

Writing Sample - Not for Publication

This is the introduction and prologue for a book about Hurricane Katrina, ghostwritten for a client.

This is currently a work-in-progress.

Introduction

There have been dozens of books written about Katrina, the Category 5 hurricane that leveled long stretches of the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida and decimated the city of New Orleans in August 2005. The story has been told countless times by survivors, politicians and journalists, most of whom were there on the front lines, witnessing the devastation as it happened. Their stories express the unimaginable horror of seeing the bodies of dead men, women, children and animals floating in the putrid flood waters. They tell of personal loss, grief and devastation. And they shine a harsh light on poverty and politics. It's been five years since Katrina, and most of us have heard it all.

But our story is different.

We are the men and women of Acadian Ambulance Company, the largest privately-held medical transport service in the nation. We are the paramedics, doctors, nurses, administrators, technicians and volunteers who were on the scene before, during and after Katrina, from the pre-storm evacuations, through the storm itself, and throughout the surreal and unexpectedly tragic aftermath. The accounts you will read in these pages are told first-hand by *healers*... the people who treated the wounds of the traumatized and injured, held the sick and dying in their arms, and did their best to create a haven of safety in the midst of terror and chaos.

Katrina gave us an extraordinary new perspective on the work we do. We're accustomed to school bus accidents, murders, heart attacks, suicide attempts and human suffering of all kinds. We're used to pulling mangled bodies out of multi-vehicle car crashes, but we never imagined that Katrina would require us to rescue elderly people from rooftops or to navigate the streets of New Orleans in boats looking for survivors. We also could not anticipate that some of the people we were trying to help would end up shooting at us, or that we would run short of supplies, medicine and equipment, and that our eight helicopters, five airplanes and 250 ambulances wouldn't be enough to manage the transport needs of 30,000 survivors.

In the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) business, Katrina is what we call a "mass casualty incident." But we -- along with most everyone else in the southern states -- never expected it to elevate to such a desperately critical level. Acadian employees compared it to being in a combat zone, and many of the military medics who worked alongside us said that they'd never seen anything like it.

Our company and most of our staff is based in Lafayette, about miles east of New Orleans, and most of us rode out the hurricane in our own homes. After the storm passed, we walked

outside to find blue skies and gentle winds blowing, just like any other summer day in Louisiana, and it seemed that the area had emerged relatively unscathed. But that was before we knew that the levees had broken and the low-lying areas of New Orleans were beginning to flood. There was no electricity or phone service, so news of the flooding didn't reach us until the next morning.

As I packed to accompany our paramedics into New Orleans to begin our medical relief operations, I threw my video camera into my duffle bag with the intention of videotaping some of the work we'd be doing. I didn't realize at the time that I'd be way too busy to carry a camera around with me, and in fact I didn't even open the bag until three or four days later. I was disappointed that I hadn't been able to document something that most people never see... the medics' point of view. But then I got an even better idea. I sent one of my employees back in Lafayette to purchase ten digital voice recorders from a local electronics store. He sent these to me on one of the helicopters that were flying back and forth transporting our teams, and I handed one to each of my key staff members. My instructions to them were simple: *record your experiences and impressions.*

The stories in this book are based on transcriptions of those recordings. I'd recognized that this would be a disaster like no other, and I wanted to make sure the world knew how it looked through the eyes of the emergency medical personnel on the scene. Some of the people you'll meet in these pages have worked in EMS for decades. Some lost their homes, their family members and their pets in the storm. Most worked 20 or 30 hours non-stop without rest in the Superdome, on the freeway overpass that became one of many makeshift hospitals, in helicopters, in ambulances, in boats and in our offices, doing whatever needed to be done to meet the needs of an entire city of refugees.

The intent of the book is to document the frustration and deeply felt compassion of Acadian's responders. The stories told by these employees will shock you to your core and touch your heart with their expressions of brotherly love, human kindness and human vulnerability. Although, as medical director for Acadian, I am extremely proud of my colleagues, there were countless others who helped with equal dedication, including the National guard, hospitals, medical professionals, civilian helicopter companies, churches, civic organizations, local businesses and local fire & police departments. And then there were the friends, neighbors and average folks who helped by cooking meals for our medics, bringing us clean clothes, offering their boats, tools and manpower and assisting us in a hundred different ways.

We walked with angels during that time. And we were reminded that material things can be washed away, but that the human spirit is eternal.

Ross Judice, MD
Medical Director,
Acadian Ambulance

Prologue:
The Lay of the Land

As you read through these pages, you'll see numerous references to locations such as the Superdome, the Arena, the I-10/Causeway cloverleaf, St. Bernard Parish, Lafayette and other sites that figure prominently into the story. You'll also see medical terminology that you may not understand as you read the first-hand accounts from paramedics. This prologue will provide a valuable key to understanding the sequence of events and some of these references,

Acadian Ambulance has had the first aid contract with the New Orleans Superdome since (year?). During football games, rock concerts and other events at "the dome," we are stationed in a small first aid area on the middle level of the Superdome, and this little station is quite familiar to many of our medics. When it became clear that a monster hurricane was due to hit New Orleans on Monday morning, the city ordered a mandatory evacuation and set up the Superdome as a "refuge of last resort" for people who needed a safe place to take shelter from the storm. As the contracted medics for the dome, we manned our usual post on Sunday, and because the high winds could potentially blow out the glass doors at all the dome's entrances, we parked an ambulance in front of each door to serve as a wind barrier. Then we watched the dome slowly fill with people, mostly the poor, elderly and indigent who didn't have cars to take them out of town or money to stay in a hotel on higher ground.

In addition to the medics stationed at the Superdome, other members of our staff were busy evacuating patients from hospitals and nursing homes and taking them to other hospitals in safer areas. The evacuation effort went smoothly, and by Sunday night we'd moved all the patients and returned to our homes to hunker down with our own families until the storm passed.

It happens that on that same weekend, the annual EMS¹ Expo and conference was being held in New Orleans. This is North America's largest gathering of emergency medical personnel, and there were perhaps 2000 paramedics, nurses, doctors and other emergency medical practitioners in town. Acadian had a quite a large presence there; many of our staff members were in attendance, and we were also exhibitors at the expo and speakers at the conference.

Throughout the conference everybody watched the news and kept up-to-date on the storm's movements, and by Saturday night the winds had changed and Katrina was heading directly toward us. When the mandatory evacuation was announced, some conference attendees managed to get early flights out, but many found themselves stranded at either the hotel or the airport once all the flights had been cancelled. Car rentals were the next option, but the roads were jammed with evacuees and it took five hours to travel a distance that normally took one hour. As a result, hundreds of EMS people were left in New Orleans, and many of them pitched in to help. Several came to the dome with us.

As an interesting aside, my wife and I had just sold our vacation condo in the French Quarter, and we'd spent most of that week packing up our belongings to take back to our home in

¹ Emergency Medical Services

Lafayette, where Acadian is headquartered. I recruited some of our guys who were in town for the conference to help us move. We had everything loaded up and were able to get out of town just minutes before the evacuation order came in and the traffic started to back up.

The storm hit on Monday morning as expected. Back in Lafayette it wasn't too bad, and after it had passed, things appeared to be calm and under control. It wasn't until late Monday night that New Orleans began to slowly flood, but we didn't even hear about it until Tuesday morning when we saw news footage of the city under water. We immediately jumped into high gear.

The first order of business was to send new teams to the Superdome to relieve the staff that had been at the first aid station since Sunday. I assembled a group and we traveled by helicopter from Lafayette to New Orleans. We could not believe what we were seeing on the ground as we flew over... the city had become an enormous lake. Nobody expected the levees to break (except the engineers and experts who'd predicted it years earlier, but that's another story), and because there was no power, communications were crippled, so nobody knew what the conditions were from one location to another. The land lines were all down, and a few cell phones worked because the towers that hadn't blown down were operating on generators, though the generators eventually flooded. Luckily we had satellite phones and were able to acquire some radios and other communications equipment over the next several days.

After we got to the Superdome, the population of refugees starting growing. Thousands of people were arriving, wading through chest-high water to get to the only shelter they could find. The only medical care available at that point was provided by our little first aid station, and we quickly realized that this would not be enough. The dome is an enormous place, and thankfully, we had two or three "Gators," which are like golf carts that function as mini-ambulances, so we drove them around the dome picking up the sick and injured and taking them back to our first aid station.

Because we had no communication with the outside world, we didn't know that one of FEMA's Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMAT) had arrived and set up a treatment station at the Arena, which is a smaller building adjacent to the Superdome (see site map, page). News of the flooding and the increasing number of refugees was spreading, and rescue teams were beginning to arrive from all over the country. We sort of stumbled upon the DMAT people, and when we realized they were there, we worked with them to come up with a system for transporting patients to their station, which was better equipped to deal with serious medical issues.

Remember the ambulances we parked as wind barriers in front of the dome's entrances? Those entrances are on an elevated walkway that runs around the dome, so as the floodwaters rose, the ambulances were able to stay high and dry. We'd pick up people around the dome using the Gators, and if they were significantly hurt, we'd take them to the ambulances and drive them along the elevated walkway to the Arena where the DMAT area was. This plan worked for a while, until the demand for medical care outweighed our ability to supply it. Conditions in the dome were rapidly deteriorating. The DMAT area was filling up with patients, and there was no place to keep them and no way to evacuate them. At this point there were no helicopters and no military assistance.

I called our dispatch on the satellite phone and asked them to send our six helicopters to the dome so we could move patients to hospitals, but all our helicopters were busy in other parts of the city. A few minutes later I got a call back saying that some medically-equipped helicopters owned by Petroleum Helicopters Incorporated (PHI), which primarily serves offshore oil rigs, had arrived at the dome to help out. But because communications were so bad and the Superdome was so big, nobody knew that these PHI helicopters had landed, and their medics didn't know where to find *us*. I made my way over to the Superdome helipad and there they were, waiting for instructions.

Finally I had a rough idea where everybody was... our first aid station was inside the dome, the DMAT area was in the Arena, and the PHI helicopters were at the helipad. It was time to start connecting the dots. I got some portable radios from the DMAT people, gave one to our first aid station, and kept one for myself. Then I positioned myself at the helipad and began directing traffic.

The Gators were buzzing around the dome picking up people and bringing them to our first aid station. The critical patients were put into our ambulances and transported along the elevated walkway to the DMAT area. After they were treated at DMAT, they'd be put back into the ambulances and driven over to the helipad, where they'd be flown off to various hospitals. By now some National Guard medics had arrived, and I gave them the keys to our ambulances so they could drive the patients around, since our staff was needed at the first aid station. There was water rising all around the dome, and eventually the ambulances could no longer drive from the Arena to the helipad, so we started transporting patients in the big military trucks the National Guard had arrived in, which were high enough off the ground to drive through the water.

This system worked, but only for a short while. We'd been flying the patients to hospitals in Baton Rouge, which is a 90-minute round trip flight, but this caused us to run short of helicopters, and the number of patients was increasing by the minute. We couldn't be without our helicopters for that long, so we needed to set up a field hospital somewhere close by. We chose the Interstate 10 overpass at Causeway Blvd. because it was only a six-minute flight and was elevated above the floodwaters. The overpass was in a cloverleaf configuration, and it turned out that each of the clover leaves could serve as a helipad. It was a brilliant solution. The helicopters could take people from the Superdome to this new site and be back in six minutes to pick up another load.

As soon as we got set up on the I-10, thousands of people started showing up. Word had gotten out that we were there, and people started coming from everywhere, wading through the water in search of dry ground, medical care, food, water, shelter... any relief they could find.

Back at the dome, military trucks started arriving with "vent" patients who'd been evacuated from hospitals. These are patients who cannot breathe on their own and rely on electrically-powered ventilators to move air in and out of their lungs. Without a ventilator, they die immediately. When someone like this is rescued, they have to be "bagged," which means that a *manual* breathing apparatus is used that looks something like a bellows with a tube that blows air into the patient's lungs. The bellows, or bag, has to be squeezed by hand to keep the air flowing.

We heard many stories about hospital staff members who took turns for hours on end bagging ventilator patients after the electricity had gone out. A lot of hospital employees chose to stay at their hospitals rather than go home to ride out the storm, because a hospital is a safe place to be in an emergency. Some of these employees even brought their families in, so there were plenty of helping hands when it became necessary to bag patients. Even the children of the staff members were enlisted to help with this task. Because many of these patients were terminally ill, some people disagreed with the decision to bag them, believing it would be more effective to use the manpower elsewhere. In some cases, compassionate doctors simply gave these patients drugs to help them comfortably die, and at one point in the aftermath, the Louisiana Attorney General decided to accuse these doctors of murder. Thankfully, that case was thrown out.

By Wednesday our people were beyond exhausted, and it was time to bring in relief teams, but it was hard to get our people out of the Superdome, because the helicopters were all being used for patients, and there were thousands of patients waiting. Around 6 or 7 pm I'd been there for 30 hours, and it was at this point that we realized we were no longer safe in the dome.

There had been reports of rapes and murders, and we'd heard that snipers were shooting at anybody in uniform. A "fog of war" set in as the MPs² warned us that the generators would soon flood and the lights would go out, and the criminal element would take advantage of the dark to attack us and steal our supplies. The MPs advised us to remove our command vests, hide our stethoscopes and try to blend into the population so we wouldn't be targeted. They formulated an escape plan for us in case of rioting, and instilled an "enemy out there" mindset that stirred my staff into a panic. There were tens of thousands of people in the dome, and many of them were sick and dying. There was no electricity, no plumbing, no water and no food. People were urinating and defecating wherever they could. Between the smell of human waste, sweat and death, it was unbearable to be inside.

So we moved our first aid station outside -- with an MP escort -- and after getting it set up and putting new teams in place, my group was finally able to get home to Lafayette for some much-needed rest. The DMAT people were still in the Arena, which was more secure, but there were now thousands of sick and injured patients needing help, and they were getting sicker all the time. People had fled their homes without bringing their prescribed medications, and if they did bring their meds, the pills got soaked as the people walked through the water. There were unmedicated psychiatric patients, dialysis patients, diabetics, elderly people having strokes and heart attacks, sick children, women giving birth and people dying from dehydration. It was a nightmare. And with the crime escalating, by Thursday my people were so freaked out that we decided to vacate the premises and move our entire operation to the field hospital on the I-10 cloverleaf.

By this time the military and FEMA had arrived in full force (five days after the storm), and there were helicopters everywhere. There were military and coast guard helicopters, plus our fleet, the PHI helicopters and Hueys, Black Hawks and Chinooks as far as the eye could see. Ambulances came from different services around the county, and all we did, day and night, was move patients out of New Orleans as fast we could. FEMA had established a field hospital at the

² Military police

New Orleans airport, and we were now able to fly people out of the Superdome directly to the airport, where they would be sent to various hospitals around the region.

There were so many people being transported that we'd long since abandoned the protocol of setting up medical charts and collecting personal information about the patients. We were loading people into helicopters and flying them out so fast there just wasn't time to keep track of them. Family members didn't know where their loved ones were being taken, and neither did we. People were being transported to hospitals and shelters all over the southeast with no records being kept, but there was nothing we could do about it, because at this point, nothing mattered more than getting those folks out of the dome.

From here, I respectfully turn the story over to our paramedics, who will tell you in the following pages, exactly what they experienced during the Katrina rescue and recovery.

Ross