Maryland engines, a FAST truck, a safety officer, and a task force leader. These task forces were staged at and responded from the Woodland base. We also began opening fire houses and forward staging areas along the river as the city’s services came on line. Night time operations commenced in limited areas. Privately contracted water tenders increased our tactical capabilities. We established three water tender task forces with two supporting engines and a water supply officer. Air operations, nicknamed “Voodoo,” consisted of helicopter and airplane water-drop capability. We felt quite comfortable that the city was protected from a severe threat of fire.

Woodland base, sometimes referred to as Holy Cross Command, was also a hub of
activity supervised by the incident management team. Base camp crews were created for debris removal, maintenance, chainsaw operations, and necessary construction for the camp. Decon operations for all apparatus, equipment, and individuals returning to base were set up on the perimeter. A military decon site was used on the East Bank. A training facility was set up to increase coordination of and familiarity among the multiple fire departments present. Security for staging areas and the base became an ongoing concern as military deployments were constantly being rotated out. Logistics had the additional task of replenishing the East Bank staging areas daily with food, water, and needed supplies. Assessment teams consisting of Maryland and Illinois personnel continuously visited, cleaned up, and deconned fire stations to help reestablish forward staging areas on the East Bank. Operation Chainsaw, staffed with off-duty personnel, cleaned up debris and trees at the homes of firefighters and other members of the community. All mutual-aid fire department members worked tirelessly, helping out in every fashion imaginable, and then some. They personified the concept of teamwork.

WE WILL NEVER FORGET

On September 11, a memorial ceremony was held in front of Holy Cross College. For the past three years in New Orleans, firefighters, police officers, and EMS workers, and their families and friends had come together to remember and reflect on the events of 9/11. On this fourth anniversary of the most horrific terrorist attack on American soil, we assembled to honor those lives that were lost. Now, the most horrific natural disaster ever to hit the United States had brought everyone together in New Orleans. Here we have a saying, “It is the City that care forgot.” Clearly, our firefighter brothers and sisters did not forget us. They came to our aid just as firefighters came to the aid of our New York brothers and sisters on 9/11. Just as we had sent the “Spirit of Louisiana” to help rebuild the FDNY, FDNY returned to help rebuild New Orleans and help lift the spirits of Louisiana. Firefighters from around the country have come to help rebuild the city one fire house at a time. We can’t thank our brothers and sisters enough. We will never forget.

The New York incident management team did an outstanding job from day one, but its leadership recognized early on that its Type 2 team did not have the staffing necessary to handle such a large and unprecedented incident. They recommended that a Type 1 team be requested to help manage the incident. On September 15, Bob Anderson and his Pacific North West (PNW) IMT 3 arrived at Holy Cross College. Team members began shadowing FDNY IMT on September 16 with Mike Weinlein as his team transitioned with Bob Sweeney’s team and 260 New York firefighters. As the first group of FDNY firefighters were
demobilizing, the Maryland group also demobilized. For the duration of the second FDNY rotation, work was divided between the two IMTs--FDNY taking the lead in operations and safety and the PNW Team 3 in support while PNW took the lead in planning and logistics with FDNY in support. Illinois transitioned on September 20 and downsized to 10 engines and five trucks with 180 firefighters plus staff.

A unified command structure was instituted with NOFD, FDNY, Illinois Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) and PNW IMT 3. A single incident action plan was used. Incident objectives were as follows:

- Provide for firefighter safety and public safety.
- Maintain and improve the effectiveness of the fire/emergency response system for the City of New Orleans.
- Use a unified command ICS organization, maintain an effective command/control and support structure for fire suppression.
- Assess and document the status of the New Orleans municipal water distribution and fire hydrant system.
- Assess and document the operational status of the fire protection systems in the high-rise buildings in the Central Business District.
- Assess, document, and improve the operational status of the New Orleans fire stations and forward staging areas.
- Implement the transition plan for the NOFD to resume independent delivery of fire suppression services.

On the night of September 17, a send-off ceremony was held, starting with a Mardi Gras-style parade entrance, complete with costumes and marching music. Adorned with beads, everyone got into the festivities. Chief Richard Bowers addressed the audience and announced Montgomery County, Maryland, was donating two ladder trucks and a fuel truck to assist NOFD in its rebuilding cause. In addition, several laptop computers, decon gear, equipment, and more than a thousand Maryland Fire Department T-shirts were donated. All the incident commanders addressed the attendees and thanked everyone for a job well done.

Katrina created a special, almost symbolic connection to our newly formed friendships. There was a feeling of oneness, of depending on one another, and of strength derived from our unity. The bonds formed in the short time spent during this most challenging incident would be some of the most memorable of our firefighter careers. Saying goodbye was more difficult than any of us would have guessed.

PNW IMT 3 went to work immediately, introducing a very structured meeting and planning format. Briefings were held every morning at 0600 hours for daytime operations for all fire department personnel and IMT teams and again at 1800 hours for nighttime operations. NOFD was working a 12-hour rotation. FDNY and Illinois worked a 24-hour rotation. An Area Command/IC conference call was held every morning at 0900 hours, followed by a Unified IC meeting. Operational staff meetings and strategy planning meetings were held every day. A unified and general staff meeting was also held every day to ensure that everyone was on the same page. Late every evening after the camp seemed to settle down, Tim and I would meet to review and assess the day and how it affected the NOFD. At first glance, it would appear that too much time may have been spent in meetings. However, with such a large-scale incident introducing so many unknowns, a tight and
disciplined management system with strict accountability proved beneficial. The unified management team effort also proved efficient for daily problem solving.

The large IMT assembled by PNW 3 did an excellent job getting a handle on the numerous issues that confronted us daily. Security was stabilized by using the National Guard on the base, augmented by Forest Service law enforcement officers. Supplies on the base and in the field became easier to track and distribute. Base camp operations included buying team support, feeding, billeting, showers, fueling, laundry service, and decontamination activities for more than 1,000 personnel.

PNW IMT #3 personnel facilitated the development of an interim-staffing plan focused primarily on protecting “values at risk.” The Interim New Orleans Firehouse Staffing Plan addresses: firehouse location, apparatus placement, suppression staff placement, and housing requirements. The plan consists of two phases:

**Phase 1:** Stations requiring various levels of logistical support, which will diminish as city water and sewer systems come on line.

**Phase 2:** Outlines the development of initial sites within portions of the flood area. The placement of firehouses within the flood areas will be driven by environmental review and approval of re-entry. All sites identified in phase 2 will require housing units.

An order was placed with the Army Corps of Engineers for modular living units and engine bays. NOFD Chief Tommy Papa worked with the Corps and FEMA to facilitate this operation. Despite the long hours and dedicated work by Chief Papa and the NOFD team, the modular units never came to fruition. Unfortunately, it took a great deal of wasted time and energy before we realized the Corps and FEMA just couldn't get their act together and lacked the ability to deliver what they promised. Their inability to perform created an ill affordable delay and a huge impediment to our phase 2 plan. We later developed a plan using smaller and less expensive house trailer units placed at strategic firehouse locations. Although phase 2 was significantly delayed, we were very aggressive in our pursuit of phase 1 implementation. By September 21, we were successful at locating numerous forward staging areas on the East Bank on a 24-hour basis. The locations included the golf clubhouse at Audubon Park, Engine 1’s quarters on Magazine, Engine 16’s quarters on Martin Luther King, Engine 2’s quarters on Girod, Engine 29’s quarters on Decatur, Engine 9's quarters on Esplanade, staging at the Training School in New Orleans East, all 8th District firehouses, and Woodland task force staging. In less than a month, we were able to reestablish significant forward staged fire protection for the entire city from West to East.

On September 19, Hurricane Rita began to get our attention. We began our normal preparations and also started working on a contingency plan. We shared copies of our hurricane guidelines with all our mutual-aid personnel and briefed them on what to expect. Many had never experienced a hurricane before, and most were pretty anxious, especially after hearing Rita had grown to a Category 4 storm.

While the mutual-aid companies prepared plans for evacuation, New Orleans made it clear from the start that we were not going anywhere. Even though our main focus was on Rita, daily operations continued with some adjustments. We also used this time to work on an exit strategy and glide path for NOFD to stand on its own.
**Hurricane Rita**

On September 22, New Orleans came under a tropical storm warning indicating that storm/flood conditions were expected or were imminent in our area. Chief Gary Savelle continuously monitored the Federal Government’s Computerized Hurrivac System. This system, used by an experienced operator such as Chief Savelle, can be an excellent predictor of a storm’s threat. On its current course, Rita was projected to reach landfall near the Louisiana/Texas border. New Orleans could expect sustained winds of 40 mph with gusts up to 60 mph. Rainfall was predicted at three to five inches and could trigger three to five feet of rising water. More than six feet could compromise the levees. Any eastward movement would increase winds, rain, and storm surge.

Evacuation to the east had already been cut off by Katrina. Evacuation to the west would mean heading into the storm. Evacuation to the north would be extremely crowded and slow. Reports were already coming in about congested highways. The window to evacuate to safety was rapidly closing. In fact, we warned that it already may have been too late for the mutual-aid companies to leave. We recommended that it would be safer to shelter in place with New Orleans. Everyone agreed. We immediately arranged for all personnel to shelter indoors. All tenting and equipment were also stored inside. All Illinois apparatus and firefighters returned to Woodland, as well as all companies staged at the Training School. All other East Bank companies remained in place to ride out the storm. Arrangements for last places of safe refuge were made at the downtown Hilton, Hyatt, and the Marriott hotels should the storm turn and create a greater threat to the East Bank companies.

On September 23, Hurricane Rita made landfall west of New Orleans. Chief Gary Savelle’s hurrivac forecast was impressively accurate. Although we received the predicted tropical storm force winds and rain, we received very little damage, much to everyone’s relief. During the next few days, we continued to monitor rain and flooding throughout the rest of the city. We received reports of a levee’s breaching and flooding at the Lower 9th Ward original break. We were also informed that I-10 west at the Florida Avenue train trestle and I-10 east at the high rise bridge were impassable because of high water.

On the morning of the September 25, Rita was downgraded to a tropical depression, with possible continued rains. Damage in the Southwest was less than expected. While the city experienced numerous problems, Woodland base and our forward staging areas survived Rita without event. It was time to get back to recovering from Katrina.

On September 24, a request for a third deployment from FDNY and Illinois MABAS was approved. It included 80 New York firefighters and 110 Illinois firefighters with 10 apparatus. They would be deployed from September 29 through October 14. Chief Bob Sweeney’s FDNY IMT personnel would be replaced by an FDNY team led by Chief Harry Meyers. Chief Tom Lovejoy would be replaced by Illinois IMAT Ken Wojtecki. We were also
notified that on October 5, Dave Larsen’s Northern Rockies Type 2 IMT would be relieving PNW IMT 3.

REPOPULATION
OF THE CITY BEGUN

Monday, September 26, was the Mayor’s target date to start repopulation of the city and Entergy, the local power company, had plans to energize the French Quarter. Planning and Operations never rest. High-rise and hotel inspections needed to pick up where they left off. Hydrant inspections and water supply updates needed to be stepped up. Safety fliers were printed and handed out to reentry population. Fire companies maintained a visible presence to reassure the public they were being protected.

PNW 3 was also instrumental in implementing a plan for the NOFD to resume independent delivery of fire suppression services. A target date of October 12 was set. During this next period, progress was made in positioning NOFD to assume full command of its fire suppression organization. To facilitate this, PNW Team 3 and NOFD developed an interim ICS organization structure and began integrating NOFD personnel into ICS positions. The ICS structure developed was designed to allow, to the extent possible, normal fire department operations where they existed and provide additional attention/support to those portions of operations that were short-staffed and not typical of the normal day-to-day fire department routine.

NOFD personnel began shadowing some PNW IMT 3 counterparts in the positions identified in the NOFD organization to prepare to implement the IC structure. NOFD assumed the lead role in operations, under this concept, on the departure of the second rotation of FDNY personnel. NOFD rotation and personnel shortages have limited the amount of shadowing that occurred in other sections, particularly Logistical and Finance. Successful completion of training key members of NOFD will be key to NOFD’s ability to implement ICS. NOFD will continue shadowing and training under Dave Larsen’s Northern Rockies IMT Type 2 Team.

The next few days was business as usual. We continued to plan for the last group transition for FDNY, Illinois MABAS, and PNW IMT 3. Internally, we continued our planning for repopulating our fire houses and forward staging areas to better protect the city. Chuck Burkell from the U.S. Fire Administration Strategic Planning Team was briefed regarding current status and identified issues. He assembled a team to assist the NOFD in developing a strategic plan for immediate, interim, and long-term planning and operations.

On October 1, an Emergency Operations Center planning group discussed the need for a plan for civil unrest and conflagration, but wanted no assignments. Earlier because of our conservative planning nature, we had already developed some preplans to address civil
unrest and conflagration. Fortunately, the plans never had to be implemented.

“We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.”

FIREFIGHTER COMMENDATIONS

On September 30, at 0930 hours, we held a commendation ceremony in front of Holy Cross College. This was the first in a number of commendations to be given to firefighters who responded in an outstanding manner during and immediately after Hurricane Katrina. This day we were honoring firefighters from the 4th District in eastern New Orleans, identified as the “Bell South Building Group,” their last place of safe refuge. They responded out of their personal boats effecting rescues every day. Their flotilla of 10 boats used a grid pattern working outward to ensure a safe, thorough, and systematic search. They operated as unified teams using VHF and civilian handheld radios. Civilians were first rescued from their attics and roofs and then finally from second-story and higher homes. This operation continued for five days until they downgraded operations after their final evacuation of disabled and handicapped senior citizens from Lake Forest Towers, when USAR and Wild Life & Fisheries teams relieved them. More than 1,000 persons were rescued and brought to safety. During this entire operation, as eyewitnesses reported looting, civil unrest, and shots fired, we maintained communication with the Bell South Group. Each day when we suggested that the group evacuate, it insisted on continuing its rescues, knowing they were needed to continue operations in place. These firefighters gave their best, and it was an honor to give them the recognition they so courageously earned.

On this same day, we graciously praised and honored the New York and Illinois firefighters who were in the process of demobilizing. The ceremony was very emotional, and the news media did an excellent job of capturing the moment. Much credit goes to Public Information Officers Brian Hollins and Brian Crawford on loan from Shreveport Fire Department. Superintendent Kelvin Corcoran could not have been more helpful. He also allowed our newest recruits to join his training program in Shreveport, housing and feeding them as well. NOFD is very grateful for all Shreveport has done.

Fire companies continued high-rise building and hydrant inspections, targeting specified zip codes for repopulation. Some hydrant grids were shut down in the East and in Lakeview because of broken and free-flowing mains. The Seventeenth Street Canal area was also shut down, as was the lower 9th Ward. We reported four staging areas as self-sufficient and using city utilities, five staging areas logistically supported, and three locations as needing continuous service and supplies. We continuously searched for a
Lakeview staging area because of the increased activity being reported in those neighborhoods. NOPD and the Federal Bureau of Investigation requested notification of all working fires. Everyone had concerns regarding the threat arson posed. All suppression personnel were now working on a 24-hour rotation schedule.

**“CLOSEOUT” MEETING**

On October 4, Dave Larsen’s Type 2 Northern Rockies IMT shadowed and transitioned with PNW Type 1 IMT. Several notable comments were made at the Pacific North West closeout meeting:
- It was critical for the NOFD to have its team continue to shadow and be able to stand alone with ICS. The guiding and mentoring process was successful up to this time. Additional formal training and ICS involvement are needed.
- The ordering process was completely broken. There was a lack of command and control at the EOC. The contracting authority was unable to deliver the needed supplies and services during the response mode.
- Hurricane Katrina was the largest and most rapid mobilization in Forest Service history.
- Area Command stressed how incredibly well all fire departments integrated.
- Bob Anderson’s PNW IMT Type 1 Team received the highest ever awarded rating for its handling of the Katrina Incident.
- All the Fire Department ICs felt everyone blended and integrated well and in short order. For many of us it was our first interaction with Forest Service personnel. They are true professionals we are proud to call our firefighter brothers and sisters. We look forward to future opportunities we might share together.

**PLANNING AND RESUMPTION OF DUTIES**

On October 5, an unsubstantiated rumor circulated in the base camp that the water was not potable. The rumor initiated from several mutual-aid personnel who overreacted to a test run by the Military. New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board immediately disputed the findings, reporting that the Military had consistently made this same testing misinterpretation pre-Katrina. This was the same West Bank water supply we had been drinking before, during, and after Katrina. We issued an announcement explaining the misunderstanding and prevented any panic. The same morning, some hotels reported receiving contaminated water from unauthorized water tenders. This report was true. The Sewerage and Water Board quickly identified the guilty tenders and corrected the situation. Of all city departments, besides Fire, the Sewerage and Water Board seemed to have its act together. We communicated well with its EOC representative, who was very responsive to NOFD needs.

A Lower 9th Ward fire response plan was implemented using special instructions because there was still standing water, downed wires everywhere, and trees blocking most routes. Companies were to stage at the foot of the Industrial Canal Bridge, and the chief would find a safe path for response. Two high-water National Guard military fire engines
were reassigned to our operation. They had self-contained pumping capability and 1,000-gallon booster tanks. They categorically met our needs. We certainly could have used them from the start. They previously were assigned to cleaning up streets. They were very happy to be working an assignment more befitting their capabilities. In addition, the NOFD USAR team was put in service to assist in victim searches, especially in the Lower 9th Ward.

The Planning team identified St. Pius Elementary School as a staging area in Lakeview. It did not receive any flood waters or significant storm damage. We were prepared to hook up a generator but were fortunate to get Entergy to connect us with city power. Several fire companies and two New Orleans water tenders with pumper capacity were assigned. Water Tender Task Forces proved extremely beneficial in supplementing our firefighting proficiency, especially after the Water officers made some tactical adjustments that made them more effective in delivering an adequate and continuous water supply. The Southern Pacific Railroad provided two tank cars each containing 10,000 gallons of water. They were staged in New Orleans East at our Training School. We felt confident in our ability to provide sufficient water to efficiently fight fires anywhere in the city.

Because of contaminated dust and muck, firefighters were advised to wear safety masks when riding through Lakeview and the Lower 9th Ward. This was an ongoing problem enhanced by a lack of rain. The Environmental Protection Agency set up a monitoring and testing system. Some toxic concentrations were found, but they were reported to be in acceptable parts per million and non-life threatening. The contaminants were classified primarily as irritants. We continued to track testing results daily.

On October 7, we held our second commendation ceremony at Holy Cross College. Another group from New Orleans East, comprised of E-37, E-10, and E-31, was honored. Working out of E-37’s quarters after the storm passed, these firefighters immediately began boat rescues using two boats the firefighters brought in. After conducting their windshield survey, they found the only dry spot was Chef Menteur Highway. All members worked at various duties running an efficient base operation, providing support to the rescue and suppression operations. After nine days, the three companies were responsible for extinguishing four fires. Four had to be allowed to burn because of security reasons. Firefighter personal safety is always a high priority. More than 3,000 people were rescued by boat. As was true of every post-Katrina operation, this group elected to stay where it was needed most instead of evacuating to safer, more comfortable quarters. Our firefighters did us all proud. We were pleased to honor them this day. Illinois and New York made a special flag presentation to the NOFD at the end of the commendation ceremony. We were all deeply touched by our mutual-aid brothers and sisters.

Normal daily operations were sustained without any significant events. NOFD continued to shadow their counterparts. Everything proceeded smoothly. We followed the projected glide path with a transition plan for the NOFD’s developing an ICS IMT to have in place by October 12. As planning progressed, NOFD assumed more responsibilities in the overall planning function. NOFD became the key lead in compiling and producing the incident action plan. NOFD coordinated all briefings, pre-strategy meetings, and planning approvals. On October 12, NOFD assumed all operational control with New York and Illinois as backup only. As the closeout date of October 15, approached, NOFD showed itself prepared to stand up on its own.

The Planning team expanded response capability by adding another staging area. The New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) in the 9th Ward on Press and Chartres
gave us better access to the 3rd District responses and to the Lower 9th Ward. The two military engines were located at Jackson Barracks, with a water tender for additional supply. We expanded the role of our USAR team to assist in the numerous victim searches. We regularly met with Mike Zumpstein of the Corps of Engineers on the issue of temporary engine houses. The delays also continued. We also pursued discussions with Chuck Burkell of the National Fire Academy on a Strategic Planning Team to plot the short, mid and long term future of the NOFD. On October 13, all New Orleans members and apparatus were relocated to East Bank staging. Spare apparatus were moved to the Training School. The NOFD IMT was going to operate next to the Deputy’s office at Headquarters.

On October 15, Northern Rockies Type 2 IMT held its closeout meeting. All Unified commanders participated. All agreed our working relationships were outstanding. We felt very lucky to work with such a class group of leaders. Some of the noteworthy comments made are as follows:

The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was assigned a Deputy IC for coordination between the Unified Command and the EOC. The Deputy IC worked directly with NOFD Superintendent Parent and his senior staff on major issues related to ordering specialized resources, water supply, strategic planning, and coordination of agencies. An inordinate amount of time was spent tracking resources ordered through the Louisiana State EOC using the FEMA Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) and Action Request Form (ARF) processes. Neither of these ordering methods had a timely tracking method; it often took longer to track the computer generated e-team request than it would have to have placed a phone order and follow it up with a written, faxed general message. Often, there would be no record of what happened to the resource order for days; sometimes, we had to issue a second order. There was no follow-up information about canceled or lost orders. The New Orleans EOC operation functioned well; leadership was integrated with an EOC ICS team from northern Virginia. This assisted in coordinating information. Considering the magnitude of the disaster, the coordination was adequate.

Northern Rockies IMT felt the mission was successful and extremely rewarding. The Unified Command worked exceptionally well and was a professional and valuable experience for all involved. Northern Rockies IMT proudly announced it would work with NOFD, FDNY, and Illinois MABAS anytime it was needed.

**MANAGEMENT OF POST-KATRINA OPERATIONS**

A downsized IMT consisting of Chief Richard Hampton, Chief Tim McConnell, Captain Richard Smith and Captain Chuck Jonau, continues to assist the NOFD in managing post-Katrina operations and the rebuilding process. Some of the early challenges we faced with the ordering process still plague us today. Progress is slow, which continues to frustrate everyone. There’s plenty of blame to go around. The blame game and finger pointing will not solve anything. Those responsible probably know who they are. We feel the greatest lesson to be learned can be summed up in one word, ACCOUNTABILITY.

If every individual held himself accountable for every action to which they committed and communicated the result, whether successful or not, we would then know how to proceed. Perhaps there is much truth in the quote, “The difficult is that which can be done immediately; the Impossible is that which will take a little longer.” We’re determined,
committed, and accountable, even if it takes a little longer.

Choice, not chance, determines one's destiny. It was our first choice to become firefighters; it was our choice to step up to face the enormous challenges brought on by Hurricane Katrina. It was this choice that determined our destiny, a destiny immersed in tremendous successes attributed to our commitment and devotion to duty to save lives and property.

Words cannot describe the immense gratitude and the sense of spiritual well-being we have for all our brother and sister firefighters. We have shared one of the most memorable and heartfelt experiences in our entire careers. It has been an honor and a privilege to work alongside greatness. We could not be more proud of our members and our profession.

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