

Ryan Lambert, Fermilab Firefighter  
Re: Deployment to New Orleans  
11/27/2005

I received confirmation of my deployment to New Orleans on Sunday 8/18/05 at approximately 1500 hrs. I would be one of two hundred Illinois firefighters to go during this second deployment. I packed my stuff the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup>, set-up care for my 3 year old daughter and tried to prepare myself mentally for what I was about to embark on, only to find out that there really is no preparation for what I saw.

I am currently a full-time firefighter with the Fermilab Fire Department and a part-time Lieutenant for the North Aurora Fire Department. I was asked to go to the first deployment through North Aurora, but was asked by the Assistant Chief to wait due to being on the Divisions Technical Rescue Team. The Assistant Chief felt that the Technical Rescue Team would be called to New Orleans also and wanted me to respond with that unit so he would have enough Lieutenants to command a group. So when the Technical Rescue Team was not called upon, I decided to accept the second Fire/Suppression Team deployment.

I left for New Orleans at 10:00 hrs. on August 19<sup>th</sup>. I said my goodbyes to my wife, who was 6 months pregnant, and daughter (very difficult to handle). I almost "lost it" when my daughter didn't understand why I would not be home tomorrow. Thank the Lord for blessing me with an understanding wife. When I asked for her permission to go, she understood that I was needed to help down there and said she would rather me go now before the baby is born and not take the chance of missing the birth.

I departed from Aurora Station #1 with Dan Darce from Aurora Fire. Before we left we had to sign paperwork that included to whom our belongings should go to if we are killed during our tour and if we wanted a fire department funeral service. Reality had set in at this point. We drove Aurora fire engine #55 to New Orleans. This was a reserve piece of equipment that had seen a lot of action and was getting old. The engine had no air and was very hot. We drove straight through to New Orleans and made the trip in about 20 hours.

The damage from hurricane Katrina could be seen approximately 100 miles from New Orleans. Once we got into the New Orleans area, the damage got worse. Trees ripped apart like twigs, buildings taken off their foundations and most impressive was entire neighborhoods leveled as if they never existed. Unbelievable.

I had witnessed the damage that Mother Nature can produce when I went to the tornado scene in Utica, IL as a technical rescue team member just an hour after it had hit. Katrina's damage was a thousand times worse. It's amazing how wide spread the damage was. Total destruction everywhere you looked. It was very heartbreaking, stressful and scary. But as a rescue worker we had to eliminate these thoughts from our minds and complete the tasks at hand.

The camp that we were located in was at Holy Cross College in Algiers, New Orleans. The camp housed firefighters from New York, Maryland and Illinois. Also housed in this camp were the U.S. military personnel that had been deployed to assist in the security of New Orleans. All fire personnel were assigned tents to sleep in, rations (food in air tight bags) and water. This was our home for the next three days. The weather was extremely hot (98 degrees and 90-100% humidity) and the tents were even hotter. We later moved into an abandon nursing home for the rest of the tour.

I was originally assigned to a Naperville, IL truck located in downtown New Orleans, but was later assigned to Oak Park, IL engine 611. We were located near the base camp and ran calls with a crew that manned a Pingree Grove, IL fire engine. I worked with a great bunch of guys, 2 from Lockport, IL fire department, 1 from West Dundee, IL fire department and 1 from Maywood, IL fire department.

The shift we worked was a 24/24. We worked 24 hours on a fire rig and had 24 hours off. On our work day, we would wait for fire calls and respond accordingly. During my tour in New Orleans we responded to several calls. We responded to gas leaks, downed power lines and structure fires. The entire time we were doing these jobs we had to keep in mind of the different hazards that we normally don't deal with. Things like; hazardous bacteria in the air that caused us to wear breathing masks outside of fire buildings, bacteria in the water, mold, unidentified energized power line locations and water supply issues.

Our fire company did not save lives and we didn't even fight a lot of fires. What we did do was allow for the New Orleans firefighters to have extra time off so they could travel to see their families that have been forced to live outside of their state or take care of the plans for loved ones that they had lost. This is why we were really there. To help them deal with the situation.

All the firemen that I worked with were very professional and very in-tune to the way things are done. We never had any problems with fire ground procedures. We did the job and did it well.

On our 24 hours off time, we ended up doing more work than we did on our on days. We worked each day on a detail called Operation Chain Saw. This detail consisted of firefighters going out into the neighborhoods and clearing trees and debris from homes. We mostly focused our attention on New Orleans firefighter homes, but would help anyone we came across. Since the mayor of New Orleans called for a complete evacuation of the city, police and firefighters were the only people around.

The homes we went to were for the most part completely destroyed. They had water damage up to the roofs and wall to wall mold problems. This work was very depressing and very gratifying at the same time. We were there helping these men and women get some of their prized possessions from the damage. Their prized possessions weren't the big screen TV or jewelry, but instead as one firefighter we assisted needed to find a ceramic bowl that his daughter made him when she was just 10 years old. This was his most prized possession.

As we did these details the New Orleans firefighters kept thanking us over and over. They called us their heroes. But in reality, they were our heroes. They kept their minds on the job when their families were hundreds of miles away, they lost their homes, all of their belongings and many even lost loved ones. They never dwelled on it. They kept going to save and protect what the city still had. And we did everything we could to help.

Our deployment did not get a chance to make a lot of rescues or fight a lot of fires. The city was completely abandoned due to the mandatory evacuation from Katrina, and then while we were in New Orleans hurricane Rita came through. This was first time I had experienced a hurricane first hand. It was truly amazing the pure power that they pack. We stood by during hurricane Rita and waited to see what would be our fate when the storm came to an end. Luckily Rita went from a category 5 hurricane to a category 3 when it hit landfall. This coupled with a low population in the city, the damage to life and property was minimized.

As I recap the 2 weeks that I was down in New Orleans many thoughts and feelings come to mind.

- 1) I think about the many friendships that I made. These relationships were bonded from firefighters living through hell together for 2 weeks.
- 2) Then I remember the devastation that was witnessed. This devastation I hope that nobody has to witness ever again.
- 3) The smell, how horrible the smell was. The horrible smells coming from many sources like rotten food, mold and most heartening the dead bodies.
- 4) The fact that I felt like we were in a war zone. Helicopters flying overhead 24 hours a day, military personnel everywhere and the sounds of military jets flying around.
- 5) Heroes. Lots of heroes came out of this disaster and I don't view any of us firefighters deployed to New Orleans as heroes. Instead the heroes were the firefighters that stayed home and protected our communities while wishing they could help in New Orleans. These men and women that had to work extra shifts to cover our spot while we were away.

And New Orleans firefighters that continued to do the job while they had no family around them and lost everything. Many of these people had just lost their homes, pets, pictures and most importantly, family and friends.

Finally and most importantly, our families. The families of the firefighters deployed to New Orleans that had to pick-up the slack for our absence. The husbands and wives, that had to play both mother and father while we were away. They had to field the questions as to why daddy won't be home tonight. They had to do all of these things and then in the back of there minds have this unknown thought as to if we are safe, we will come home and will we be the same after experiencing what we did. My hats off to these people. My mom, my dad, my sister, my co-workers and mostly my wife. What I did was so minor in comparison, these truly were the heroes.

I returned from the deployment 13 days after I had left for the journey. I was drained. Both physically and emotionally. I never got a rest when I returned. I had to see my family and do some of the things that I have missed out on the last two weeks. Then it was back to work. No reminiscing about what had happened. I had life and property here that the rest of the men and women had been protecting while I was gone.

I thank God for the people that allowed for me to help in New Orleans. I joined the fire service to make a difference in people's lives. Whether that difference was saving someone's property from destruction, saving a pet or saving a life I wanted to be the one they called to help them. I love having the skills and knowledge that allow me to make a difference. Having the opportunity to utilize my skills and knowledge to make this difference is the most gratifying feeling in the world. I wish I could have made a big rescue in New Orleans, I didn't. But I did make a positive difference in many of lives, a difference that may have indirectly saved a life. And that was well worth the trip.

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