

The following message was delivered to the Commanding Officers of participating units after the brunt of the initial Hurricane Katrina rescue work was accomplished:

Fellow Commanding Officers,

We (Captain Callahan and Captain Jones) have struggled to find words which adequately express our admiration, respect and appreciation for the herculean efforts of the many, many Coast Guard men and women, Active, Reserve, Auxiliary, and civilian you sent to us and who made the recent Coast Guard air rescue operations over Louisiana and Mississippi possible. Words cannot adequately express what they accomplished, but please pass this message from both of us to them, and thank you all for your leadership and support in the Coast Guard's continuing Katrina response and recovery operations.

**SUBJECT: COAST GUARD HURRICANE KATRINA AVIATION RESCUE OPERATIONS**

1. On 28 August 2005 aircraft from Air Stations New Orleans and Houston and ATC Mobile descended on the devastated city of New Orleans and Mississippi coastal communities only to find the utter horror of great expanses under water up to rooftops or completely flattened by winds with burning gas mains and buildings and thousands of survivors clinging to rooftops adding to the unimaginable scene. In tropical storm conditions, every available helicopter immediately began hoisting survivors, reacting intuitively to the difficult task of triaging the neediest from among the throngs of victims, and delivering those recovered to the nearest dry land or overpass.
2. As the scope of the disaster became known, Air Stations around the Coast Guard immediately began dispatching aircraft and aircrews to join the enormous rescue operation, staging out of both ATC Mobile and Airsta NOLA. Each and every Coast Guard Air Station, without exception, contributed personnel and/or aircraft to this extraordinary effort. In addition, logistics and support personnel from units including PSU 308, ISC St. Louis and New Orleans, MSU Houma, SFOS Atlantic City and Grand Haven, CEU Miami, Atlantic Strike Team, MLC (K), ESUs NOLA and Portsmouth, and many others descended onto the severely degraded Airsta NOLA facility to help with watchstanding, aircraft dispatch, loading of equipment, aircraft maintenance, facility repairs and any other task required, making this operation the epitome of the "Team Coast Guard" concept.
3. All Airsta NOLA berthing and most shop spaces were rendered uninhabitable by flooding after Katrina's Cat 4 winds peeled back the hangar roof. Consequently, during the intense first four days of the operation until temporary tent cities and other shelters began to arrive all aircrew and support personnel staging at CGAS NOLA bunked head to toe on floors or on cots in the Airsta's crowded admin building. For much of this time the admin building/operations center was without power, air conditioning, running water, and all but one working cellular phone making the concept of "adequate crew rest" an impossibility. ATC Mobile encountered challenges with their own hangar roof, losing all of their operations spaces, Opcen, and many maintenance shops, along with a loss of base-wide power and phone communications.
4. Despite these hardships, the extraordinary Coast Guard men and women who gathered from all over the Coast Guard to join the fight worked ceaselessly and cheerfully, allowing around the clock SAR and maintenance operations to continue unabated and at an unprecedented level. The dogged determination, enthusiasm and eagerness to serve in any capacity exhibited by all members was awesome to behold. Many members of the embedded media commented frequently and with wonder at the superb quality, dedication and camaraderie of the entire crew.
5. In around the clock flight operations over a period of seven days, Coast Guard helicopters operating over New Orleans saved an astonishing 6,470 lives (4,731 by hoist) during 723 sorties and 1,507 flight hours. They also saved or assisted thousands of others by delivering tons of food and water to those who could not be moved immediately. These figures include all Coast Guard helicopter operations over the New Orleans metro area regardless of whether the flights originated at CGAS NOLA, CGAS Houston or ATC Mobile, and are almost certainly underreported as some sorties returned to their bases before overtaxed flight operations personnel could collect their data. The numbers from coastal Mississippi are still being scrubbed, and will increase the total considerably.

6. Challenging each pilot and flight mechanic to his or her limits, most hoists were completed in obstacle-strewn environments, often on night vision goggles, over power lines and downed trees with daytime temperatures near 100 degrees, often in power-limited aircraft. The conditions encountered by rescue swimmers included flooded houses and buildings, steep, slippery roofs, foul and contaminated water, and the need to hack through attics with axes or break out windows to free survivors. Add to this the urgency felt by all crew to continue rescuing a seemingly endless supply of increasingly desperate survivors as the hot days wore on. Aircrew returned from missions with dozens of rescues on a single sortie. One ATC HH-60J crew completed its day's work with 150 lives saved. One CGAS Houston HH-65B crew saved 110. Another crew returned to base almost dejected, having saved "only" 15 lives. The stories of heroism and initiative these courageous professionals from all over the Coast Guard have to tell are remarkable.

7. That these extraordinary operational accomplishments, often achieved by mixed crews and aircraft from across the nation flying together for the first time, were accompanied by no significant personnel injury or major aircraft mishap is simply remarkable. The operation's superb safety record is a testament to the leadership, professionalism and skills of each individual participant, and also to the Coast Guard's aviation training, safety and standardization programs we have relied upon for years.

8. The Coast Guard's superb aircraft mechanics and aircraft maintenance program were a key enabler of the operation's success. Aircrew from every unit commented on the quality and speed of aircraft turnarounds and maintenance. Again, Coast Guard aviation's outstanding training, safety and standardization programs in place at CGHQ, ATTC and AR&SC, and at each individual Air Station enabled maintainers from across the country to instantly form effective teams at ATC Mobile and at CGAS NOLA and keep aircraft flying to save lives.

9. ATC Mobile served as the major staging area, force provider and maintenance depot for aircraft and crews cycling continuously to and from New Orleans, while simultaneously conducting major SAR and post-hurricane operations in its own AOR. At times ATC had no less than 37 USCG aircraft on its ramp and in its hangar. As helicopters operating out of New Orleans approached major maintenance cycles, both ATC and Airsta Houston accepted these aircraft and provided fresh mission capable aircraft and crews in return.

10. The support and logistics chain worked around the clock to return the hurricane-scarred CGAS NOLA and ATC facilities to life. Logisticians here and up the chain determined how best to meet our vital needs, and where they could not be met quickly using existing administrative procedures and requirements, steps were taken to procure needed equipment and supplies by whatever means possible. There are many "Radar O'Reilly's" in the Coast Guard and God bless them. Not a single life was lost due to Coast Guard red tape.

11. The generous and unwavering support of our fixed-wing shipmates in ferrying vital equipment, supplies and many generous care packages, often paid for with personal funds donated by unit civilian and military personnel, was essential to the continued operation at CGAS NOLA and greatly appreciated. It is hard to describe the gratitude felt by those working for days without air conditioning or showers upon the arrival of crates of new underwear, deodorant, toothpaste and other amenities. Staggered rotation of all personnel out of theater for rest was an essential component of the success of this operation and we are grateful to the Falcon and Hercules communities for their continued support.

12. The dedicated volunteers of the Coast Guard Air Auxiliary, as always, stepped up to the plate and provided outstanding support to the operation. Their commitment allowed SAR aircraft to stay focused on SAR while still accomplishing necessary logistics missions.

13. To each and every Commanding Officer who sent personnel to serve in theater, your men and women were without exception superb and your leadership is apparent. Thank you. We ask that your returning personnel have the opportunity to meet with CISM counselors (opportunities have already been provided in theater).

14. That this complex operation could be so overwhelmingly successful despite a nearly complete loss of connectivity between Airsta NOLA and the outside world and chain of command for extended periods of time is a testament to the value of our Principles of Operations (reference Pub One). Particularly, the principles of Clear Objective; Unity of Effort; Effective Presence; On-scene Initiative; and Flexibility. If you turn highly trained and properly equipped Coasties loose on an objective, they will tackle it, and let you know when it is done.

15. The New Orleans and Mississippi air rescue operation is but one part of a much larger story of the Coast Guard's response to Katrina. For example, 300 Coast Guard men and women from 20 different units quickly coalesced at Station New Orleans and rescued or assisted in the rescue of an estimated 22,000 people over ten days with surface assets, in horrendous conditions and with amazing displays of bravery and perseverance. Many of these shipmates lost everything in the flooding. Their stories remain to be told.

16. To those hundreds of devoted Coast Guard men and women who toiled to and beyond the point of exhaustion to keep helicopters flying, CGAS NOLA's and ATC's facilities functional and to save lives, you have more than upheld the traditions of your predecessors. You embodied our core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. You have earned your place in history. Be proud of your extraordinary accomplishments.

17. After several days of cover from various other H65 units staging out of ATC Mobile, CGAS NOLA resumes its own B-0 and B-1 SAR response requirement today and continues to find its "new normalcy". ATC Mobile will return to its business of Coast Guard aviation training next week. We will continue to rely on the generosity of the operational and logistics communities in providing personnel and services, so that our own personnel can take care of the many issues to be dealt with in the aftermath of family dislocations and hurricane damage. CGAS NOLA will be both home and workplace for almost all of its crew while they wait for the city to be reopened for occupancy, children's schooling and spousal employment. The expressions of concern and offers for assistance from outside the command are overwhelming, and we are deeply grateful.

18. God bless our incomparable Coast Guard men and women. Semper Paratus!

19. Signed, CAPT B. C. JONES and CAPT D. R. CALLAHAN