

Lt. Christopher Williams,  
Fermilab Fire Department  
Re: Hurricane Katrina and Rita

On Tuesday, September 27, while on Duty at Fermilab Fire Department, I received a phone call from my hometown fire department, Crystal Lake. The City of New Orleans had asked for a third deployment of Illinois fire fighters to help in New Orleans. They were looking for experienced fire fighters with Technical Rescue and Hazardous Material training and experience. Details of the deployment were unknown at the time of the call. I advised Chief Steinhoff of the possibility of being deployed and he gave me his support. At approximately 1630 hrs I received a second call from the Crystal Lake Fire Department, stating the deployment would leave some time over the coming weekend, October 1st or 2nd. We had one day to travel down, 14 days of work and one day to travel back home. The first thing that came to my mind was my family since they knew I could be deployed at any time.

The Crystal Lake Fire Department had already sent two members during the first deployment, one being my friend Rob Martel. During his deployment, I talked to him daily giving him and others I knew there my moral support. Conditions were bad. I also talked with my Fermilab co-worker, Ryan Lambert, who was also in New Orleans.

I wanted to talk to my family face to face, asking for their permission, but I had to wait until my 13-year-old daughter, June, got home from school, and my wife of 15 years, Lovell, got home from work. I called home and got them both on the phone and asked if I could go. My wife, Lovell, said yes, "this is what you have been training for and what you like doing, helping others". My daughter, June, was quiet. I told her this was not the way I wanted to ask her but if she did not want me to go, I understood. It had to be a family decision. She wanted more details than I could give her. Finally, June said she was scared because she did not want me coming home with any diseases. I reassured her that I would protect myself the same as if I were working here or at home, and I am going with other firefighters, who watch over each other.

Having strong family support is very important in the life of fire service. The next day I received several phone calls and e-mails about the deployment. One e-mail had forms attached for us to complete. This was when it all started to feel real. Questions that needed to be asked, who to contact, and what the family wanted if something happened to me while on deployment. I left Friday, September 30th, with one other member of the Crystal Lake Fire Department, Kirk Kiermas. Kirk and I attended our first fire school together 23 years ago. He married my wife's cousin, and now we were going to New Orleans together. We reported to Crystal Lake Fire Station One at 1000 hrs on Friday morning, September 30th. I was going with 11 other members from McHenry County that form MABAS Division 5. We met up with Lake County members of MABAS Division 4. I was allowed three bags; one bag for personal property, one bag for fire fighting gear to include extra equipment and technical gear, and the third bag was a deployment bag. The deployment bag was issued to us. It was loaded with gear and equipment we needed to support our operations.

That Thursday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, I picked up June from school and we went out for lunch to our favorite place, Subway. Later that night the family went shopping for last minute items and then out to dinner at Nicks Pizza & Pub.

Friday morning seemed like a normal day, my family got up, we had breakfast, I said my goodbyes to my wife and dropped June off at school. I arrived at Crystal Lake fire station and checked all my equipment. Kirk and I had to fill out more paperwork and make sure we had proper IDs. From Crystal Lake we were driven to Cary Fire Station, where we met up with the other members from McHenry County fire departments, several of whom I knew. From Cary we were driven to Mundelein Fire Department. Once there, we were checked in, bags checked, paperwork checked, and yes, more paperwork to fill out. Other fire fighters from Lake County arrived; there were 35 fire fighters in all. Next, we were driven to the Metra train station to catch a train to Union Station in Chicago. When we arrived at Union Station we had to transfer all our equipment from the Metra train to an Amtrak train. We met up with other fire fighters from all over Northern Illinois. The Amtrak train left at 2000 hrs with 80 Firefighters, picking up more as we headed south. In the end 120 Firefighters, Officers and Chiefs were headed to New Orleans. I have always wanted to take a cross-country trip by train and the ride was an experience. For those of you who live near train tracks, they blow the horn at every crossing, and at 70 miles per hour, that's a lot of crossings and horns sounding.

We arrived in Hammond, Louisiana at 1400 hrs Saturday. We were met by the firefighters from the second deployment who would take the train back home. We could see damage from the tornados and winds from Hurricane Katrina and Rita. From Hammond we went by charter buses to our base camp, located on the southern end of New Orleans. It was a one-hour ride. The further south we went, the more damage we saw. The bus became very quiet as we looked out the windows at the damage we had been seeing on TV. All we could see were destroyed buildings, blue tarps covering roofs everywhere, abandoned vehicles, boats, garbage, mud and muddy watermarks everywhere. The one thing that hit me the most was arriving in a large town, at 1600 hrs on a Saturday, and not seeing any people. We were driving down the Interstate and there where no other vehicles, nor did we see any people on the streets and no signs of life.

We arrived at our base camp, Our Lady of Holy Cross Catholic Collage. This was our home away from home for the next 14 days. We were checked in, more paperwork, they checked our medical records and given shots if needed. Because of the medical program here at the Lab, I was one of the few who did not need shots. We were then given our sleeping arrangements; we would be sleeping in classrooms, wall to wall on cots. We had photo ID's made that we were required to wear at all times. A briefing was held on the lay out of the base camp, rules, our assignments and how the operations were conducted. We were divided into two groups, odds and even. Odds would work at the fire stations on odd days, and even would work on the even days. I was scheduled to the odd days, assigned to Bettendorf, Iowa's fire engine. I met up with the rest of the members of my crew and we went over the fire engine for familiarity. The base camp

was the home for the main body of the New Orleans Fire Department. Their members were staying in the college's nursing home used to teach nursing students how to care for the elderly. 100 New York firefighters, FEMA's Northwest Pacific Management team and Federal Forest Rangers were there providing protection for the base camp. We all walked around the base camp to get familiar with where things were located. Showers were in two portable trailers. Hot meals were cooked in a semi-trailer made into a large portable kitchen. Two large tents made up the dining hall. Breakfast of eggs, bacon and grits were staples each morning from 0500 hrs to 1000 hrs. Bag lunches had to be picked up by 1000 hrs. These consisted of a ham sandwich, apple and apple juice or an orange and orange juice, a large bag of M&M or a large Snickers candy bar. Dinner was served each night from 1700 hrs to 2200 hrs and consisted of chicken, mashed potatoes and a dinner roll, all you can eat! FEMA had tents and semi-trailers set up and loaded with supplies and equipment available if needed.

Sunday morning, wake up call was at 0500 hrs, shower, have breakfast and report to the front of the college for the day's briefing. Fire fighters that were assigned to apparatus and fire stations left for their 24 hour shift. The rest of us had our choice of hanging out at the base camp or helping the community. Several other firefighters and I choose to participate with Operation Chain Saw. This was a program where people of the community would register at a "sign in" desk. The Operation Chain Saw coordinator would then give an address and the service requested. We would go over to the FEMA tents, sign out vehicles and equipment needed, and head out to help the people in need. Each group would take two or more jobs each day, depending on the size of the tasks. The groups would range from 3 to 20 firefighters from Illinois and New York.

We helped residents remove trees from their houses, patch roofs with blue tarps, cover roofs that had shingles blown off, board up broken windows/doors, remove moldy furniture, and helped them gain entry to their houses because the water had caused the doors to swell closed. We also helped to remove refrigerators from homes. They had no electricity for 4 weeks, so all the food had rotted. This was the worst job. We were helping people who were being allowed to enter their homes for the first time since the flooding. They were only allowed to be there during daylight hours. As we helped the citizens, I was amazed at their attitudes; smiling, being grateful for what they could save, which in many cases was a box of muddy, moldy, items. We realized that we could not do enough. There was damage everywhere; I could not find one house or building that was not damaged. The only people we met on this day were elderly couples or men salvaging as much as they could. After helping a person who registered with Operation Chain Saw, we soon realized that there were more people that needed help who were not aware of what the firefighters from New York and Illinois were doing. After helping one person or family, we would walk down the street and check with other residents to help them in any way. Some were living in their homes against the curfew, no running water, no cooking gas, no electricity or sewer. Just after 1700 hrs we had to return to the base camp to check back in, clean the equipment we had signed out, shower, attend a night briefing, eat and pack for the next day working at a fire station.

Monday morning wake up at 0500 hrs, head for the showers, eat breakfast, and attend the morning briefing. At the morning briefing there were two plywood bulletin boards, one for Illinois and one for New York. On these boards were daily updated maps of the city on where people were allowed to enter. Also noted was where water pressure in the city was good, where the water pressure was weak. For most of the city, there was no water in hydrants for fighting fires. Our assignments for the next 24 hours included what station we were to report to, and what piece of apparatus we were to ride on. At the briefing we were informed on who was the Incident Commander of the shift, any new hazards to watch for, a weather report for the day, and the status of the city. After the briefing, we would gather our personal and firefighting gear for the shift, and load it into one of the modified school buses. The last 6 rows of seats were removed and cages were built to keep our gear and luggage from rolling around. These were the same buses that the forest service uses for transporting wild land firefighters around. We would then pick up our bag lunches, bags of ice and cases of water and PowerAde. At 1900 hrs the six buses would head out in a caravan over the Mississippi River Bridge to different fire stations located in the center part of the city. New Orleans lost 22 of their 33 fire stations, only the ones on the south end of the city survived. Once we got to the fire station we would unload and the crew we were replacing would load on to the bus to head back to the base camp.

We kept our personal gear on a cot. Most of the stations were designed for 8 to 20 firefighters, we had 30 to 50 firefighters per station, so we slept wherever we could. One night I had to sleep under stairs, another on the apparatus floor, my last night in a station was sleeping in a school cafeteria. One firefighter slept on a pool table while others slept in locker rooms. Our firefighting gear was loaded on the apparatus we were assigned to. I was lucky, each shift I would be placed onto a New Orleans fire engine so that a New Orleans firefighter could ride on an Illinois engine to help them get around the city. Street signs were damaged or missing, so it was hard to find your way around. I would be placed at a different station and different apparatus each shift I worked. There were always two New Orleans firefighters, one New York firefighter and myself on a rig. After getting our gear set we would check the engine over, checking fuels, lights, sirens and all the equipment for readiness. We washed the vehicles, and the street. Because there was so much apparatus and personnel at each station, some apparatus was left out on the street. The National Park Service Rangers were assigned to each station for protection and security. Other tasks were cleaning the station, washing floors, vacuuming, cleaning the kitchen and cleaning out the ice coolers, reloaded the ice coolers, and put our bag lunches in the engine cooler. Each fire engine would be loaded with a cooler full of water, PowerAde, ice, and our lunches. We had a station briefing and special assignments were handed out. The special assignments would be conducting fire alarm testing, hydrant inspections or accessibility to different neighborhoods.

Because of the heavy damage by the hurricanes and flooding, most roads were impassable. FEMA had contractors cleaning up all the debris so road conditions would change daily. There were utility poles down or leaning across roads, power lines down, trees and abandoned vehicles everywhere you looked. And of course we would respond to emergencies such as downed arching power lines, natural gas leaks, odor

investigations, fire alarms and structure fires. Emergency Medical calls were run by a separate group of deployed medical people. Each time we went out on a call or were completing special assignments, we would find residents that needed help. So our group made it a point to walk down the streets and find someone who needed help. Most of the people needed help with removing their refrigerators, a deplorable job. Because of the rotting food we didn't want the refrigerators to open. We carried a roll of Duct Tape and plastic with us, tape the door closed, move the refrigerator to the center of a large piece of plastic and then tape the end on the side of the appliance and out onto the curb. FEMA has special crews who would remove the refrigerators to be cleaned and recycled. We had to be back to the stations before sunset because of the curfew and security.

Dinner was brought out in a pickup truck loaded with five gallon buckets of plates of food stacked on top of each other, more chicken. Each fire station had boxes of Military Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's), after our second shift of chicken we started eating the MRE and mixing the chicken in with them for something different. We would clean the station for the night, shower in Hazardous Material Decontamination Tents. Socialize with the other crews and relax before calling it a night, hoping we would be able to sleep all night. It was usually around 11:00 PM before we got to bed.

Up at 0500 hrs we packed our bedding and clothes, cleanup from the night calls, pack up fire fighting gear and wait for our relief to arrive so we could load onto the bus and head back to the base camp. Once we arrived at the base camp we would place our fire fighting gear in one of two tents to dry out. Take a shower, eat breakfast, and get jobs from the Operation Chain Saw coordinator and head out in work crews for the day. There was laundry service available for both personal clothes and firefighting gear. The laundry service was two large cargo trailers loaded with washers and dryers. If you dropped off your clothes by 1900 hrs it was done by 2300 hrs. Firefighting gear would have to be dropped off by noon, the gear could not be dried in a clothes dryer, so they would place plastic pipes in the gear with air blowing through the gear to dry.

While in New Orleans we helped the fire department salvage equipment from damaged stations. As electricity and water was being restored, the New Orleans Fire Department was looking for additional buildings to use as fire stations. The deployment helped the fire department open two additional stations; one at a golf course clubhouse, and one at St. Pius X School. This was the first station opened north by Lake Pontchartrain, reducing the response time for that area. By the end of our deployment, the firefighters from New York and Illinois were stepping back and letting the New Orleans Fire Department handle calls by themselves and we were there just in case they needed more manpower.

My last shift was working at the St. Pius X School, because of no or low water pressure; I had the pleasure of teaching the New Orleans Firefighters how to operate using water tankers to fight fires. On Thursday, October 13<sup>th</sup>, the 100 New York firefighters said their goodbyes, headed for the airport that was now open, and headed home. On Friday, October 14<sup>th</sup>, the firefighters from Illinois loaded onto three charter buses for the ride back home. We said our goodbyes and thank you's to the New Orleans firefighters, the

FEMA management team, and the employees of the college. The New Orleans Fire Department were on their own now.

As I look back, it is hard to put into words all that we did and saw. I thank my family and friends for their support, thoughts and prayers. I thank the City of Crystal Lake for choosing me to go and help; it was a hard decision with so many to choose from. Also, I thank Fermilab for their support, without their support I would have not been able to go.

I met many people who will have lasting effects on my life and new friendships I hope will never end. The City of New Orleans has a long recovery ahead of them. The citizens were very grateful to us, our families, and to our department for responding to their call for help. The firefighters of New Orleans could not say kinder words to us. We were there to help them, and we did at the fire stations, on emergency calls and helping them clean their own houses.

My goal was to help as many people as possible while I was there. I learned quickly that there was not enough time in a day to help all those who needed help, but we did what we could. Working with other firefighters who had the same goal, we accomplished large tasks. On some tasks we were told to “go there and see what you can do”. We were able to return reporting “task complete, don’t ask questions”! It was hard going to structure fires with longer than 10-minute response times. It was unique going to structure fire after structure fire where several buildings were on fire at the same time. At the beginning of the deployment, people were scarce, by the time we left, the roads were becoming busy and we would see families again. Cleaning up the city was in high gear, businesses, stores and gas stations were opening, they are trying to get back to “normal”.

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