

# Remembering Hurricane Katrina a Decade Later

Aug. 28, 2015 | By Jim Garamone, DoD News Features, Defense Media Activity

You have accessed part of a historical collection on defense.gov. Some of the information contained within may be outdated and links may not function. Please contact the [DOD Webmaster](#) with any questions.



Forecasters said the hurricane would be bad, but no one expected a Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina hit the American Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005, causing initial destruction from Texas to Florida. It wreaked such damage over such a large area that it changed the way the U.S. government responds to disasters.

According to the National Hurricane Center Katrina was directly responsible for around 1,200 deaths, making it the third most deadly hurricane in American history. It caused \$108 billion in property damage, making it the costliest hurricane to strike the U.S.

DoD personnel were in the middle of rescue and recovery efforts for weeks and months after the storm hit.

More than 60,000 members of the U.S. military forces were on the ground, first saving, then sustaining lives.

### **An Enormous Effort**

It was an enormous effort with 18,000 active duty service members joining 43,000 National Guardsmen that focused on Katrina relief operations.

And they were needed. When Katrina hit, it caused a storm surge that inundated whole coastlines, according to National Hurricane Center Service measurements. The storm had sustained winds of more than 120 mph. Portions of Louisiana and Mississippi received 15 inches of rain.

Katrina knocked out power and the communications grid crashed. Bridges, underpasses and roads were all closed. Flooding forced relief personnel to detour for miles.

### **Huge Storm**

The size of the storm caused its own set of problems. The storm surge in Mobile Bay -- fully 70 miles east of where Katrina hit land -- was still between 12 and 16 feet. Hurricane force winds lashed the Florida Panhandle.

Typically, hurricanes lose force quickly once striking land. Not Katrina. Tornadoes and rain lashed inland areas up into Georgia. Hurricane Katrina affected over 93,000 square miles of the United States, an area almost as large as Great Britain and left an estimated five million people without power, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Levees protecting the city of New Orleans weren't high enough with the storm surge overtopping some of the protective berms, and breaching others. At a U.S. Senate hearing after the storm, Army Corps of Engineers officials said there were 55 breaches in the levee

system protecting the city.

## **New Orleans Residents Experience the Storm**

New Orleans officials estimated that 80 percent of the population evacuated, but that still left between 50,000 and 60,000 people who were hunkering down in their homes or in “last-chance” shelters like the Superdome. The levee failures flooded about 80 percent of the city. Some 26,000 people who had taken refuge in the Superdome were surrounded by water.

The city also sustained wind damage. The Hyatt Hotel in downtown New Orleans had almost every window blown out on the north side of the building.

The Mississippi coast was devastated. Pass Christian, a pretty town along the Gulf Coast, disappeared. The storm surge and winds scoured the town leaving nothing but concrete slabs where brick homes once stood. The surge picked up whole section of a bridge that carried Route 90 and deposited the huge concrete structure 200 to 300 meters inland. Strangely, the other two lanes of the bridge remained in place. More than 80 percent of the structures in Pass Christian were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable, according to local officials who had set up a headquarters in a relatively unscathed gas station.

In Biloxi the surge picked up freight train cars full of chicken and the winds broke them apart. For weeks, the smell was something to behold.

Seabees based in Gulfport, Mississippi, began work with their base essentially underwater.

## **Rescue Efforts Commence**

U.S. Coast Guard and National Guard personnel moved in as soon as conditions allowed. Coast Guardsmen were the first on the scene with any kind of organization. Coast Guard helicopters skittered across the city rescuing people from rooftops, from flooded streets and providing the eyes for those following in their wake. The Coast Guard helicopters were soon followed by Coast Guard boats. The airport in Mobile became the world’s largest Coast Guard base with choppers from around the service flying missions. Overall, Coast Guard personnel rescued 33,544 people during Katrina operations, according to their records. For its response, the Coast Guard received the Presidential Unit Citation.

National Guardsmen tried to move into the city even as the winds were blowing and the rain was falling. Fallen trees and flooded roads stalled their progress, said Guardsmen. Many of the Guardsmen had lost their homes, yet they were heading out to help others. There was

confusion about what powers Guardsmen had and who they reported to.

In New Orleans order had broken down. Shortly after the hurricane passed looting began and reports out of the city mentioned everything from murder to rape to carjackings. Later investigations found the reports were exaggerated, but it was no exaggeration that the city was in dire straits.

### **Multi-Service Effort**

National Guard forces entering the city conducted humanitarian, search-and-rescue, evacuation and security missions, officials reported. While Coast Guard, Air Force and Army helicopters sought out those trapped in attics or roofs, National Guardsmen and police conducted house-to-house searches. The doors marked with an X and information in the various quadrants saying who searched the house, what was found and when the search was conducted, soon became a familiar sign.

The Guardsmen were soon joined by active-duty soldiers and Marines.

Navy and Coast Guard vessels sailed up the Mississippi River to lend the help their crews and facilities could provide. In time, 28 ships -- 21 Navy and seven Coast Guard -- were stationed in the affected region.

Coordinating the DoD effort was Army Lt. Gen. Russel L. Honore, who commanded Joint Task Force Katrina. Honore, a Louisiana native, became a legend for his gruff, no nonsense approach. "He got things done," then-New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said of Honore.

### **Getting Back to Normal**

The Army Corps of Engineers set about mending the breached levees and getting the pumping stations that usually kept the below-sea-level city dry working again. It was October before the floodwaters were pumped out.

There are still signs of Katrina in New Orleans and along the coast. Then-President George W. Bush said recovery would take years, and he was right. A decade on, the area is still rebuilding. New, deeper levees were emplaced, new water control apparatus erected. Some areas were elevated, while others were cleared. It remains a work in progress.

Katrina has served as a warning against complacency, Federal Emergency Management Agency officials said. It is an example of why people should take evacuation orders seriously and be prepared for emergencies.

The loss of life and the damage from Katrina was so severe, that the National Weather Service officially retired Katrina from the Atlantic hurricane naming list.

(Follow Jim Garamone on Twitter: @garamoneDoDNews)

Hosted by Defense Media Activity - WEB.mil