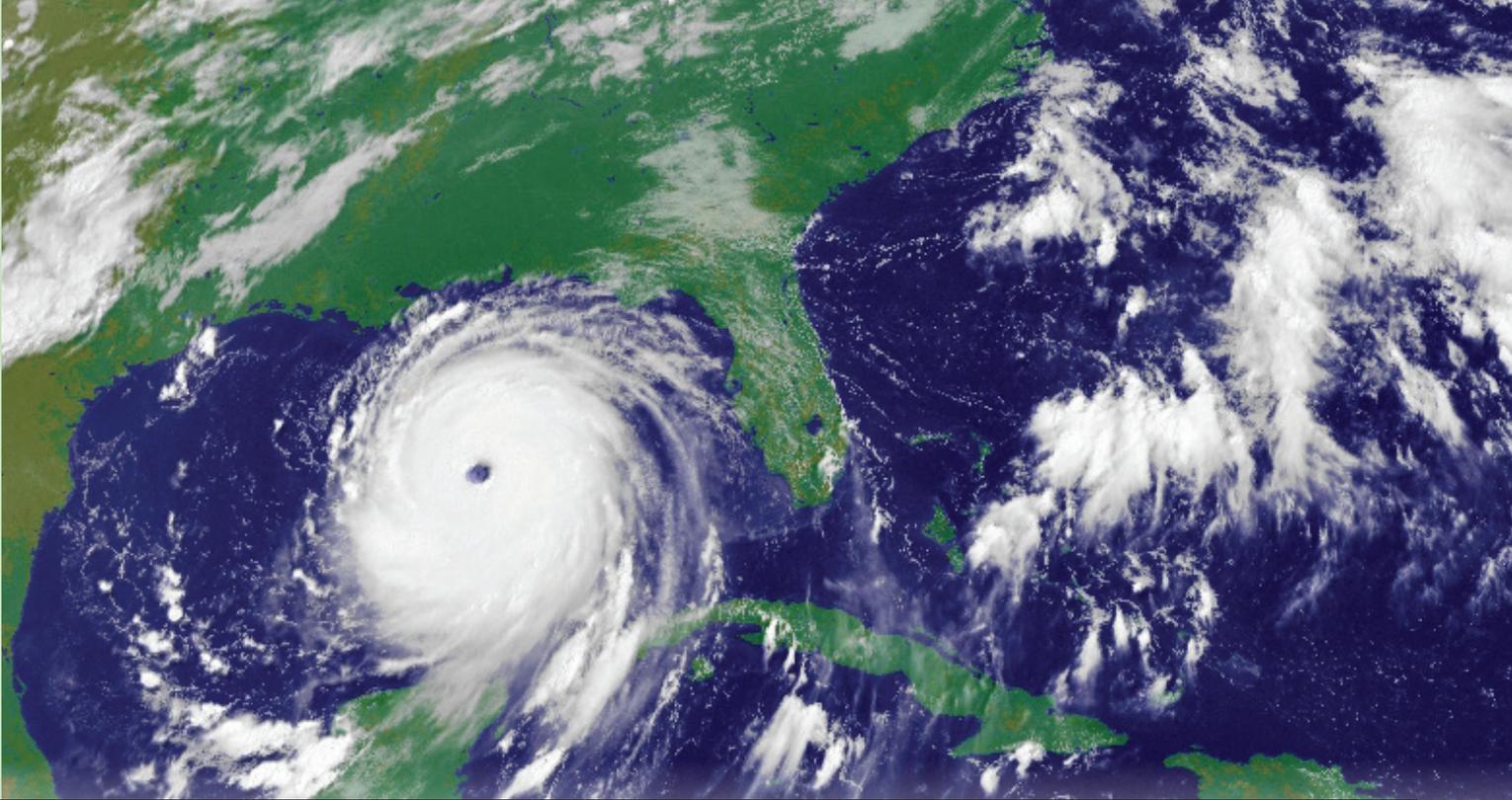




HURRICANE KATRINA TEN YEARS LATER

A unique perspective from
the Commanding Officer of
the USS Iwo Jima





Hurricane Katrina

On the 29th of August 2005, having ravaged South Florida on its way through the Gulf of Mexico, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States, leaving a wake of massive destruction and devastation of Biblical proportions across an area reaching from the western panhandle of Florida to Louisiana. The city of New Orleans dodged the eye of the storm but was lulled into a sense of false security. Hurricane forces winds and heavy rains from this Category 4 storm produced a tidal surge of some 22 to 26 feet along the Gulf Coast, but also in Lake Ponchartrain to the north of New Orleans. After several hours of over-topping, numerous levees that protected the city and its neighborhoods gave way, flooding the entire city and leaving thousands stranded in rising flood waters.

On the same day, USS IWO JIMA (LHD-7) was preparing for an engineering inspection in homeport Norfolk, Virginia, when the word was received that IWO JIMA would replace one of her sister ships as the Ready Ship for possible humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts in the Gulf of Mexico. The inspection was postponed and the ship remained pierside on call. It was not until late the following day, Tuesday, 30 August, the full magnitude of the disaster was realized. The ship had been given approval from the Fleet Commander to get underway to complete the engineering inspection, but half way down the Thimble Shoals Channel leading from the Norfolk Naval Base to the Atlantic Ocean, IWO JIMA received word to turn around and return to the Naval Base to load supplies and equipment. The ship returned to Norfolk, loaded humanitarian supplies throughout the evening and then got underway the following day, Wednesday 31 August with two LCAC from Assault Craft Unit FOUR, elements of Beachmaster Unit TWO, Naval Beach Group TWO, Amphibious Construction Battalion TWO, and Amphibious Squadron FOUR, a detachment of some 85 doctors and medical personnel from Naval Hospital Portsmouth, and aircraft from HM-14, HSC-26, and HC-2, and sailed some 1,500 miles at a sustained speed of 25 knots from Norfolk to the Gulf Coast, arriving in less than 72 hours late in the afternoon of Saturday, 3 September. Two other ships, USS TORTUGA (LSD-46) and USS SHREVEPORT (LPD-12), and later followed by USS WHIDBEY ISLAND (LSD-41) sailed with IWO JIMA to the Gulf Coast to join USS BATAAN (LHD-5) who was already on station in the Gulf of Mexico conducting rescue and relief operations.

Over the next three to four weeks, IWO JIMA and her sister amphibious ships, as part of Joint Task Force KATRINA and a 40,000-person Department of Defense response, undertook a wide variety of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions in the region, starting with relief and clean-up efforts in Gulfport and Biloxi to humanitarian efforts in the city of New Orleans itself to rescue and relief operations back out along the Gulf Coast after a second Hurricane, Rita, struck western Louisiana and eastern Texas on 23 September. On the 28th of September with the relief mission transitioning to federal and state agencies, the ship was released from the Joint Task Force, and after debarking some 650 members of the 1st Battalion 8th Marines at Camp Lejeune, returned to homeport Norfolk on 02 October 2005.

The following pages are a compilation of the observations of the ship's commanding officer of the extraordinary events and the remarkable accomplishments of the ship and her crew...



Going Ashore after Katrina

Sunday, 4 September - It is after midnight and I finally have a chance to catch my breath and drop you a note. I did go ashore today with about 150 Sailors to support two clean up efforts: a local High School that was being used as a shelter for 500-1200 people and a church that was completely devastated. I worked on the church project with about 120 Sailors. The area was hit hard. Everything made by man was swept away a couple hundred yards from the beach. Only the trees, thick majestic southern oaks, stood the trial despite having their branches ravaged. The church was gone. We spent several hours just clearing the wreckage away and piling it along the side. It was like an archeological dig in that we recovered bits of glass, broken china (and quite a few pieces that were intact), toys, a Bible, broken lamps. The church had an open air mass with some 150 parishioners that morning standing in among all the wreckage. We cleared the wreckage, but carefully stacked all the keepsakes, whether broken or whole, all around the make-shift altar. I found a picture of a baby, mostly deteriorated, that must have been on someone's desk. We thought the saved keepsakes will have some emotional value to the owners. It was hot, nasty, and dirty work, but everyone was inspired to do their part, and I was glad, even blessed, to have the opportunity to do this with my Sailors.

We were bombarded with press. Our arrival was the first real contingent of Navy personnel ashore (though the beach-masters had gone ashore late the previous evening and set up their camp on the beach), so we got a lot of press coverage. Quite a few people drove by and took pictures of us. Surprisingly (and ironically, too) there was a granite memorial to those that died during Hurricane Camile in front of the church. We cleaned that up too and tried to put the heavy granite pieces back together.

The whole area was pretty hard hit. The neighborhood behind the church was all wrecked, the massive piles of debris in the street pushed in place by bulldozers. While we were working on the site, part of a 4-5 story apartment building came crashing down a few hundred yards away from us. I met the owner of the home next to the church. His property was completely gone, just massive debris. He appeared resigned, but obviously was inspired to rebuild. He had a restaurant in town that had suffered too but was repairable. I promised to come back in a few years and eat at his place. We finished up around sunset and sailed back to the ship on the LCAC. But before we left, I got the word that VADM Fitzgerald wants IWO to sail up the might Mississippi to act as the command and control center for all DoD operations in LA...Joint Task Force Katrina. We expect to have one Admiral (RADM Bookert) one three star general (my old boss from the Joint Staff - Russell Honore), two commodores, and countless (numbering in the hundreds) staffers, plus helos and a bunch of other things. So as I write, we are racing down to the entrance of the River at 24 knots in order to fly on Admiral Bookert and his staffers at first light and before we hit the pilot pick up point and start our 8 hour transit up the Mississippi.

Despite all the frustrations - we are getting tortured hourly by stupid staff taskers - we are holding things together. Everyone is safe and in good spirits. I just need to get us safely up the Mississippi to New Orleans. I picked the wrong week to give up smoking.



Up River

Monday, 5 September - Another incredibly busy 24 hours since I last wrote. We raced down from the coast of Biloxi and Gulfport and arrived at the entrance of the Mississippi River before daylight. After conducting some helicopter operations and picking up the first of two river Pilots, we turned north and started our nine hour transit up the Mississippi to New Orleans, a distance of about 100 miles. At first we did not see much damage, the low flat delta is primarily wet lands, though virtually all the navigation aids were gone. But as we got further north, the destruction became overwhelming. We sailed passed broken levees and flooded towns, smashed buildings, plywood houses stripped bare of shingles and siding, boats and barges – some 200 feet in length – stranded high and dry 20 to 30 feet above the water level on some berm, sail and pleasure boats piled 30-40 feet high in the middle of some woods, sunken or partially submerged barges, huge oil tanks crumpled and smashed with oil leaking into the river. At one point, both sides of the river were covered with miles of stranded river barges. River traffic today was only about 10 percent of normal capacity, though the roadstead was filled – literally packed – with oil tankers waiting their turn to sail up river to offload their crude oil. After a while you become anesthetized to the carnage, only to be hit by some new and strange sight – a herd of black cows roaming free on some small island (how on earth did they get there? How did they escape the 20 foot tidal surge?). At times we had to watch our speed so as not to create too large a wake that might disturb relief operations or a delicate levee on the verge of splitting. After about 8 and a half hours of twists and turns, we pulled into New Orleans. On one embankment, the whole pier was still smoldering from days of res. Most of the buildings had shattered and broken windows. There must have been 20-30 helicopters, civilian and military, buzzing around the skyline, giving the impression of a combat zone.

With much difficulty, I spun the ship around just beneath the bridge (with the help of four tugs) and moored along the Riverwalk pier where luxury liners normally moor. The city is just as it is portrayed in the news – broken. The mayor of New Orleans estimates that the death toll could be as high as 10,000 from the Hurricane and the violence in its aftermath. The mayor is currently onboard in the cabin across the passageway. He and his staff were grateful for hot food, a hot shower, some clean clothes, and a comfortable and safe bed. We are opening our doors to many other civil workers who have been battling the challenges of reclaiming the city over the past week. We have 140 National Guardsmen (from RI, no less) coming onboard tomorrow morning for hot showers and a hot breakfast before they return to their patrols. They had the grim work of clearing out the Convention Center a few days ago.

Since 0500 this morning, we have been launching and recovering aircraft, even during the transit up the river. I finally had to stop flight operations as we approached the pier so I could concentrate on mooring the ship. We have had three Admirals, one General (LGEN Honore – the Joint Task Force Commander), and the mayor and all their respective staffers onboard at some point today. Anne Curry of the TODAY SHOW plus members from three other networks flew onboard this morning and rode us up the river. I'm slated to be on the TODAY SHOW live at 0713 (Eastern Time) Tuesday from the flight deck of USS IWO JIMA.

All along the way up the Mississippi, we passed outbound merchant ships. Some rendered honors or dipped their flags as we passed. Every single river Pilot called over to us to pass along their thanks for our impending arrival in New Orleans. Our pilot, who lost his home in the Hurricane, had tears in his eyes when he thanked us all for coming up river. IWO JIMA has arrived in New Orleans. We are all grateful to be here and hope to make a difference.



Herding Cats

Tuesday, 6 September - Since I took over IWO JIMA over a year ago, I felt as though I had control of the destiny of the ship. I thought I lost it today, the first time ever, and that we were merely reacting to events rather than controlling them.

Within the first 24 hours after arriving pierside in New Orleans, IWO JIMA has become many things. We are one of the few full service airports in the area and have been operating aircraft on and off our deck for almost 15 hours each day. We are also one of the only air conditioned facilities within a ten mile radius and though we have had problems making water from the polluted Mississippi, we have the only hot showers within miles. All day long we have been accommodating local policemen, firemen, state troopers, National Guard, 82nd Airborne division personnel with hot showers and hot food. I met an ambulance team from Minnesota who just drove straight to New Orleans when they heard of the tragedy and have been supporting hospitals free of charge for the last week. They hadn't had a hot meal in over a week and were grateful to have the opportunity to have lunch onboard. The Deputy Commander of the RI National Guard reported to me that he had guardsmen who were whipped, but after a hot shower and an IWO JIMA breakfast were ready to hit the patrols again. Rarely have I seen so many smiling, happy faces than on these people. After two weeks in the trenches sleeping on concrete floors, no shower, and eating MREs, good ship IWO JIMA has been a Godsend. I had an opportunity to talk to the Director of Homeland Security for New Orleans for a few minutes in my cabin. I asked him if there was anything more I could do for him. He asked if he could get a shower. I was glad to turnover my cabin to him. The local FEMA coordinator and his logistics and security teams were on my quarterdeck this afternoon asking permission to set up their command center on the pier next to the ship. While they had sophisticated command and control equipment, they had no place to berth their 250 FEMA members. We were glad to give them a home. Contrary to the press, all the FEMA people I met had been on station since last Sunday (before the Hurricane hit), never left the area, and have been in the field ever since. The command duty officer was told that one state trooper had driven 80 miles to get to the ship. He said that the word was out: Come to IWO JIMA. We expect that the flood gates will open on us.

Early this morning we received our first medical emergency: an elderly woman with stroke-like symptoms. Throughout the day we received about a dozen medical emergencies, the most serious was an elderly man who was stabbed in the chest and was bleeding to death. The doctors performed surgery on him and saved his life. I toured the hospital ward; all our charges were elderly and disadvantaged individuals. As with Hotel IWO JIMA, we expect to see many more casualties tomorrow.

Our curse appears to be our flight deck and our extraordinary command and control capabilities. Our challenge today was the tidal wave of Flag and General Officers that flooded onboard, 17 total, virtually all without notice. I couldn't believe there were so many involved in this effort and they all wanted to come here. They poured onto the flight deck in one helicopter after another in order to meet with General Honore, the Joint Task Force Commander. The majority showed up around the same time and all wanted to leave at the same time, making it a nightmare for our flight deck team to control and coordinate flights on and off the ship for all these admirals and generals while supporting the humanitarian effort. I spent most of the day running around the ship getting these people off and on helicopters and in and out of the meetings and command spaces. It was like herding cats. But the ship performed superbly and "flexed"

to meet the challenge. Regretfully, we expect nearly 20 admirals and generals onboard tomorrow for more meetings. To add to the challenges, virtually all of these commands are sending liaison staffs to help coordinate issues, and already a number of admirals and generals have “permanently” embarked. The Inn is full.

I talked to one of the FEMA team members who had also worked the disaster relief for 9/11. I asked him how much more difficult was the Katrina relief effort compared to 9/11. He said it was without measure: thousands of times worse than 9/11. He couldn’t articulate the magnitude of the destruction.

Despite all the challenges, I think we regained control by the end of the day. We are forearmed for tomorrow’s onslaught. At our evening Department Head meeting, I asked all my principals to tell me what the stupidest thing they heard or saw today. The list was enormous. But the most absurd item was when my Tactical Action Officer , who runs our 24 hour command center (CIC) got a phone call from the Director of the New Orleans Zoo. Apparently, there was a large fire near the zoo. It was so intense that the fire department had to abandon the cause, but military helos were heavily engaged in scooping up giant buckets of water and dumping them on the blaze in an effort to put it out. The director complained to us that the noise from the helos was disturbing the animals, especially the elephants, which he was most concerned about, and asked us to stop. The TAO thanked him for his interest in national defense.

It is inspiring to meet and talk to such a huge number of individuals who are doing the Lord’s work to recover this city. They have had little sleep, little food, no showers, working 16-18 hours a day, and in some cases no pay, and they are thanking ME for a hot meal! Only in America. We have turned the corner. It will take an awful long time, but we have turned the corner.





“For this moment and this trial...”

Wednesday, 7 September - We finally had a chance to have Captain’s Call this morning. The ship has been running at full speed for 8 days straight with a myriad of changing missions and requirements piled on top of us. I thought it best to tell the crew where I thought this was going and what impact we have made. I told them that as with any contingency operation there is that initial surge of energy and inspiration that often times gives way to frustration and tedium; I did not want them to underestimate the magnitude of what they were accomplishing each day by their hard work on the flight deck, the galley, the well deck, CIC, Radio Central (JMC), on the pier, and in the engineering spaces to support this great undertaking. Every job on the ship is important and the contribution of IWO JIMA has already been enormous.

Our contributions have been growing. Today, we opened our doors to 900-1,200 Army, National Guard, and local law enforcement personnel to take showers and get hot meals. We were getting overwhelmed. There was a steady stream of 60 to 100 every hour on the quarterdeck asking to come onboard and get refreshed. The word has obviously gotten out. One Army Captain told the Command Master Chief that his unit of 60 soldiers had come from 60 miles away because his general told him to “go to IWO JIMA and they’ll take care of you.” We couldn’t say no.

Not satisfied with the record-setting flight operations yesterday, the flight deck team nearly doubled the number of aircraft hits. At one point the team was bringing in Army Blackhawks two at a time, one group after another in perfect sequence. It was an impressive sight to behold. Medical casualties continued to come onboard the ship, some by stretcher and ambulance, others by air or boat. After yesterday, the Medical folks reworked their procedures, so today everything flowed smoothly. Supply department has served up thousands of meals; the mess line never closes. Deck department got back to their roots and conducted boat operations and a sterngate marriage with TORTUGA’s LCM-8 landing craft, moving more supplies to our sister ship. But lest we forget, the bedrock of IWO JIMA’s strength lies in three simple things: electricity, air conditioning, and hot water – all provided by the uncomplaining engineers.

But of all the manifold capabilities of good ship IWO JIMA, medical, logistic, and air support, our command and control capabilities have moved to the forefront. It almost sounds surreal but IWO JIMA has literally become the headquarters, the “center of the universe” for all Federal recovery efforts – DoD as well as civilian. It is on this ship that the myriad efforts have all come together. Yesterday, for the first time ever, some 17 admirals and generals got together with the Joint Task Force Commander, General Honore, face to face to coordinate the numerous and ever growing military recovery and support efforts. Today, the same cadre of admirals and generals were back onboard but this time accompanied by the civilian side. FEMA has now established their headquarters on the pier along side (and onboard IWO JIMA) to better coordinate their efforts with us. But with this has come an ever growing number of staff members embarking on the ship. Our population has grown from a crew of some 1,200 to nearly 2,500 (including several hundred guardsmen and soldiers living onboard) with all the detachments, augments, and now senior staffs. I think we are now up to one three-star, one two-star, and four one-stars embarked good ship IWO JIMA. We are bursting at the seams. We have spent the vast majority of our days taking care of and chasing down the myriad staff members. It is like herding cats, except these cats fly on and off our flight deck periodically.

I had a chance to meet Governor Blanco of Louisiana and her Lieutenant Governor today when she came onboard for the giant 1200 briefing with General Honore and were later joined by Admiral Nathman and Vice Admiral Fitzgerald. The ship's Ready Room was bursting at the seams with senior officers and high officials – you had to step outside just to change your mind.

I had seen the Governor on TV many times. She looked different in person: tired and worn out. She told me that she was averaging about 4 hours of sleep a night, but smiled, “I guess that’s about what you get in the military.” You could see the severe strain of the past week’s events. I quoted her the famous line from Churchill the night he became Prime Minister of wartime Britain, “that it was as if I were walking with Destiny, and that all of my past life had been but preparation for this moment and this trial.” The recovery from the damage of Hurricane Katrina is an unprecedented trial for the Governor and many, many others. My observation is that America, throughout her history, has always been slow to respond, but once that powerful engine gets into gear it is massive and unstoppable. I suspect this will also be the case for the Gulf Coast.

It has become our tradition at the evening Department Head meeting to go around the room and have each person list the stupidest or silliest thing they heard or saw during the day. As you can imagine, the log book is overflowing with accounts. Yesterday it was the helos and the elephants at the zoo. Today it was me. I have been inundated with doing interviews: CNN, Pentagon press, Regina Mobley and Channel 13 news, the Boston Globe, Carla McCabe and the Army Times, and finally Greta Van Sustren. We did a spot with Greta on the pier this morning with the massive bow of IWO JIMA in the background and helos flying on and off the ship with great noise – an impressive backdrop for this puffed up officer. As I was being interviewed by Greta, a pair of Blackhawks swooped onto the flight deck sending up a great wind which blew off my ball cap. I instinctively scrambled after it before it blew into the water. When I turned around the FOX News photographer looked at me and smiled, “I got that on film.” Look for me chasing my hat down the pier on the next Fox News spot.





Center of the Universe

Thursday, 8 September - As the “Center of the Universe” for recovery efforts, IWO JIMA has been attracting her fair share of attention and then some – Vice President and Mrs. Cheney came onboard for a short visit and brief in the wardroom along with Governor Blanco (I think she knows her way around the ship now), Senator Vitter, and Secretary of Homeland Security Chertoff, as well as other Congressmen and local officials. We had gotten the word the day before from the Secret Service, so we had a chance to prepare – compared to the 20 minutes heads up we got in Portland when former President Bush visited the ship. The primary purpose of the visit was for the Vice President to get a brief from the senior State, Federal, and DoD officials on the status of the relief efforts in Louisiana and surrounding areas. But as always, I think it is an opportunity for the Vice President to meet with the Sailors and thank them for their contributions to the recovery efforts.

Vice Admiral Allen, the Chief of Staff of the Coast Guard, and now the Principal Federal Official (PFO) – the senior official responsible for all Federal recovery efforts (including FEMA) – gave a half hour presentation to the Vice President, the Governor, Senator Vitter, and the assembled officials, admirals, generals, and staffers on the Recovery Plan. It was superb. The press seems to always condemn the government and Federal agencies for not having a plan. What VADM Allen outlined was detailed, extensively researched, extraordinarily organized, thorough, and forward-thinking. They had modeled out when all the flood waters would recede, identified the vast majority of infrastructure that had to be rebuilt or replaced, addressed and anticipated environmental concerns and hazards, established a timeline for recovery, and identified and put in place the resources needed to execute the plan as rapidly as possible. I was left with the belief that the government had assembled the right people for this massive undertaking and the great American engine of recovery was starting to turn over and gather steam. I had a chance to talk to the senior FEMA official on the pier this evening and he expressed the same optimism in spite of the fact that it will be a long road to recovery.

The entire visit went extremely well. It is always a pleasure to work with the United States Secret Service. These folks are always ON TIME! (Note: I’ve spent a huge chunk of my naval career waiting on the quarterdeck for someone to show up). The XO and the Command Master Chief did a masterful job in coordinating the entire event. They both seemed to be everywhere all at the same time. The Master-At-Arms folks and the security teams did a superb job of establishing security and working closely with the Secret Service. And the Culinary Specialists did a magnificent job of setting up the wardroom in short order. And it is always a pleasure and a great relief when a senior officer gets up to show a brief and all the audio visual equipment works perfectly (especially in front of the Vice President) – my thanks to the Intelligence Specialists. But the unsung heroes of the visit were PH2 Metzger and her back up photographer, PH2 Stratchko. As the Vice President was departing, he stopped to greet and thank about 50 IWO JIMA Sailors lined up in Upper Vehicle Stowage (“Upper V”). The National Press was onboard covering the visit and descended on the Vice President like vultures. But PH2 Metzger pushed in front of them all and held them at bay while she snapped pictures of every single Sailor shaking hands with the Vice President, Mrs. Cheney, Governor Blanco, and Senator Vitter while the press angrily backed out of her way.

I had a chance to walk through the ship and the pier this evening with the schedule of events of the day having wound down to dull roar. Most of the city is dark but here and there one sees lights. Most of the big hotels, Sheraton, Hilton, and Embassy Suites have some of their lights on though it was amusing to note that some of the letters on their big red signs are missing – destroyed by the hurricane winds. From a distance “SHERATON” is “SH T”. On the flight deck, the aviation boatswainsmates were hard at work moving aircraft and respotting for the next day’s air plan. Despite the incredibly long, hot hours they have put in over the last 4 days, they had smiles on their faces and were pumped for the next challenge. I caught all the purple shirts (aircraft refuelers) late at night cramped in the Fuels Shop conducting PQS training... of all things, taking advantage of a slightly earlier conclusion to flight operations. The boatswainsmates were sitting around in Upper Vehicle Stowage, probably solving world peace as best as I could tell.

Throughout the day there has been a steady stream of Army and National Guard personnel coming on and off the ship for hot showers and some hot chow. The pattern repeated itself over and over all day long: they stumble onboard with their heads down and walk off the ship with heads high and smiles on their faces and full of gratitude for a simple courtesy. And the engineering plant continues to run smoothly with an overflow of air conditioning, hot water, and power despite the high demand.

I won the stupidest thing of the day contest for the second straight night. I must be getting tired or I am losing my mind. After the Vice President arrived at the quarterdeck and we completed all the introductions with the welcoming party, I escorted the Vice President and Mrs. Cheney up the ramp to the Hangar. Taking advantage of this God-given opportunity to talk to the Second Most Powerful Man on the Planet in one-on-one conversation, I asked the Vice President if had been on this type of amphibious ship before. He stopped for a moment, turned to me, lowered his head so that he could look at me over the top of his glasses and said, “You know, Rich, I WAS Secretary of Defense at one point.” As Homer Simpson would say, “Dowh!” Mrs. Cheney had christened our sister ship ESSEX.

The crew remains engaged and inspired and eager to get out and do some hard work in the city and local neighborhoods. I hope to have some projects ready to go in another day and will get our Sailors out and on the job. Despite the intensity of our support operations, considerable work is getting completed around the ship. Some 200 plus Third Class Petty Officers took the Second Class Navy-wide Advancement Exam today under very challenging conditions and with not a whole lot of study time. We all wish them well.





Simple Acts

Friday, 9 September - Meal hours on IWO JIMA is an extraordinary thing. I walked through the mess decks several times today to watch this intricate and impressive operation. On the average the Chow Boss and his team of Culinary Specialists and Food Service Attendants (FSAs) are serving up between 6,000 and 7,000 meals a day, over twice the ship's normal capacity. This is extraordinary in that, unlike our ARG deployments where the 1,200 embarked Marines provide an equal number of cooks and FSAs to augment the galley, Supply Department and the ship are taking it all out of hide. We have over a thousand Army and National Guard personnel off the concrete slabs and on soft(er) Navy racks. Relief is on the way from both PHIBGRU 2 and SECONDFLT to help us out, thankfully. Yet despite the strain, the Food Service Team is inspired to the task. I watched a group of FSAs furiously working the scullery, cleaning thousands of dishes in rapid fashion amid the heat and steam to get them back on the mess line to meet the growing demand.

The other extraordinary thing about meals on IWO JIMA is the sea of uniforms. It is the epitome of Jointness: Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, National Guard, and Coast Guard, plus FEMA and dozens of local and federal personnel. There are 35 to 40 distinct and different Army and National Guard units alone. IWO JIMA's Sailors are learning a considerable amount about what the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps (well, this is the amphibious Navy and of course we all know about our fellow Marines), National Guard, and Coast Guard do. "One team one fight" is a truism on the mess decks just as it is out in the field. The interaction has sparked extraordinary cooperation. On the beach, the ship does not want for any support: ground transportation, boats, helos, etc. We are all in this together.

The ship's engineers have been helping out the National Guard. They repaired the roller doors and restored the air conditioning plant in the large Riverwalk Terminal building adjacent to the ship which is used to house the Rhode Island National Guard. One Guardsmen stated that it was so cold she needed a jacket. They have also been heavily engaged in repairing the air conditioning system at the Convention Center where some 1,650 service men are billeted. Over the past few days, they have been pumping up several thousands of gallons of chill water (from the ship) to prime the system via a jury-rigged, hand-made pumping system, and will hopefully fire up the plant in the next day. We discovered another unique capability of USS IWO JIMA today, or I should say, our shipmates in the field did: the laundry. With the exception of our sister ships TORTUGA and SHREVEPORT, IWO JIMA has the only operable laundry in all of New Orleans. Today, the Ship's Servicemen have washed about a ton of laundry from the troops in the field. But that is just a drop in the bucket. The S-3 Officer was approached today by an Army Captain noting that he had 24,000 soldiers and Guardsmen whose uniforms needed a good wash. This one is going to take some time. Another sorely missed service is the haircut. We set up a chair on the pier yesterday and have had no end to customers wanting a haircut, about 100 got their ears lowered in the last two days.

A handful of IWO JIMA volunteers joined TORTUGA and the Coast Guard and National Guard in conducting combat rubber raiding craft (CRRC) patrols in fl flooded areas to evacuee people still there. TORTUGA was the first of the amphibious ships to arrive in New Orleans last Sunday and set to work immediately upon arrival using the CRRCs (“cricks”) for search and rescue. This has been a huge effort shouldered by our Sister ship. To date, our shipmates have cleared out the entire south side of the Mississippi south of Algiers, rescuing hundreds of people and transporting them to safe havens after a medical check-up and a hot meal on good ship TORTUGA. Our Sailors reported the grim conditions out in the still fl flooded areas with contaminated water, refuse, and dead animals after today’s patrol.

Despite the disheartening residue left by receding waters, there are increasing signs that things are improving. I detected that there are more red letters illuminated on the Sheraton sign this evening...and more lights appear to be coming on along the river front. 37 pumping stations plus 17 portable pumping stations are now online, continuing to drain the flood waters, and more pumping stations are repaired and brought online each day. Roads are opening up. Sister ship TORTUGA received a truck load of MREs, the first ground-transported logistics, I think. More will follow. The Ship’s Doctor visited the three main hospitals in the area, East Jefferson, West Jefferson, and Oschner. All are up and operating, near fully staffed with state of the art equipment, and ready, if not eager, for patients. It demonstrates a very positive trend by the federal and local authorities of getting the infrastructure in place ahead of demand vice the other way around. Our neighbors in the RI National Guard have been hard at work cleaning up in and around the Convention Center, clearing out the refuse and scrubbing walls and decks. Our first official act after we put over the brow last Monday was to clean the pier. It was covered with trash and refuse, and with our berth shift on Saturday morning, we’ll send out another 100 person working party and clean another segment of the Riverwalk pier. Sometimes a simple act becomes infectious and helps restore civic pride.





Hotel IWO JIMA

Saturday, 10 September - Our attempt to get into some kind of battle rhythm hasn't been working out very well with the demand of events. Today was an extremely busy day with a berth shift, flight operations, logistics runs, a working lunch with the Parish presidents and the new Principle Federal Officer, VADM Allen, plus a CJTF Katrina meeting with all the subordinate commands, and the visit by CNO Admiral Mullen. We set the special sea and anchor detail this morning to get underway... but only to move approximately 600 feet to free up space astern of us for the arrival of a cruise liner. We elected not to sound the ship's whistle as is required by the International Rules of the Road to indicate that the ship was underway making way because we did not want to give any hint that IWO JIMA was leaving. Instead and with the help of 3 tugs, we sailed ever so slowly down the river a couple hundred feet to our new berth almost as though our movement was imperceptible to a landward observer. Nonetheless, it felt good to get underway even for such a short time.

As we did with our old berth, several dozen Sailors set to work cleaning off the pier and surrounding areas. It was nasty work. There was garbage rotting in the sun for several days piled up under the Terminal. We even set up re hoses to blast weeks of filth to clean off the pier. Rudy Guiliani changed the spirit of New York City by attacking the simple problems like broken windows, trash, etc. It helped restore civic pride. We are following the Mayor's example. We figure we'd start with the pier and Riverwalk Terminal and continue to expand out each day, clearing out trash and garbage, cleaning up streets, and sweeping up parks and public areas.

A new addition to the growing list of ship capabilities is the Dental Doc. As the only dentist for a crew of 1,200 Sailors, he has a full time job already – the LHDs traditionally have the highest doctor to patient ratio out in the fleet – but now his workload has doubled. With the exception of the dentists on our sister ships TORTUGA and SHREVEPORT, the Dental Doc is the only deal in town. He is amazed at the number of guardsmen with bad teeth, or so he says. We suspect that he is working on a tooth necklace and is using this opportunity to increase its length. He claims that if you sit in his chair, he is going to pull something. Despite his reputation, he has not had a shortage of off-ship customers.

I am seeing the strain on the crew of Hotel IWO JIMA. The demand of serving thousands of meals, washing tons of laundry, moving large numbers of people on and off the ship, and seeing that they get to where they need to go through the rat's maze that is the interior of the LHD is getting tough. There is a steady stream of new faces coming onboard each day seeking food, a shower, and a place to stay. As the shore infrastructure improves – the air conditioning systems for the RI National Guard and 82nd Airborne facilities are working fine as well as the system at the Convention Center – some of our tenants are gravitating back ashore, but they are replaced by new tenants every day. We sent a delegation to the Parish Hall for Orleans Parish today to talk with officials and identify projects where we can help. During a break in the discussions, the Ship's Chaplain engaged one of the workers in conversation. She asked him what service he was in and where he was from and he told her, "IWO JIMA." "Oh," she replied, "that's the place I can get a shower and hot food." The Supply Officer reported that the number of meals served was between 6,500 and 7,000, today and we are now up to 2.5 tons of laundry washed since we arrived. But, the Sailors are hungry for something much more than just the "routine" of the past few days.

Symbols can be very important. Most everyone feels the arrival of IWO JIMA and her sister ships TORTUGA and SHREVEPORT was a “symbol” of hope for the City of New Orleans. But Sailors don’t care about symbols and numbers and statistics. Sailors care about “doing.” They want to do more for this great undertaking than just wash dishes and chock and chain helicopters. However, given the enormous challenges facing every single relief agency, it is difficult, if not frustrating, at times to get specific tasking for relief projects, so the ships have to be proactive and just strike out where we think we can best provide help. SHREVEPORT and TORTUGA have already done just that and we are doing the same. The area around the Riverwalk Terminal is one of the most “trashed” sections so we will expand out our cleaning and clearing efforts and go as far as we can. The Command Master Chief has the perfect project in mind and the crew is hungry for the mission.

Our CIC gets hundreds of queries for information every day. But one query from a higher headquarters (who shall remain nameless) asked us, “What is your course and speed, and current position?” As if we are going anywhere? We still have an awful lot of work to do before this is over.





Remembered

Sunday, 11 September - Today was the 4th anniversary of 9/11. While the tragic events down here may have eclipsed the anniversary, it was not lost to us. Those that work IWO JIMA's Flight Deck and fly on and off the ship every day are reminded of it. Under the Tower (Primary Flight Control or PriFly) is painted the famous quote by Admiral Nimitz of the Iwo Jima campaign, "UNCOMMON VALOR WAS A COMMON VIRTUE" and the words "WHY WE ARE HERE." Underneath that, starting with the Battle for Iwo Jima (19 February to 26 March 1945), is a listing painted in large black letters and numbers with the dates of attacks and number of lives lost in the Global War on Terror, starting with the Beirut Barracks in 1983 down to September 11th 2001.

Despite the busy schedule of events, we carved out a few moments this Sunday morning to assemble All Hands in the Hangar Bay for a short memorial. The Ship's Executive Officer, Captain Mike Walley, who was there in the Navy wing of the Pentagon on that fateful September morning in 2001, spoke eloquently and emotionally of the events, of the shipmates lost and of those who inspire us today with their selfless acts of courage. There was not a dry eye in the house. We held a moment of silence, then solemnly rang the ship's massive brass bell to honor and commemorate the dead, and then concluded with a final prayer by the Ship's Chaplain.

And then we went to work.

As I had mentioned before, there are three emotional phases in contingency operations of this nature: Phase 1, where everyone is pumped and inspired to the task. Phase 2, the longest phase unfortunately, where the motivation starts to wear off and the ship slips into frustration and tedium. And then Phase 3, where the mission ends and the memories of tedium and frustration give way to a strong sense of pride and accomplishment. I feared that good ship IWO JIMA had irreversibly slipped into Phase 2 this weekend, and so we resolved to get the crew beyond "Hotel IWO JIMA" and back to work directly contributing to the reclamation of the city. From the September 11th memorial ceremony we called for volunteers to undertake a huge project of cleaning out the once popular New Orleans Boardwalk fountain and Plaza area along the waterfront. Nearly 200 Sailors from the ship and embarked detachments enthusiastically poured out for the effort. Within a few hours, the plaza was fully restored. With push brooms and saws, power washers and forklift trucks, the Sailors set to work in transforming the Plaza. The art of commandeering and hotwiring forklift trucks and other work vehicles should be taught in "A" Schools for the Supply, Engineering, and Deck ratings. It came in handy today. I was amazed at the number of young men who were exceptionally good at it. A massive amount of trash, leaves, branches, broken plaster and construction material was removed and staged for pick-up. The GWOT (Global War on Terror) temporarily became the GWOD: the "Great War on Debris," as coined by ABF3 Robert Bauer. The ever enterprising Engineers managed to repair, light off, and fully restore the famous (but highly complex) fountain within 30 minutes of arrival. The fountain continues to churn and shoot foam skyward. The combined energies and talents of Hull Technicians (HT), Electricians Mates (EM), Machinist Mates (MM), Enginemen (EN), and ICmen (IC) is a powerful force for good.

Along the waterfront adjacent to the Plaza (and all the shops and restaurants) is a gangway that can connect cruise liners directly to the Plaza and the three story mall. At the end of the gangway stand two impressive 3 story towers with flag poles on top of each. On one flagpole stood the Louisiana state flag, slightly frayed but defiant, and on the other stood the shredded remains of our National Ensign. Quarter Master Second Class (QM2) Shannon Crank ran back to the ship and secured another flag – in the same tradition as Coast Guardsman Resnick who provided the second American Flag for the famous flag raising on Mount Suribachi on February 23, 1945 as immortalized in the famous Joe Rosenthal photograph. Young Airman(AN) DaSilva from HSC-26 “The Chargers” helicopter squadron bravely scaled the towers, gently removed the tattered flag, and then launched the new flag aloft into the stiff river breeze. The assembled volunteers saluted the restored flag as it rose and cheered the intrepid Airman DaSilva.

With this phase of our recovery efforts complete, many IWO JIMA Sailors volunteered to help out with cooking for the police and firefighters at a nearby barbecue.

And by late afternoon, morale was improving. ...And then President Bush came and morale went through the roof.

As soon as his helicopter landed, the Commander-in-Chief was on the flight deck thanking each of the flight deck Sailors for their service and hard work in the recovery efforts. Everywhere he went as he moved around the ship he took a moment to shake hands with each and every Sailor he came across, have a photo taken, and thank them for their service. The President left the ship to tour some of the stricken areas, but when he returned a few hours later, the flight deck and port elevator were crowded with Sailors who cheered the President and roared with applause as he walked back across the brow onboard his flagship.





Uplifting Humanity

Monday, 12 September - President Bush remained overnight aboard good ship IWO JIMA, the first time ever on a Navy ship according to the Secret Service folks. He electrified the crew by showing up on the mess decks early this morning for breakfast. IWO JIMA's mess decks normally hold about 100 seats. Within a few minutes, as word spread throughout the ship, the population of the mess decks swelled to three hundred to four hundred people. Hundreds stood in line to shake his hand. The President moved from table to table, greeting Sailors, Marines, Airmen, Soldiers, National Guardsmen, Coast Guardsmen, air crews, doctors, and civilians, shaking hands, taking a picture with them, and thanking them for their service. Would that his incredibly tight schedule permit him to do so, he would have spent all day on the mess decks greeting and thanking each and every service member. As he was departing the ship later this morning, I introduced him to IWO JIMA's veteran LDO Chief Engineer, Rick Shelar, dressed in coveralls, naturally. The President made a point of thanking him for the "hot water and cool air" – two commodities greatly appreciated by thousands of IWO JIMA guests this past week. We implemented a change in IWO JIMA's uniform policy on Sunday. Hence forth, all long sleeves shirts have to be rolled up, in the style of the Commander-in-Chief. Like the President, we are ready to get back to work.

The business of good ship IWO JIMA continued uninterrupted throughout the President's stay. Several medical evacuations (medevacs) took place; a number by air and the flight deck and a number brought by ambulance to the quarterdeck. Flight operations continued throughout the morning. Deck department continued their extensive preservation work of the ship's port side and the "golden" anchor on the port side was brightened with a fresh coat of gold paint. The steady stream of soldiers and guardsmen coming aboard for showers, meals, laundry, medical attention, and meetings continued unabated as well as the steady flow of Sailors going off the ship to support a number of relief projects. The trashed and gutted Riverwalk Terminal was completely clean out this morning by a large contingent of IWO JIMA Sailors. The Command Master Chief had to hold them off before they went so far as to start waxing the decks. The Terminal building is slated to become the new FEMA officer for recovery efforts. Twenty volunteers returned to the Plaza to continue the feeding of the First Responders, cooking and barbecuing several thousand meals a day for firemen and policemen from New Orleans and from around the country, including some 300 from New York City. Last Sunday, teams of volunteers – including a group of brothers from Alabama - set up the "soup kitchen" to ensure that the First Responders were supplied with good food as they worked to restore the city. A team of engineers conducted a site survey of Charity Hospital to drain the facility's huge basement of flood waters. Other teams surveyed jobs to build showers for the city workers at a local gym and rehab the Orleans Parish City Hall to get it up and running. Around the city there are growing signs of recovery. Some of the parishes are reported to be allowing some residents to return to their homes. The Army Corps of Engineers indicated that dewatering efforts were proceeding ahead of schedule with the water level dropping on the average of a foot and a half per day across the city. Louis Armstrong Airport is reported to be opening up soon. And as I looked across the night skyline this evening, I notice that the red "Sheraton" sign has been completely restored. There is still a gigantic amount of trash, debris, and garbage to be cleared out. But inch by inch, areas of the city are being cleaned and reclaimed.

As I went around the room this evening during our Department Head meeting, there was one worthy candidate for the amusing event of the day. With such a large population of civilians and personnel from other Services onboard, getting around the ship and comprehending Navy terminology can be challenging. One lost civilian asked a crewmember how she could get to the “Half deck” “Don’t you mean Quarterdeck?” Was the response. I suspect it is the “new” math.

Before the President left the mess decks this morning, he spoke briefly to the packed audience of hundreds of service men and women. He thanked the troops for what they had done in relieving the misery of the Gulf Coast and expressed his pride in their service, and he told them that by their actions and extraordinary efforts they were “uplifting humanity” and bringing hope to those without it.





Perseverance

Tuesday, 13 September - The schedule of the ship has settled down to a dull roar. It was a slow day on the flight deck, relatively speaking, compared to the high op-tempo 15-16 hour days of last week. Deck department continued their preservation work and conducted a number of stern gate marriages with TORTUGA's LCM-8 landing craft to bring supplies on and off the ship. Hotel IWO JIMA remains open for business and the steady stream of "customers" continues. The engineers have set to work a joint project with the Army to dewater the basement of the venerable Charity Hospital. Navy pumps and an Army generator with Coast Guard oversight – it doesn't get more joint than that. I had a delegation of five New York City police officers visit me aboard IWO JIMA. They were part of a 300 person NYPD contingent that arrived on station last Monday. They took to the streets on their own initiative and established order. Some of the members are seasoned veterans of 9/11. Who better to set the first line of defense than New York City's finest.

With the break in the action, I took the opportunity to tour the City and surrounding areas by air, courtesy of the professionals of "Charger 61" from HSC-26 helicopter squadron. We flew as far north as Slidell and as south as the lower part of New Orleans, across all the City's parishes. It was a grim and sobering hour and a half flight. From our perch on the bridge of USS IWO JIMA during our transit up the Mississippi we saw a significant amount of damage along the river and a few miles across the river delta lowlands. And even from our travels through downtown New Orleans, we have only seen a fraction of the devastation.

It is different from the air. The wide expanse of Katrina's cruelty spreads out for dozens of miles. There are still neighborhoods flooded with waters from the once broken levees, miles of low one story homes still suffocating and choked in the black Stygian waters. In other areas where waters the color of olive green have receded, the entire landscape is coated with brownish, olive colored mud: roads, sidewalks, cars, shrubs, lawns, sidewalks and driveways, swimming pools, decks and patios, layered in mud and dried scum. But not content to just suffocate and drown in black water and mud, Katrina elected to smash with savage winds. In some areas, homes were flooded off their foundations and then pushed into a pile at the edge of a levee. In one parking lot, a bunch of smashed cars were placed in the same way. Noble trees uprooted and smashed. Pleasure boats piled in a mass half a mile from the nearest water. Homes, businesses, hotels, restaurants, everything smashed, choked, or crushed. And the devastation carries on for miles. After a while, one becomes anesthetized to the carnage.

What seems to be completely lost in the press is the insidious nature with which this massive storm struck the Gulf Coast, particularly New Orleans. General Honore called this the "perfect storm" – an enemy who conducted a perfect, flawless, devastating attack on New Orleans. First, Katrina savaged the area with winds as she moved northward, knocking over telephone poles, power lines, and cell phone and microwave antennas. Then as the storm passed and moved northward, expanding in size as it gathered up moisture over the Mississippi valley, it brought a calm to the ravaged city New Orleans, lulling the residents with the false belief that they had dodged the worst of it. Then Katrina poured a sea of rain into the Mississippi valley swelling the river and Lake Ponchartrain and all the tributaries beyond their banks, funneling massive amount of raging water through New Orleans and the delta, weakening some of the levees until they broke without warning. The water rose quickly, several feet within minutes in some cases, covering huge areas. There was

no time to evacuate, no way to escape, and no way to call for help – all the phone lines and cell phone services were down. Flooded streets denied rescue workers access by road. Downed trees impeded access by boat. The storm knocked out bridges and causeways cutting off sections of the city – separating and dividing friendly forces. Smashed or fl flooded air fields denied aircraft staging bases from which to launch search and rescue efforts. Rescue workers inside the area were trapped, isolated, unable to communicate with outside support and with victims, and unable to get around to conduct rescues. It is an absolute miracle, surveying the wide expanse of destruction, that so many thousands were rescued. And it is astounding that 1.3 million people were safely evacuated to safe havens and refuges under such difficult circumstances within 24 hours – a feat of coordination without precedent.

The first thing you notice about the damage from the air is black water and mud. But the second thing you notice is “movement”. There is movement in the flood waters and on dry land. Flooded areas were being patrolled by Coast Guard boats and teams. Neighborhoods still covered with brown scum were being patrolled by Marines and their amphibious assault vehicles (or “tracks”). In areas where the waters had receded Army, Air Force, and National Guard personnel walked the streets, checking homes for potential evacuees and people in need. A military helicopter was adding huge bags of cement to a recently repaired levee, reinforcing its banks. Countless utility company trucks were engaged in rigging wires and repairing lines. Strung along the bank of a number of levees were fleets of portable pumps, six to ten in a line, drawing massive amounts of black water from fl flooded neighborhoods. In less damaged areas, residents were out piling debris from their yards and homes on the edges of the street for some future collection. In another neighborhood, dried mud was being scraped off the street by a bull dozer. And at the Superdome, pieces of heavy equipment were extracting debris and piling it for removal. From the air you occasionally see a sign painted on the roofs of houses. Some had calls for help or noted that a pet had been left behind. But one in particular struck me as inspiring. On a fl at, black shingled roof was painted the following message in large white letters: “No Phone...1 Dog...2 Cats...1 Person...Bring Supplies...STAYING!” - a sign of stubborn defiance! Foremost of the qualities of Americans, along with charity and good will to others, is perseverance. America throughout her history has prevailed against all forms of adversity: civil war, world wars, economic depression, civil strife, and natural disasters. It will be perseverance and a determination by her citizens to rebuild a new New Orleans, despite the challenges of time and the daunting recovery ahead.





Signs of Recovery

Wednesday, 14 September - Our neighbors in the Riverwalk Terminal, the 119th Rhode Island National Guard, have been told they are moving out and returning to the Ocean State in the next few days. These 140 guardsmen have been our shipmates for the past two weeks. They were one of the first teams on station in New Orleans, helped the local police restore order, and were the ones who carried out the grim mission of clearing out the Convention Center. Some of the guardsmen have done tours in Iraq, some have scars from VIED attacks. Now they are going home. With this being their last mission day before pack out they took the XO on patrol...in his flight suit.

There are signs of recovery. A local McDonalds opened up nearby. It was reported that there were lines extending “for miles” with service men and women waiting for a Big Mac. We saw plenty of soldiers and guardsmen with McDonald’s bags this morning. That probably accounts for the precipitous decline in breakfast diners this morning. During his patrol with the 119th, the XO stopped by and bought 50 burgers for the crew. He said that McDonald’s was giving a free meal to all military customers as thanks for what they have done and for what they are doing. Now I understand the popularity. But all in all, this is a good sign. There are a number of detachment personnel packing up as well. Good ships WHIDBEY ISLAND and HARRY S TRUMAN are headed back to the Tidewater area. The New Orleans International Airport opened yesterday with 30 flights throughout the day – about a quarter of the normal capacity. They expect to be up to 60 aircraft a day by the end of the month. More traffic is coming up and down the river. When we arrived on 5 September, the river pilot told me merchant traffic was about 10 percent capacity. Five days later it had risen to 20 percent; double. New teams are coming in. The South Dakota National Guard rolled into the city today. Thankfully, they will not have to face the same challenges as the Rhode Islanders when they arrived. There are more supplies coming in by road every day. The pilots reported that the highways are filled with cars and traffic. Having suffered the commute in Washington DC for two years, I thought I never consider bumper to bumper traffic and traffic jams “progress.” It was also reported that the checkpoints coming into the city are crowded as residents stream back to rebuild their homes and their city.

The mission we are executing is one that is not new to our Amphibious Forces. In truth, for the past several decades, the “Gator Navy” and their allies in the United States Marine Corps have carried out dozens of humanitarian aid / disaster relief missions. The ships are ideally suited for the mission. The landing craft from our floodable well and the helicopters off our flight deck can just as easily carry humanitarian supplies and a construction battalion as they could combat loaded Marines ready to hit the beach. The cavernous vehicle stowage spaces, magazines, and hangars can carry thousands of tons of supplies. And we have the means to get it all to the beach. The focus here isn’t missiles or weapons – no one is currently shooting at us – but logistics – tactical logistics, the art of moving vast amounts of supplies, material, equipment, and people, tactically – getting the right material to the right place at the right time. This is the challenge we face every day. Over the past week, we have moved hundreds of pallets of stores and humanitarian supplies. The HSV SWIFT has sailed up the Mississippi twice since we have been here delivering 300 pallets of supplies to IWO JIMA for further transfer to TORTUGA and SHREVEPORT by either landing craft or by helicopter vertical replenishment (VERTREP). To date we have moved half a million pounds of supplies by air alone with two to three times that amount by surface.

But it is not just supplies and logistics. It is also the equipment and gear we carry. TORTUGA was the mother ship for nearly two dozen combat rubber raiding craft. They would send groups of boats into the flood areas supported by one of the LCM-8 landing craft acting as a support ship. They rescued dozens of individuals with this innovative tactic. Combined, the amphibious ships BATAAN, TORTUGA, SHREVEPORT, WHIDBEY ISLAND, and IWO JIMA brought a significant portion of Naval Beach Group and Amphibious Construction Battalion capabilities to Gulfport and Biloxi where they have opened roads, cleared harbors, and rebuilt infrastructure – so that relief aid can pour in. The unsung heroes in all this are the Combat Cargo Marines. IWO JIMA only has 5 Marines as part of ship's company – one major who coordinates and controls air operations, and a warrant, one Master Sergeant, a Gunnery Sergeant, and a Staff Sergeant who run combat cargo. They account for and move the thousands of people that cross our flight deck and our well deck during operations and get them to where they need to go in this cavernous and confusing ship. They also move and found storage for tons of cargo, and berth thousands of people on this ship. Berthing in officer's country is the domain of Culinary Specialist First Class Drakos. With hundreds of staff officers onboard IWO JIMA, she is far more well known than the Captain, and rightly so. As the ship is bombarded with aircraft and guests, the Combat Cargo Team ensures that the right people get to the right place at the right time.

I had the privilege to volunteer at the “soup kitchen” in front of Harrah's this evening. It is a remarkable place. It provides hot meals to thousands of First Responders and troops each day from eight o'clock in the morning until close to nine o'clock at night. Eddie, his brothers, Joe, and Doug all from Alabama and Florida roared into town after the storm and set up this outside kitchen with gas grilles and coolers. They have been here ever since, feeding thousands. It soon expanded to refrigerator trucks packed with donated steaks, hamburgers, hot dogs, shrimp, and vegetables. Soon thereafter, the tents and chairs arrived, and the operation got larger still. Since Sunday, IWO JIMA has had a steady stream of volunteers to help set up, cook, serve, and clean up. The operation is typically American: generous souls who see people in need and share their abundance and good will with those less fortunate. And some people still wonder why we are the most fortunate nation on earth.





Do your part

Thursday, 15 September - To be perfectly honest, most everyone onboard IWO JIMA has lost the concept of time. After a while you forget what day of the week it is or what the actual date is. Days are remembered by the big event: completion of a big project, the departure of a unit, or a visit by the President. Thursday, 15 September is remembered on IWO JIMA as President Bush's second visit. We have now officially renamed compartment 02-59-4-L, formerly the "Amphibious Group Commander's Cabin," the "Presidential Suite."

The ship gathered up several dozen volunteers this morning for a clean up project at a local church, Holy Trinity Cathedral, one of the oldest Greek Orthodox parishes in the United States. The church was located near the bayou and had sustained about 3 feet of flood damage. The flood waters had barely receded; one edge of the parking lot was still connected to the bayou. The interior of the church was covered in a slippery layer of brown scum. The team went to work clearing out all the furniture and holy items while the ship's chaplains cleaned up the altar. The saturated carpet was completely pulled up and the beautiful marble floor was washed and cleaned. One group wiped down all the pews with Murphy's oil soap, so that by the end of the day the interior of the church was fully restored – ready for services this Sunday. The church was aired out and the stagnant smell was replaced by the faint scent of bleach.

My time on the project was cut short in order to return to the ship for the visit of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs who was onboard for a tour of IWO JIMA's medical facilities and talks with the JTF Commander along with other admirals and generals of the health services. I had to apologize for greeting the Secretary in a set of muddy coveralls. The ship was also visited by the Assistant Chief of NYPD who leads the 300 person NYPD contingent. He wears two stars on his collar and considering the size and reputation of the NYPD compared to most countries' armed forces, an Assistant Chief is probably equal to a two star general. With the streets secure, the NYPD contingent is getting close to returning back home. We also had an unexpected visit by a Congressman from Oklahoma who was on his way to see his troops – our neighbors - the Oklahoma National Guard. The Congressman took the opportunity to meet with fellow Oklahomans on IWO JIMA and thank them for their support of the humanitarian relief effort. At the request of the ship, VADM Thad Allen addressed the ship at Admiral's Call. While the majority of the participants were IWO JIMA Sailors, there were Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, National Guard, Coast Guard, Center for Disease Control, US Public Health Service, US Marshals, and local members in attendance as well. The Admiral talked at length at what had happened, how the storm had devastated the region and how its affects had impacted relief efforts. He talked about IWO JIMA's role in all this and I think the crew was left with a better understanding of what their contributions meant to the overall effort. He noted how this relief effort was unprecedented in history, that we had gone beyond having a Dept of Defense response, or a FEMA response, or a State response, but rather had set the course for one coordinated combined response...at all levels. The crew was engaged and asked a lot of questions – probably more than in a year's worth of Captain's Calls...

But as expected, the big event today was the second visit by President Bush. He flew aboard late this afternoon and after meeting with VADM Allen, LGEN Honore, Governor Blanco, the Mayor of New Orleans, Secretary Chertoff, and the new FEMA Director, he left the ship to address the Nation from Jackson Park. Upon his return, a large crowd of several hundred Sailors, Marines, Airmen, Soldiers, and Guardsmen had assembled to catch a glimpse of the President as he transited back up the Flight Deck to catch his flight. At the first sign of the President, the crowd erupted in applause and cheers. The President then approached the crowd and shook a couple hundred hands. He thanked the damage controlmen who recently completed the dewatering of the Charity Hospital. He thanked the Sailors who worked the Flight deck. He thanked the doctors and corpsmen who manned up the medical spaces. And the list went on. Since this was one of the last nights for our neighbors, the RI National Guard, we invited them up to the Hangar as well, and a few dozen RI guardsmen had a chance to shake hands with the President. And as he turned away to head up the ramp to the Flight Deck, the crowd erupted once again in cheers and applause. One of the Secret Service Agents told me he had not seen such an outpouring by the troops. He said the President really loves the troops. And it was evident to me that the troops love their Commander-in-Chief.

In his address to the nation, the President challenged Americans to “find your role and do your part.” The example has been set down here in New Orleans. The NYPD contingent found their role and did their part without anyone telling them what to do. The same with the RI National Guard. The same with the brothers from Alabama who set up the soup kitchen across from Harrah’s. There are dozens of examples. They all saw the need and stepped up to the plate.





What's in a name?

Friday, 16 September - The 'high' from President Bush's visit last night still has not worn off. I noticed a few Sailors, who had the opportunity and honor of shaking hands with the President, whose feet didn't seem to be touching the deck as they walked down the passageway. The cell phones were busy last night with hundreds of calls to parents, wives, friends and family members. A dozen Sailors had the privilege of having their pictures taken with the President by the White House photographer.

It was another busy day on IWO JIMA. This morning, the ship hosted a delegation of 15 Senators, led by the Senate Majority Leader, along with several dozen staffers who came onboard for a briefing by VADM Allen and the CJTF Commander. The delegation flew onboard in four Army Blackhawk helicopters. As always, the tower and flight deck executed the event with precision; our flight deck operations have become well choreographed events. Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin were also onboard for the briefing. There was standing room only in IWO JIMA's cavernous wardroom. VADM Allen provided a detailed explanation on how the damage and destruction were caused by the storm, the impact it had on first responders and initial recovery efforts as well as the impact on the ability of local, State, and Federal agencies to respond. He also outlined a detailed plan for recovery and relief efforts. A master of virtually every detail of this operation, VADM Allen handled the barrage of questions from the Senators with aplomb. With flood waters receding and services slowly being restored, the Mayor announced that he expected 180,000 residents to return to the City in a week or two.

In the afternoon, the JTF Commander gathered his generals and admirals for another Commander's Conference. A delegation from the NYPD returned aboard to present the ship with the flag of NYPD. We promised to fly the flag the day the ship gets underway from New Orleans, once our mission is complete here. Already a contingent of policemen has already returned to the Big Apple; the rest are expected to depart after this weekend. In the meantime, IWO JIMA continued with the steady stream of support requirements. Despite the free hamburgers at McDonald's and the free pizza at a recently opened franchise – further indicators of restoration – the mess decks were packed with hungry soldiers, airmen, guardsmen, Sailors, and Marines.

The Engineers, specifically the DC men and the HTs, have nearly completed the dewatering of Charity Hospital's gigantic basement. This has been a huge joint undertaking. It turned out that there was an underground tunnel connecting the basement of Charity Hospital with the basement of another hospital across the street which was also flooded. In the end, the team ended up dewatering two basements for the price of one. Ever cautious engineers, they came back today with Self Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBAs) and oxygen analyzers as they inspected the basement to find the source of the flooding. They discovered a number of body parts (the hospital's morgue was located in the basement) and worked with hospital officials to properly take care of the remains. With DC plugs and patching kits, they hope to stop the flooding and allow water to be restored to the hospital soon so that it can be up and running. The IWO JIMA Intelligence team has been the sole source provider of critical intelligence to the City of New Orleans Emergency Operations Center. The Intel Officer has been conducting daily briefs and providing intel training in order to get city officials connected self-sufficient.

Of the many projects underway, one of the most important has been our volunteers to Eddie's Soup Kitchen in front of Harrah's. The Senate delegation ate there this afternoon. Long after the Senators left, I had the opportunity to spend a few hours at the grills with two of the ship's Information Technicians, IT2 Montgomery and IT3 O'Keef. After getting off watch, they spent the whole day, from 0900 in the morning until the kitchen was shut down and cleaned up after 2000 this evening, manning the grills non-stop, feeding soldiers, guardsmen, and First Responders, and cooking several thousand shrimp. They said they were ready to do it again tomorrow. Whether on the ship or off the ship, we always seem to be feeding General Honore's troops one way or another.

As all of the Senators and their staff members were departing the ship this morning, one of them grabbed the and pulled him aside. He thought that renaming IWO JIMA to the CITY OF NEW ORLEANS would be a good thing. We have been hearing that issue circulating since this weekend. While we are gratified and honored by the suggestion, I would have to respectfully disagree. What's in a name? Everything. The heart and soul of this ship is our heritage. It is a source of inspiration for some 1,200 Sailors and our 5 Marines as it is for thousands and thousands of Marines past and present. And while we are proud of our accomplishments here in New Orleans these past few weeks, they are not of the same caliber as the heroic efforts of some 70,000 Marines, Sailors, and other service members who stormed that island 60 years ago and where over 6,000 made the ultimate sacrifice. It would take several lifetimes of sacrifice to even register on the same scale of the 19 February to 26 March 1945 campaign. To rename IWO JIMA would be to gut the ship's soul and leave her hollow. The officers and crew are honored by the suggestion, but we wish to retain our proud name and our inspiring heritage. I hope the Senate does too.

Despite the challenges of the day, IWO JIMA took a few minutes this morning to pin eleven new Chief Petty Officers. Even with the significant pace of operations, the Command Master Chief and the mess managed to devote considerable time for the "mentoring" of the selectees. One selectee from COMCARSTRIKEGRU TEN joined IWO JIMA's ten for the process. With the crew assembled, the new Chiefs came marching in, singing "Anchors Aweigh." I have had the honor of witnessing the Chief's pinning each year for the past 25 years. And nothing has changed; they still can't carry a tune. And that is a good thing. These eleven men and women looked like they had been wearing khaki their entire careers – a testimony to our Chiefs who have molded and mentored this new generation. I could not think of a more fitting place, maybe with the exception of being out on the tip of the spear in Iraq or Afghanistan, to conduct the ceremony. As the Command Master Chief said in his remarks, "The Republic is safe."





Behind the Scenes

Saturday, 17 September - For the first time in three weeks, the ship was able to catch her breath today. We restricted flight operations in the morning to let the Flight Deck team sleep in and pushed reveille and breakfast back an hour to give some small amount of relief to the Culinary Specialist and Food Service Attendants. I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but I got six hours of uninterrupted sleep last night...and I think others did too. Teams of Sailors went out on their various repair projects and the good work of the ship continued.

They are signs that our participation in recovery efforts is winding down. Sister ship BATAAN was detached this evening to head back to Norfolk. She had been the very first ship on station, having dodged Hurricane Katrina herself, and carried the burden of rescue and relief operations until IWO JIMA and TORTUGA arrived on 3 September, and she supported the lion's share of the recovery efforts in Gulfport and Biloxi. First Army has evacuated IWO JIMA's Landing Force Operations Center (LFOC), having set up their Operations Command Post (OCP) ashore. The Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) on IWO JIMA is slowly migrating ashore as well. Our neighbors in the 119th Military Police unit of the Rhode Island National Guard depart tomorrow enroute home to the Ocean State. A delegation of firefighters from the Fire Department of New York City (FDNY) paid a call on the ship this morning; they are heading back as well in a few days. On my way back from manning the grills at Eddie's Soup Kitchen, I talked to a platoon from the 86nd Airborne Division. They expect to be headed back to Fort Bragg soon. They also passed along their thanks for the hot showers and hot meals they routinely received onboard IWO JIMA. And the opening of the Golden Arches down the street seems to have drawn off a significant number of servicemen and women dining on the mess decks.

During flight operations this afternoon, we offered up opportunities for crewmembers to conduct 'fam flights' over New Orleans. About 150 IWO JIMA Sailors had the chance to take a short 15 minute flight around the city on an SH-60 (a most elegant and superb aircraft according to the XO) to survey the destruction caused by and the ongoing recovery from Hurricane Katrina. They witnessed the still flooded neighborhoods, the miles of smashed houses and downed trees, the recently repaired levees and dewatering operations, and an area slowly but surely clawing its way back. The traffic across from Eddie's Soup Kitchen has picked up over the past few days. There are a lot of contractor trucks, trailers, and construction vehicles moving into the city.

For every overt success we have there are numerous behind the scenes actions that support that successful event. We have been able to fulfill 100 percent of our flight requirements because of the superb maintenance and performance of the aircraft and their crews. The maintainers have done a terrific job in keeping the birds full mission capable (FMC). Thanks to their efforts IWO JIMA has been "in the green" (all birds FMC) for the past few days. IWO JIMA is blessed with an Aircraft Intermediate Maintenance Department (AIMD) responsible for maintaining and repairing aircraft. For the past year, AIMD has been fixing mostly shipboard things because we have had few aircraft onboard. The full flight deck of aircraft, has given the various aviation maintenance and repair ratings (AD, AE, AM, AO, AS, AT, AZ, and PR) a chance to ply their trade. One group of maintainers helped repair on the President's CH-53 helicopters the other day. But ever flexible and creative, another group AIMD folks helped manufacture a base for the President's podium for his Jackson Square speech to the Nation. In the Hangar is an AV-8B carcass that we use for training for the Aviation Boatswains Mates in moving, spotting, and arming aircraft. Given another week, I expect the folks from AIMD will have it up and flying...we just need to find a spare engine someplace...



Farewells

Sunday, 18 September - The Wardroom officers wanted to give the hardworking culinary specialists (CS) and food service attendants (FSA) a break this Sunday morning, so they volunteered to take over their duties for breakfast and allow them to sleep in. IWO JIMA is blessed to have a large cadre of limited duty officers who have not forgotten where they came from. The LDO's led the operation. It was interesting to watch the engineers take over the scullery. I observed the Chief Engineer supervising his team, operating the scullery machine as though it was one of the ship's 600 lb boilers, and chastising the Boilers Officer when temperatures were out of designed specifications. The CSs and FSAs appreciated the break.

The 119th Military Police Company of the Rhode Island National Guard departed this morning. We held a ceremony onboard the ship to formally see our shipmates off and wish them well. They marched onboard a little after 0800 this morning and formed up on the flight deck. They presented the XO with a framed emblem of their unit and in return we gave them a large framed picture of "Hotel" IWO JIMA, their home for the last two weeks. They were our first line of defense in securing the ship during the first few uncertain days of our arrival. In the end, they all marched off, 140 of them, in single file, and the XO and I had the pleasure and honor of shaking each and every hand as they departed for home. I told them that in recovering from the biggest natural catastrophe in American history, it was America's smallest state that was one of the first to respond. We wish them a safe flight home to their families and loved ones.

There has been a steady stream of visitors to the ship, delegations from both the NYPD and FDNY, dozens of local officials, and a myriad of state national guardsmen seeking to tour IWO JIMA. We had a delegation of the Navajo Scouts from Arizona onboard this morning for a tour. One of their members was a relative of the Marine Ira Hayes, the Pema Native American who helped raise the flag atop Mount Suribachi on 23 February 1945. It is extraordinary to see the scope of volunteers who have come to New Orleans help out in the recovery.

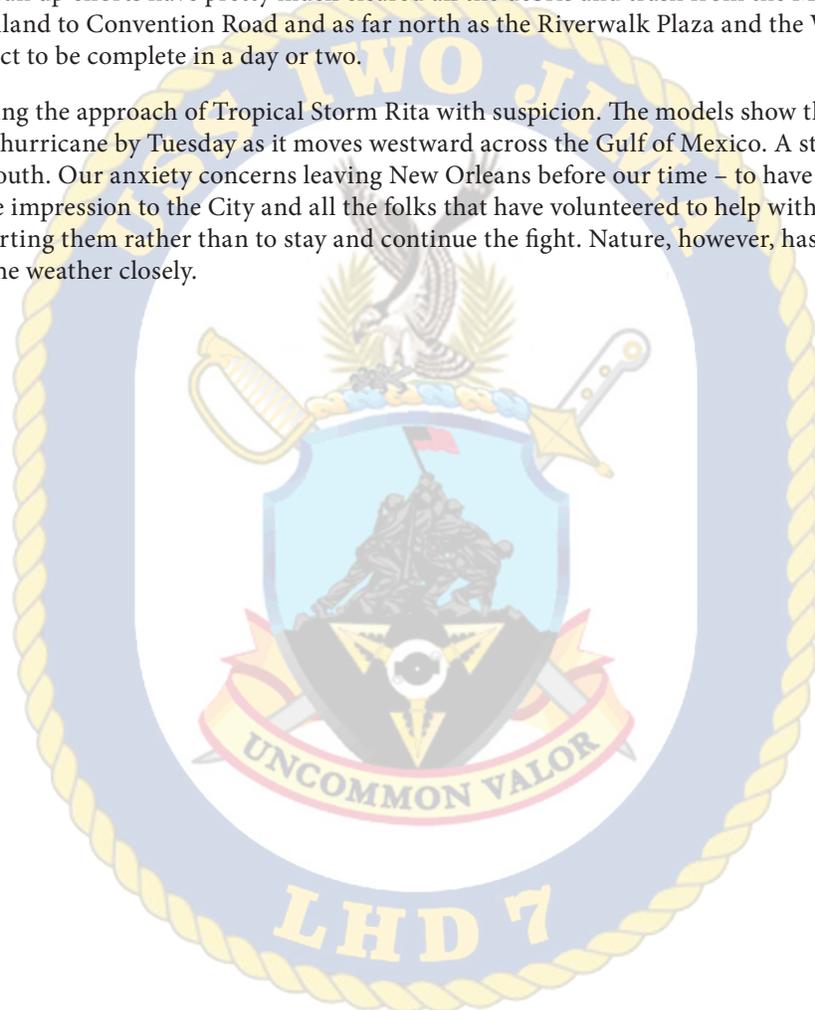
The Chaplain held a service at the recently restored Holy Trinity Church this morning. The parish's priest had evacuated the area during the storm and was not able to return in time. The National Guard still has road blocks up near the church as there are still flooded neighborhoods nearby. The service was attended by a number of IWO JIMA Sailors who had helped out with the restoration project as well as a number of stalwart parishioners who came to rejoice in seeing their saved church and to thank Father Gianulis and IWO JIMA for their efforts.

We hosted a Congressional visit by 16 members of Congress this morning. It followed the same format set by the Senate visit on Friday, but the logistics of getting everyone onboard proved challenging: one member showed up an hour early, without much notice, so the ship had scrambled, but we were able to get everyone flown onboard and settled into the wardroom for the traditional brief by VADM Allen. I have heard the brief 4 times now. It is the same brief provided to the President, Vice President, Senate, and now the Congressional Delegation, only each time it is updated to the minute with fresh information. In the past, VADM Allen would defer to his subject matter experts (Army Corps of Engineers, etc.), but has emerged as the master of virtually every detail of the recovery effort. As soon as his obligation with the Congressional delegation was complete, he raced off back to work, then later he flew off the ship to his headquarters in Baton Rouge.

As with his brief to the Senate, the admiral fielded a barrage of questions from the representatives. Local elected officials and the Parish Presidents made impassioned pleas to the Congress for all kinds of aid and assistance – including the cutting of bureaucratic red tape in order to get recovery efforts moving faster. As before, the admiral explained how the storm occurred and the catastrophic impact it had on first responders, helping to provide insights as to why certain decisions were made. The Governor also spoke, strongly defending the actions of state, local, and federal authorities in the early stages of rescue and recovery efforts and condemning the press for distorting what was actually happening on the ground. She challenged the assembled Congressional members to put aside the blame game and political infighting and to work together in this monumental recovery effort. I remember the first time I met Governor Blanco 11 days ago. She looked worn from exhaustion and drained by events, all dressed in dark clothes that reflected her spirit. Today she was a different person – and I told her so as I escorted her across the brow. She wore a bright red jacket, confident and in firm control of events and the future of Louisiana.

During our afternoon ritual of manning the grills at Eddie's Soup Kitchen, we observed the growing amount of traffic along Convention Road which runs parallel to the River. We even observed a back-up – a sign of the growing influx of people and machines coming to New Orleans. The Mayor had announced his intention to bring back some 180,000 residents, starting with the Algiers neighborhoods across the river from us, which had not sustained as much damage as some areas like Saint Bernard's Parish. The challenge is to ensure that the services (water, sewage, electricity) are up and operating before the influx. Even Eddie expects to be shutting down his Soup Kitchen in a week or so as the National Guard and Army personnel, as well as the out-of-state First Responder volunteers, turn over to local agencies. The ongoing IWO JIMA clean up efforts have pretty much cleared all the debris and trash from the Mississippi River and the Terminal two blocks inland to Convention Road and as far north as the Riverwalk Plaza and the World Trade Center. We expect this major project to be complete in a day or two.

We have been watching the approach of Tropical Storm Rita with suspicion. The models show the storm building to a Category 2, possibly 3, hurricane by Tuesday as it moves westward across the Gulf of Mexico. A strong High is keeping the system far to our South. Our anxiety concerns leaving New Orleans before our time – to have to sortie for hurricane avoidance – leaving the impression to the City and all the folks that have volunteered to help with the City's restoration that IWO JIMA is deserting them rather than to stay and continue the fight. Nature, however, has little pity or concern for us. We will watch the weather closely.





Rita & New Missions

Tuesday, 20 September - The onset of Hurricane Rita, and the growing strength of the storm as it moves into the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, has increased anxiety levels and heightened the sense of urgency. It was a massive undertaking today as hundreds of personnel moved off the ship and hundreds of Marines moved on. As expected in “fluid and dynamic” situations such as this, decisions appear to be last minute and the game plan changes hourly, requiring the ship and All Hands to demonstrate extraordinary flexibility. The venerable C5 Officer, Al Carver, from Amarillo Texas (“a panhandle man” as remarked both former President Bush and the current President when they individually met him) declared, “We don’t know what we’re doing, but whatever it is, we’re ready to do it!” In total, close to 150 pallets of material, cargo, Marine Corps supplies, MREs, bottled water, helicopter equipment and pack-up kits were brought onboard throughout the day and night. The ship’s yellow forklifts and their experienced drivers were hot commodities in this massive logistics effort as they attacked rows of palletized cargo on the pier and brought them onboard the ship. Police whistles sounded throughout the day and night as safety observers indicated it was all clear for pedestrian traffic to cross the brow and transit up and down the ship’s ramps after the heavily laden forklifts had passed – one whistle to stop traffic, two to resume. In all, about 1,200 people moved on and off the ship today, a number equal to the size of the entire crew. It was much like doing a crew swap in 12 hours. By 2100, our former tenants had all departed and some 647 Marines of 24 Marine Expeditionary Unit had arrived onboard. These Marines had been in the field for the last three weeks: no hot showers, no racks, no hot chow, and no air conditioning. Life for them is going to be different now.

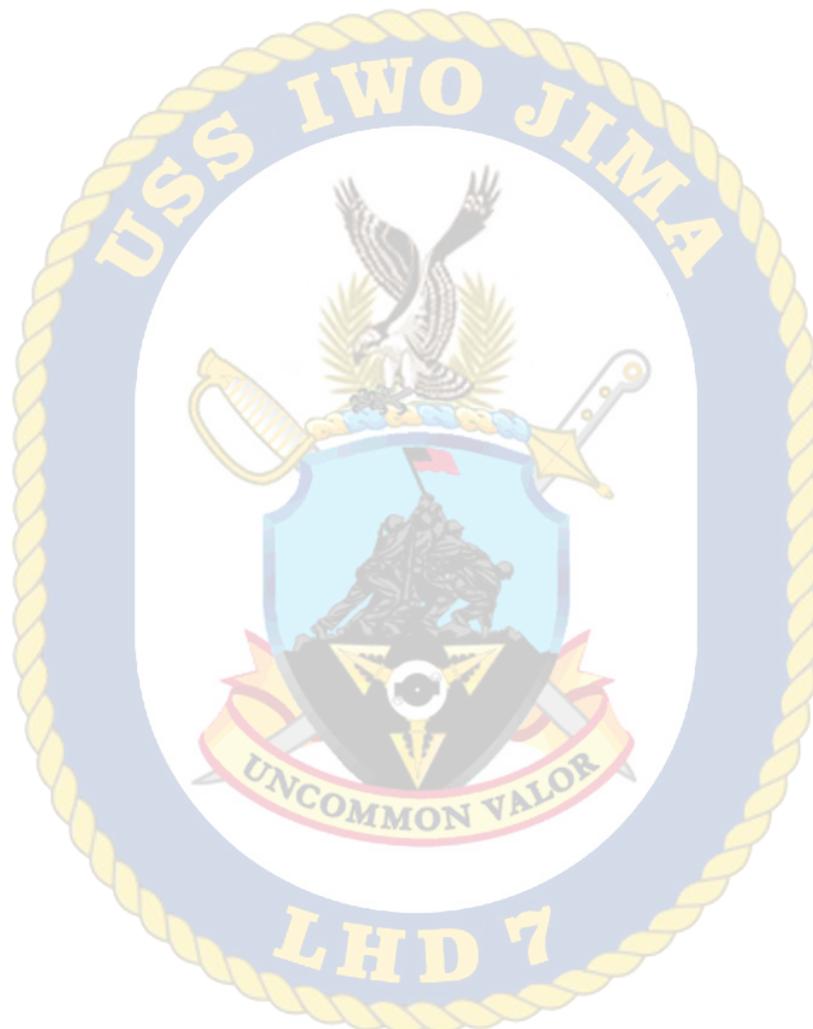
With IWO JIMA’s departure imminent, there was a steady stream of former tenants coming onboard for one last meal, one last shower, and one last trip to the ship’s store. There was also a steady stream of visitors who came onboard for farewell tours. Over the past few weeks the crew of IWO JIMA has established friendships with a wide range of people: with the various Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard units as well as the countless State National Guard units, out-of-state police, fire, and health departments, volunteers from around the country and the world as well as members of the local community. A great number of mementoes were exchanged, and I swear that half the population of the area is now wearing the famous IWO JIMA ball cap.

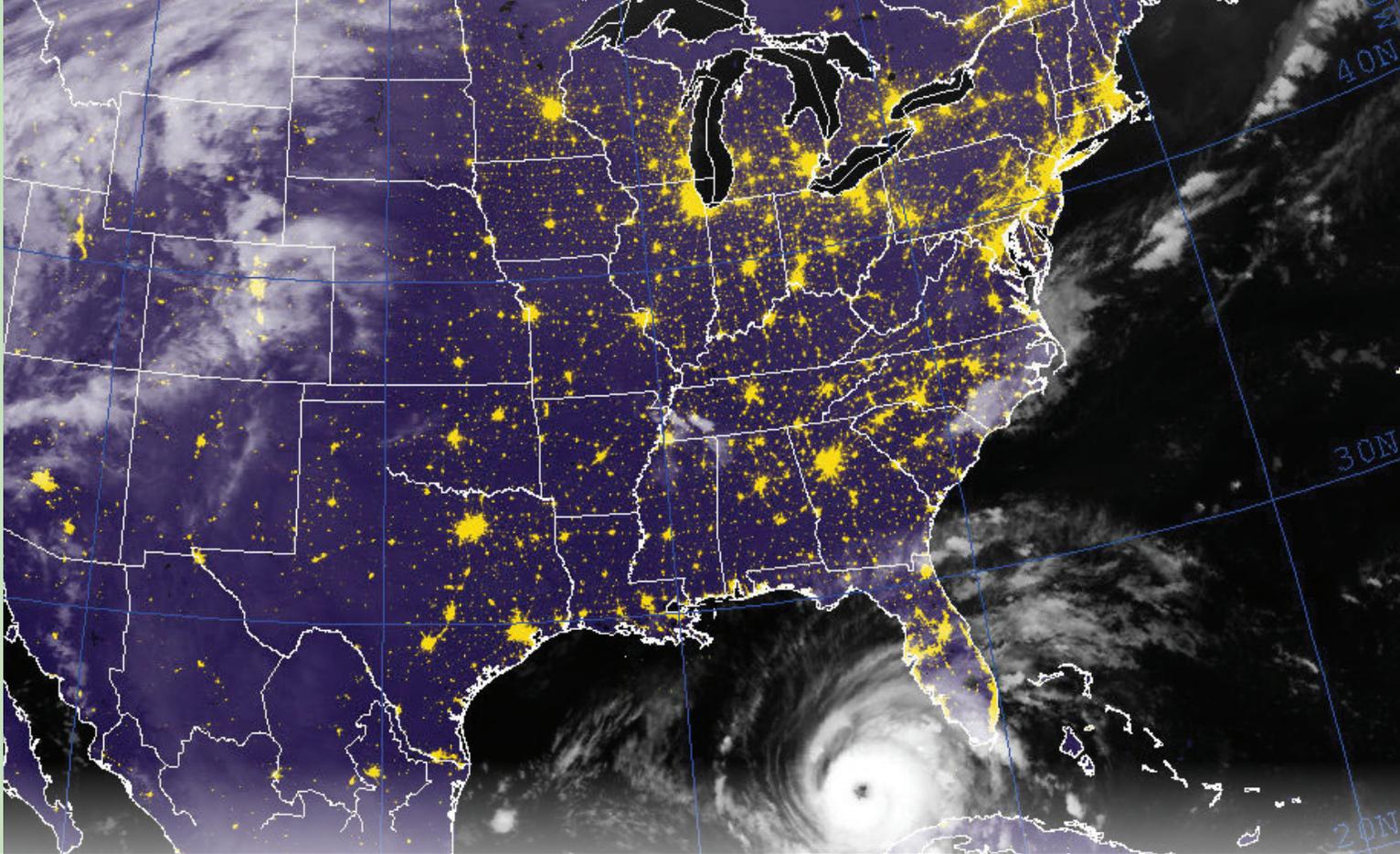
The President of the United States made his third visit to IWO JIMA today, flying onboard this afternoon for a brief from VADM Allen, LGEN Honore and the various task force commanders on both the Federal and Dept of Defense recovery efforts for Katrina and contingency plans for Hurricane Rita. The various commanders outlined detailed plans and preparations for the Rita contingency: everything from alerting fishing fleets and shipping, clearing and securing harbors, pre-staging relief aid and rescue equipment, identifying secure areas to house First Responders so that they would be safe during the storm allowing them to be relief providers and not victims, securing areas to prevent potential environmental hazards, and implementing evacuation plans. They appeared to leave no stone unturned. Pundits would say that all these extensive preparations were a direct result of and reaction to the lessons of Katrina, but my impression in dealing with these leaders over the past few weeks, particularly our shipmates in the Coast Guard, is that these plans and preparations are routine and are normally in place in anticipation of an approaching storm, it is just that Katrina was so massive and catastrophic that such preparations were swept away in the storm’s fury. I talked with a FEMA rep from Galveston, Texas. She said the Texans are “loaded for bear” for Hurricane Rita. Evacuations of hospitals and nursing

homes are already underway. The Texas National Guard was recalled and is in place along the storms projected path. Evacuations sites are already set up with food and water. Their attitude is different: “If an official tells you to evacuate and offers you a ride out if you don’t have the means to get out, and you don’t take it. Then forget it. You are on your own.” Now that’s personal responsibility!

I said farewell to Governor Blanco yesterday as she was waiting to board her helicopter. She was reluctant to have IWO JIMA depart and urged that the ship remain. But for the last week our “mission” has been winding down, Rita only accelerated the process. When the Governor spoke to the JTF Katrina commanders for the first time nearly two weeks ago, she thanked them up front for their service and looking to the future said, “your departure will mean that you are going back to your homes and families, but it will also mean that we are back on our feet.” When we anchored off Biloxi and Gulfport on the 3rd of September, we had a pretty well defined mission: land the Naval Beach Group and the Amphibious Construction Battalion and sustain their operations on the beach. Our mission in New Orleans has never been defined: no deployment order – no nothing, just bring IWO JIMA up the Mississippi and embark JTF Katrina. Our role as airfield, intelligence center, communications platform, conference center, chow hall, laundromat, hotel, and refuge all came about as we saw pressing needs. No one ever directed us to do them, we just did them, in typical Navy fashion on our own. In the end, we and our sister ships TORTUGA and SHREVEPORT did as President Bush asked all Americans to do during his Jackson Park speech, “Find your role and do your part.” We found our role and we are grateful to have had the opportunity to do our part.

We may have more missions tomorrow.





The Onset of Rita

Wednesday, 21 September - This was not how it was suppose to end. As we head eastward in the Gulf of Mexico, running north of Hurricane Rita, New Orleans and the Katrina relief efforts have faded in memory, supplanted by the anxieties and battle plans for the new threat.

IWO JIMA got underway from New Orleans at 0800 this morning in calm winds, hazy sunshine, and typical summer heat and humidity. I suspect New Orleans did not pay much attention to our departure as folks went about their business and the City and all its supporters and volunteers prepared for the onset of rain and winds from Rita. Getting underway went “relatively” smoothly. Those of us who sail in and out of the piers at Naval Station Norfolk are spoiled by having the finest pilots and tug masters in the world. The River Pilot nearly slammed IWO’s stern back into the pier as we pulled away and chastised me for throwing on a left full rudder to kick my stern out. We cleared the dock with about 10 foot separation – more than enough. The rest of the 7 hour trip down the Mississippi was uneventful. Good ship TORTUGA had given us a heads up on some of the navigation issues and everything went smoothly.

The Mississippi is a different river than it was over 2 weeks ago when we sailed up. You could see definite changes – all for the better. There was heavy vehicle traffic c going across the I-90 bridge behind our berth with a large convoy of military and construction vehicles heading in both directions. The Riverwalk Plaza looked neat and ready for tourists – just as we left it – with the fountain in full operation, and the American flag now closed up on the flag pole – thanks to Airman DaSilva. There was considerable traffic c on the River. The pilot thought it was up to about 80 percent capacity. We saw at least two dozen grain carriers at anchor waiting their turn to go up river to load. The pilot indicated that they usually stay there a day to get a customs inspection, so these ships were not waiting long. And the grain harvest is reported to be the best in several years. There were dozens and dozens of work boats, tugs, barges, dredges, floating cranes, LNG carriers, and ferries all along the river. While there were still a lot of barges high and dry on the levees (and the trees had all sprouted up around them making it look like they were surrounded by a forest), there were steam shovels and bulldozers scouring the earth around them so they could be pulled back into the river. Judging by the number of recently cleared areas, a number of barges had already been reclaimed. There was considerable movement along the shore line. The coaling stations, refineries, liquefied natural gas stations, and industrial docks were up and operating despite considerable damage to them by the storm. Some of the neighborhoods along the Mississippi, especially north of the delta, showed signs of coming back to life. The levees had been drained of flood waters, the brown mud replaced by cleared roads and green grass, debris had been moved from yards and streets, and people were out and about repairing their homes and neighborhoods.

About 40 miles south of New Orleans on our 100 mile transit to the Mouth of the Mississippi, you could see areas still fl flooded. The waters had receded from most of the inhabited areas, but there were wetlands and lowlands still underwater. Further south you still see smashed neighborhoods, but as everywhere else there were signs of activity and progress. By around 1100, we came across a steady stream of merchant traffic heading up river as we headed “down bound,” another sign of recovery.

By early afternoon, the winds began to pick up, and as we exited the Mississippi, making that tight, challenging turn to the south, they increased out of the northeast to about 20 knots. You could see large bands of white fluffy clouds streaming across the sky at great speed, the leading edge of Rita’s massive storm system. By late afternoon, Rita was upgraded to a Category 5 Hurricane, the fifth most powerful Hurricane in the Atlantic region in U. S. history. However, there is an expectation that as the High over the southern United States moves eastward, the Hurricane will start moving to the west northwest into the slightly cooler waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico which may take some energy out of the system before it approaches land. By early evening we had turned to the east northeast – dead into the winds and heavy seas – easing towards the Florida panhandle and in the opposite direction of the westward moving Rita. We expect the eye of the storm to pass to the south of us around 0200 at approximately 300 miles. But even at that great range, we can feel the effects of the storm. But, the ship is secured for sea: All heavy equipment was brought down to the lowest point of the ship. Our air wing of nine helicopters is secured in the Hangar and everything else is tied down and inspected twice. We expect the winds to start veering to the east then the south east as the storm passes to the south of us in which case we will follow in behind and be ready to answer the call. The ship is riding comfortably, but we expect there will be some rocking and rolling. Already there are some green faces among the crew and Marines. It is a shame the Ship’s Store is out of smoked oysters.





Heavy Weather

Thursday, 22 September - The eye of Hurricane Rita passed us early this morning at a distance of about 300 miles. The storm system is so massive that it fills the entirety of the Gulf of Mexico. We maintained a southeasterly course throughout last night and today in an effort to pull away from the heavy seas and high winds of the storm system. However, with the eastward movement of the high over the southern United States, Rita has curved to northwest, as we had expected. The end result was that we were never really pulling away from the eye, which moved at about 9 miles per hour, and so remained afflicted with heavy weather throughout the day. We did a modest amount of rocking and rolling last night (mild by comparison to my days on good ship MCCLOY in the North Atlantic). You feel a lot more swaying on the 0-6 level where the At-Sea Cabin is located compared to most of the berthing compartments on the main deck – six stories below – or the main spaces – ten stories below.

We have had the ship's bow dead into the seas and swells for the past 24 hours which allows the ship to ride reasonably well. At 40,500-tons with saltwater compensated fuel tanks, the ship provides a stable ride if handled correctly in the winds and seas. The winds stepped up from about 20 knots yesterday evening to about 40 knots sustained at 2000 this evening. At one point today, we observed 16 to 20 foot seas with the occasional spray flying over the bow and winds gusting up to 60 knots. The weather decks remain secured to all hands for the obvious safety reasons. I had a chance to venture down to the focsle this afternoon and stuck my head out the bullnose (an open chock at the very front of the bow about 50 feet above the waterline) to observe IWO JIMA's bow cutting through the heavy seas. I could clearly see the ship's bulbous bow rise completely out of the sea and then pound back in with an explosion of spray and foam, sending a "mild" shudder throughout the ship. An awesome and impressive sight.

Hurricane Rita remains problematic. Given the storm's size, it is impossible or impractical for us to steam around her and come up on the southern side of the system, a transit of several hundred miles. That would take days. The southern half of the storm, her left side, is considered the less dangerous half (or semi-circle/quadrant). The right side is considered the more dangerous quadrant, packing the highest winds. Given the storm's latest track, the eye is expected to hit landfall near the Texas Louisiana border, bringing the less dangerous left hand side of the storm onto northeast Texas and the more dangerous right hand side onto western Louisiana and the southern part of the Mississippi delta. Last report indicated that New Orleans should see 35 knot winds and upwards of 3 to 5 inches of rainfall, which has everyone the most concerned. We suspect the greatest need for our assistance will be back in New Orleans and the surrounding area, but we have planned for just about every possible contingency. It was reported today that Rita achieved the distinction of the 3rd most intensive and powerful system in Atlantic history before weakening slightly to a strong Category 4 hurricane. It is hoped that the cooler waters of the northern part of the Gulf of Mexico will further weaken Rita, but the storm remains powerful nonetheless. Our intention is to maintain our safe course dead into the winds and seas, heading southeast, and then when the sea state lessens,

reverse course and head to the northwest towards the Mississippi delta and the anchorages off Gulfport and Biloxi, running with the seas and winds at a fast bell. We do not know nor are we able to predict with any degree of accuracy when that will be. Our hope is to be in a position early Saturday morning to render assistance soon after the storm makes landfall, but all that depends on Rita.

When you think about it, in heavy seas, the most important person on the ship is not the Captain, but the 19 year-old seaman apprentice who stands the watch as helmsmen. With one incorrect twist of the rudder and the ship can pitch or roll, sometimes violently, sending people tumbling throughout. We have been watching the rudder angle indicator very closely for the past 24 hours. It was a quiet day on the ship. About a hundred Sailors and Marines, out of the 2,131 onboard, made the pilgrimage to Sick Bay in the hope of finding some wonder drug to ease the sea sickness. I saw quite a few gray and tired looking faces throughout the day. I consider myself blessed not to have ever gotten sea sick (Truthfully!) in over 26 years. I recommend saltines.





In Trail of Rita

Friday, 23 September - After about 36 hours of heavy seas, IWO JIMA reversed course at about 0800 this morning and headed to the west northwest in trail of Hurricane Rita. As the storm curved to the northwest yesterday, it was actually drawing nearer to the ship. We got as close as 258 miles before we started to open up. By early this morning we had pulled away sufficiently and elected to safely turn the ship in behind the storm. The seas are “confused” in the wake of the hurricane. The constantly shifting but powerful winds from this cyclonic system churned the seas up in many directions with long rolling swells coming from one direction and strong wind-swept waves coming from another. After conducting a rendezvous with sister ships SHREVEPORT and TORTUGA, and the replenishment ship PATUXENT, we transferred 30 to 40 pallets of supplies among the ships by vertical replenishment using IWO JIMA’s embarked H-60 aircraft. At about noontime, we pulled away from the group, put the swells and winds off our port quarter, and headed through the seas at 20 knots to the vicinity of the Mississippi delta. With the storm still tracking at about 9 knots, we were able to gain a hundred miles every 8 to 9 hours on Rita. Al Carver, as usual, asked the salient question, “When you think about it, chasing a hurricane is like a dog chasing a car. What do you do when you catch it?”

A good portion of the day was spent doing “contingency planning”: devising branch plans and courses of action for any number of missions or contingencies that might come our way. The many staffs from Carrier Strike Group TEN, Amphibious Squadron FOUR, Naval Beach Group TWO, and Marine Forces RITA and the ship worked through numerous courses of action. In the meantime, Air Department was able to bring aircraft up from the Hangar, spot them on the flight deck, and conduct 6 hours of flight operations to move cargo and personnel, but also to prepare for potential search and rescue missions early tomorrow morning. We hope to be approximately 50 miles south of the Entrance to the Mississippi at first light, ready to for flight quarters, if the weather permits and the mission require it. We won’t know until the morning. It is surprisingly quiet this evening, following in the wake of Hurricane Rita.

Running with the winds and seas, there is very little rocking and rolling. With the exception of one extremely ominous rain squall, the skies have been cloudy but clear, the visual horizon seemingly unlimited but absent of any surface traffic. We saw only one or two brave merchantmen today, one heading away from the storm towards the Straits of Florida and one intrepid merchantman heading to the vicinity of the Entrance to the Mississippi, some enterprising mariner perhaps, hoping to be the first up the river after it is reopened. While Rita remains a dangerous storm, there is cause for some hope here. The weakening of the system from an intensive Category 5 down to a Category 3 storm is a good sign. It is hoped the system decays rapidly after it goes ashore and doesn’t linger dumping many inches of rain in the already hit areas. We received word this evening from our shipmates at the Oklahoma National Guard still in New Orleans. Contrary to a news report that they had evacuated the city, they are all still at their posts. There have been two breaches in the Industrial Canal levee and the 17th Street levee, bringing flood waters into recently flooded, but evacuated, areas. The Army Corps of Engineers had worked so desperately hard to repair the previous breaches, strengthen the levee walls, and drain all the neighborhoods and parishes of the residual flood waters. It is disheartening to see their work reversed. But I believe the worst has passed for New Orleans (and not a repeat of Katrina) and in approximately 3 hours, Rita will make landfall in Texas and Western Louisiana. And we’ll see what missions await us.



To be worthy of our heritage

Sunday, 25 September - Our participation here in the Gulf of Mexico is winding down fast. I expect we will get word to head home sometime in the not-too-distant future. From the deckplates, there is a feeling that we're done. Once officially detached, it will take about a week to get back to Norfolk, after we refuel, pick up the LCAC, drop off the helicopters and the Marines, conduct our engineering inspection, maybe refuel again, then pull into homeport.

We could not have predicted the ending to all this; it was certainly not what any of us expected. We expected a clean ending in New Orleans, but Rita changed that and dragged it out. And our contributions to relief efforts over the past three to four days in the wake of latest hurricane were not as extensive as during Hurricane Katrina, which is a good thing, but our pilots and aircrewmembers proved their worth and made a number of rescues and evacuations over the past two days. The surveys of the areas show damage and flooding, but there is great activity on the ground and things are recovering quickly. The capabilities of our naval force appear to be no longer needed. But, when you prepare for the worst, you always bring a full tool box even though most of the tools will never be used.

It has been an extraordinary month. It seems like it was a year ago, not a month ago, that we hastily departed Norfolk and raced down to the Gulf Coast. I don't think anyone could have predicted the events that took place, the missions we ended up divining for ourselves, the people we would meet, having the President visit the ship three times and inspire the crew along with over 50 admirals and generals (we lost count) and an equal number of Senators, Congressmen, local dignitaries, and senior officials, and the remarkable things that would be accomplished. There is a great deal of satisfaction by the crew that in the end we made a difference and when you sift through all the anxiety of gearing up for missions, the frustration of constantly changing requirements, "herding cats," and the tedium of routinely being in waiting station, there remains the satisfaction of a job well done.

Regretfully (or perhaps thankfully), this will be my final Update. These updates started out as nightly rituals to send an email narrative to my wife, family, and a few close friends - an opportunity for me to collect my thoughts at the end of a long and sometimes frustrating day - and report on the events I had seen and the extraordinary accomplishments of all onboard this ship and around us. Despite all the tragedy I witnessed, there were always pockets of hope stubbornly persevering in a sea of despair. On one hand I saw the extraordinary generosity of the American people and witnessed the abundance of aid and relief, the dedication of First Responders who stayed in the field while Katrina raged helping to save others and restore hope while politicians and the media from a thousand miles away condemned them for being too slow or not responsive enough, and thousands of volunteers that just put their personal lives on hold and stepped up to the plate to bring relief and comfort to those in despair. And on the other hand, I was disappointed to see partisan politics in the midst of a national crisis of Biblical proportions. As with any human endeavor, there will be blame thrown about and shameful grandstanding. But in the end, it was clear to me that the Country showed her true self, that ordinary people stepped up to the plate and helped out, that the right things were done by our government and local authorities, and our President would find the right man in the person of Vice Admiral Thad Allen, United States Coast Guard, at the right time to command recovery efforts in the wake of Katrina.

I never imagined that my nightly Updates would have reached such a wide audience, but after a few early responses from strangers across the world or shipmates in high places I became aware of that fact. Over the past two weeks I have been inundated with emails of praise and kindness for what the Sailors and Marines of USS IWO JIMA were doing in New Orleans and in the wake of Hurricane Rita. To all of you, I am grateful for your confidence in us and thank you for your kind words. One in particular struck my heart and soul. It was from a former Marine who quoted the famous ancient Greek mathematician and philosopher Archimedes. This Marine wrote: "Archimedes said that if he had (a lever and) a place upon which to stand he could move the earth...Looks like the folks down in New Orleans have found a place to stand. Semper Fi IWO JIMA."

In March of this year, we held a ceremony on the ship back in Norfolk to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima. We had some 50 survivors from the Battle in attendance, some on oxygen machines and in wheel chairs but damned if they would miss the event. The Commandant's own Drum and Bugle Corps and Silent Drill team performed for several hundred guests, but the highlight of the evening was the presentation of American flags flown from the ship's mast on 23 February – the 60th anniversary of the raising of the national ensign atop Mount Suribachi so immortalized in the famous Joe Rosenthal photograph - by this generation of service men and women to the Greatest Generation as well as the unveiling of a memorial wall with the names of the some 6,000 Marines, Sailors and other service members who made the ultimate sacrifice on that small volcanic island. At the time I wrote, "We, the Sailors and Marines of this IWO JIMA are forever mindful of the heritage that has been entrusted to us by the ship's name. It is both a burden – one we willingly shoulder – to forever uphold the traditions set by those who sacrificed so much, and a source of great inspiration, all for the same reason. We hope that when it is our time to answer the Nation's call, as these young men did over 60 years ago, we will do so, inspired by their actions, and hope to acquit ourselves honorably, so as to be worthy of that heritage." It is my fervent hope that we are worthy of that heritage. May God continue to bless America.



