

Lessons in Command from Inside a Katrina Refugee Shelter

Command: Category 4

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Command. There's no better job in the world. After seven years in jobs with "command authority" and two squadron commands, I figured I had a good idea what command was all about. I was wrong. What changed my mind? Four words--"Shelter Commander" and "Hurricane Katrina."

From 28 Aug - 2 Sep, I lived with 730 of my "closest friends" in 50-year old Bryan Hall at Keesler AFB, MS. It was my third stint as a shelter commander, but it was unlike anything I had experienced before. As life slowly returns to normal on the Gulf Coast and I reflect on the experience, I've come to appreciate the unpredictability of command and how much an event like Katrina can change people and communities.

First, you have to understand some basics. My shelter is a unique animal on Keesler. Most shelters here are dedicated primarily to one unit. Mine is not. I have all the active duty and family members from a wide variety of units--two training squadrons, CE and Security Forces (and prisoners), 100+ Marines, communications students (NCOs and roughly 60 Lt's), 150 NCO Academy students and their faculty, and 50 international officers and their families. The building is an old nuclear fallout shelter, with no windows and no shower facilities. With that setting in mind, I offer the following memories and thoughts on Hurricane Katrina.

25 Aug (Thu): One of my sharpest young MSgt points out Katrina "may grow into something over the weekend" and suggests we update our shelter/evacuation data sheets. I admire his enthusiasm, tell him "that's not a bad idea", then promptly forget to do anything because Katrina's not headed our way at all and I've got other things to do besides worry about a piddly Category 1 storm.

27 Aug (Sat): Two CAT meetings. Katrina has strengthened and is headed our way, due to arrive Monday afternoon. Tentatively plan to open shelters Monday morning. I remember the MSgt's words and begin repeating every officer's golden rule—"Never ignore a SNCO...Never ignore a SNCO."

28 Aug (Sun): Turn on CNN before heading to 0800 CAT. Radar picture shows Katrina is Category 5, taking up the whole Gulf of Mexico and headed straight for us, due to arrive before dawn Monday. "Never ignore a SNCO...Never ignore a SNCO."

- 1000: Initiate full recall and order all personnel to evacuate or shelter NLT 2100. Many people out of town for the weekend. Accountability is a nightmare.

- 1700: Open the shelter. People/families begin arriving. Have to stop two refrigerators, one 21" TV set, and three mattresses at the door. Students (of all ranks) drafted to help carry bags into the shelter. People told to bring food and water for three days. Most bring food for two days; smokers bring cigarettes for twenty days. Have to break the news--no smoking inside the shelter and once you're checked in you can't go outside (Hotel California rules).

- 2200: Doors locked and boarded up from the outside by CE (one door in an alcove left uncovered).

29 Aug (Mon):

0500: Winds howling; can hear them best through vents in bathrooms at the end of the hallway (It didn't sound like this during Hurricane Ivan)

0800: Shelterees (hereafter referred to as "the Natives") start moving around 0800. Smokers looking for nicotine fix, but remain calm.

1000: Local news reports indicate rising waters, violent winds. Plywood ripped from external doorways (I start getting uneasy; plywood has never moved in previous storms, much less flown away).

1200: News reports 20+ feet of water in local mall. Natives getting anxious. Smokers getting jittery.

Afternoon:

- Power goes out; generators kick in. Not good. CE told us power can only go out if high-tension cables that survived 200-mph winds during Hurricane Camille go down. A/C stops working; ventilation fans stop working. No windows, no open doors, 731 nervous people...in Mississippi...in August. Ask for generator fuel status and burn rate. Have enough fuel for two days.

- Natives who smoke starting to visibly shake; many look physically ill.

- Cable TV goes out. Natives get creative with antennas. Spotted the bottom half of an NCO sticking out from ceiling tiles. Apparently reception is better if you connect a stripped copper comm cable from the TV to pipes in the ceiling. I appoint a safety observer and hope for the best.

- CE reports primary generator has flames coming out of it, so shut it off. Lost internet connectivity. Down to one generator; power only in hallways and a few rooms.

- Water stops running. Toilets overflowing. With medical advice, I brief the Natives on how to use plastic bags for toilet facilities (someone used this method within 10 minutes). Disposal of plastic bags in a sealed building is a concern. Adventurous major goes into the basement and finds 1961-vintage Civil Defense Survival Sanitation Kits. Basically, a 3-foot tall cardboard porta-potty with a hole

cut in the top. This does not look fun. However, 44-year old toilet paper (it was dated) is surprisingly soft.

- One hour later: Water comes back thanks to CE heroes going out in the storm to repair pumping station. I hug the first CE troop I can find. Sanitation Kits thankfully not used, but kept on standby.

- CE troops coming off shift report half of flight-line underwater; BX and Commissary 6 feet deep and rising; trees down all over base; CE building collapsed. Natives begin to get the picture--this is worse than Hurricanes Ivan or Dennis.

Evening:

1800: Winds still dangerous so cannot open doors. It's hot...it's humid...Natives are getting cranky. Smokers showing signs of extreme duress. One is carrying two unlit cigarettes around. I suggest he tear one open and put it behind his lip for a nicotine fix. He informs me he's already eaten an entire pack and it didn't help. Can't think of anything to say in response, so I pat him on the back and wish him luck.

- Babies and young kids getting grumpy; too hot to nap.

- Barely-visible news reports (on very fuzzy TV picture) report massive devastation in the area. Dead silence in hallway as Natives crowd around the lone TV with a discernible picture. Tension rising.

2000: Too hot to breathe. 731 nervous people generate a lot of sweat and a variety of smells. Command Post says stay locked down, don't open doors. Natives make strange noises when I walk by. Not sure the "Shelter Commander" badge is a good thing to be wearing right now. First Sergeant reports Natives consider me the embodiment of evil.

- Cops go on shift. The best NCO in the AF is assigned to patrol base housing; he offers to try to check on my cat during his shift (we left her in the hallway of my house).

2100: Even hotter. Poked my head outside—it's ugly but winds have died down. Command Post says stay buttoned up. Natives mumbling in small groups about how to eliminate a commander. Survival instincts tell me to get some air in here. Posted Marines at every exit and opened all the doors. I'm a hero; Natives love me. Haven't heard "thank you" this much since I put my shirt back on at the squadron pool party.

2200: Smokers running out of cigarettes to eat. Open a side door and rope off a 10' x 10' smoking area. No more than five people at a time; no more than five minutes. Sucking cigarettes look like blow-torches in reverse. Everyone loves me.

- Nobody sleeps much. Tough to sleep in pools of sweat.

30 August (Tuesday):

0145: One of my NCOs wakes me up because "Cops want to talk to you, Sir". SFS NCO is direct. "The good news is your cat is fine." Next question obvious. As he hands back my house key he adds, "The bad news is I didn't need this to get into your house." Doesn't quite register..."How'd you get in?" He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I walked through your back wall." That can't be good at all. Looks like a total loss. My wife was on a cot in the hallway. I woke her up to give her the news. Her response? "I guess it'll be easy to pack when we move next year." (She's getting anything she wants for Christmas, forever). Spend the rest of the night thinking of how to stay focused and project a positive attitude given that all my worldly possessions will probably fit in a gym bag. (note: we were eventually able to save most things above 4 feet)

0700: Bad news spreads like wildfire. Entire shelter knows about my house. Lots of supportive comments as I wander the halls but I see the struggle behind the words—they're sorry for my loss but worry about their own. Their concern for my family despite fears for their own touches me deeply. First time in 19 years I've really had to fight back tears, but I've got to do the commander thing and project a positive attitude. As I walk the hallways I truly feel "the burden of command." My family is safe; I have to push my losses aside for now. These 730 people have no access to information other than what I tell them. I am their link to the outside world. I see them watching me, watching how I react and looking for cues as they try to figure out how they should feel--is the commander scared? Depressed? Worried? Confident? I realize that their mood over the next few days will be a direct reflection of what they perceive as my mood. I've been tested in command before, but never like this.

0800: Drive to CAT meeting across base. Devastation is shocking. Trees down everywhere. Cars trashed everywhere. Windows out. Walls out. Buildings collapsed. Roofs ripped apart.

0930: Mass briefing to the Natives. Most uncomfortable briefing I've ever given. Reports indicate widespread devastation. Death toll probably in the hundreds. Power out for at least three weeks. Must begin water conservation. Minimum three months to resume base mission. Will not leave shelter for at least three days. 730 stunned and scared faces focused on me. All are easy to read. (1) realization of how bad it is, (2) fear of what it did to their homes. Worst possible situation for a commander--troops need reassurance I can't give. Struggle to keep my voice steady. Not sure how well I did.

Afternoon:

- Natives' supplies running out. Most critical shortfalls: food, diapers, baby food, and feminine hygiene products. Issue MREs for adults. Assign "Baby POC" to track baby supplies. Develop new metric for morning/evening briefings--diaper burn rate. 17 infants in shelter x 5 diapers/day & 4 jars of baby food/day. Have one day supply of diapers, two days of baby food, but at least three more days in the shelter. Submit urgent supply request to Command Post. Luckily, Sanitation Kits include 44-year old feminine products.

- Still no cable TV and no internet. Information is life. I average (I counted) no more than 10 steps before someone stops me to ask what's going on outside.

- Lieutenant students offer to take over operation of the Children's Recreation Room. One has been to Clown College; several brought coloring books. First Sergeant asks me later (a) "How come the officers have coloring books?" and (b) "How come some of the pictures were colored in before the children started using them?" Honor of the officer corps is at stake; I quickly assign the Shirt to a meaningless task to distract her. Hope it worked. Best not to ask. (Note: to be perfectly honest, that actually happened during Hurricane Dennis in July, but it's 100% true and was too good a story not to include here)

- Pregnant Native goes into premature labor. Ambulance evacuates her to hospital.

- Another uncomfortable night. All Natives (and myself) report profuse sweating in lieu of sleep. Set up special room with lots of fans for children to sleep in. Authorized Chaplain to take a small raiding party to Chapel next door to get rocking chairs for parents with small children.

31 August (Wed):

- 731 people, 36+ hours with no a/c and no showers. Natives stink. Shelter stinks. Natives convinced everyone stinks but themselves. Shirt reports Natives blame it all on me. Wife asks if I can boost SGLI from here. Tasked my most creative NCO to come up with some way to hose people off. Result: water hose connected to sink in bathroom supply closet, with sandbag walls leading to drain in center of bathroom. No hot water, but showers are a success. Still rationing water--3 minute shower every other day. Nonetheless, Natives can wash away the stink for at least 10 minutes till they start sweating again. I'm a hero.

- Still hot. Two cases of dehydration evacuated to hospital. I'm dehydrated, nauseous, and weak despite drinking constantly. Can't believe I let this happen. Check with medics, but saline solution is in short supply and if I'm still walking I don't need it bad enough. They give me some good drugs to control symptoms. Eight hours, 240 ounces of water (I had to keep track), and 9,000 bathroom breaks later I feel much better.

- Lots of debris around the building. Still dangerous for people to go outside, but Natives are getting stir-crazy. Assigned a team to clear and rope off an area near the building. Post guards to ensure nobody wanders off, then allow small groups outside for fresh air for short periods of time. They love me again.

- Wing/CC reads off list of inbound aid at CAT meeting. Not the same as hearing it on TV. I never imagined that it would mean so much to know that so many people are focused on helping you.

- Baby supplies critical. Wing/CC orders a raid on what's left of Commissary and BX. Deliveries to shelters save the day.

- Another bad briefing to the Natives. Only one way to explain why they can't leave the shelter--tell them the truth as I know it. Looting rampant off-base. Looters in base housing. AF member car-jacked right outside the gate. No gas in local area; \$5/gallon three hours away. Chaos in New Orleans is moving our way. Extra Security Forces with .50 cal on HMMWVs en route to help secure the base.

- Natives frantic about their homes. They fear anything that survived the storm won't survive the looters. Try to focus them on aid headed our way. Emotions running high. One woman goes into shock; evacuated to hospital.

- Another sweaty, sleepless night. Natives apparently locate world's largest stock of extension cords. Conservative estimates indicate we're running 500 fans off 5 power outlets and 2,000 extension cords. Confiscated the most impressive daisy chains as a safety hazard. Briefed Shelter Management Team to increase fire checks of the building.

01 Sep (Thu):

- Cannot release people to return to homes overnight due to security concerns. However, must let Natives assess their homes or risk bodily harm trying to keep them here. Strict guidelines for home assessments--provide written route of travel; must have a wingman; no dependents can go; max of one hour to save what you can and return to shelter; must be decontaminated before reentering shelter because many houses (mine included) have sludge/sewage inches deep. Lieutenants do great job controlling departure and decon lines.

- Natives return to shelter. Many are homeless. Commander School never taught me how to respond to "I have nothing left," or how to comfort women and men crying uncontrollably in my arms. Some cried for what they lost, some for what they saw. News reports didn't prepare them for seeing not just their home but their entire neighborhood destroyed, or for the cops telling them the bad smell they noticed was probably neighbors who tried to ride out the storm and were buried in the rubble. My only consolation is that I know how they feel. The stink in the house made me gag; the mud was gooey, sticky, and got on everything. My wife spent years building a beautiful collection of Amish figurines. Seeing the trail of broken figures across two yards (I never found the curio cabinet) was painful to endure. Crabs running across my feet in the bedroom (which scared the bee-geezus out of me) was a comical twist to a non-comical situation.

- In an attempt to improve morale, the chow hall (excuse me, "Dining Facility") next to the shelter opens for one hot meal of whatever was available. Natives happily wait in line 2+ hours for rice with spaghetti sauce and a piece of bread. After the week we've had, it's like Grandma's Thanksgiving dinner.

- Third straight day of gorgeous weather. Security still a big concern. My DO reports her neighbors shot a looter (it may not be politically correct, but I applaud their initiative). Natives don't care, they just want out. Shelter Commanders compare notes at CAT—we're all seriously concerned about

tempers rising in the shelters. Believe the Natives are just about at the breaking point.

- Still no a/c. Lots of sweat and little sleep.

02 Sep (Fri):

- Security situation better. Natives are about worn out. Wing/CC authorizes release from shelters. Six days and five nights we will never forget, and the recovery efforts have only just begun.

To say that Hurricane Katrina has been a “life event” would be an understatement. During my time running the Bryan Hall shelter I saw the best and the worst of people first-hand. Some sat in their little piece of floor space and watched others work to make the situation better. Most looked for every opportunity to help others and to make our little slice of hell a little more comfortable. I was amazed at how easy it was to read their faces. I could see clearly as fear changed to shock, disbelief, then anger. I watched in amazement as the anger was replaced with a calm sense of resolve and focus to simply move forward and do what needed to be done. From the little boy I found wandering the halls at midnight (obviously looking for a bathroom) to the lieutenants who stepped up, took charge when I asked, and showed all of us what “officership” is all about, every person in that shelter taught me their own unique and valuable lesson about command.

The CE troops and the Cops in my shelter taught me the meaning of dedication. I watched them tramp in and out on shift work throughout the storm and its aftermath. They were wet, muddy, sweaty, and tired. But every time they came through those doors they took time to find someone whose house they checked on and they always stopped by to give me an update on what they saw. To quote a favorite TV show of mine, “They were...magnificent.” My Wing/CC described it perfectly a few days after the storm. Some puffed-up colonel called him up in the CAT and said “General so-and-so is coming down there. I want to know who the most important person on that base is and I want their name right now.” The boss’ response was classic. “Well, colonel, the most important person on this base is a Staff Sergeant with a chainsaw and if you’ll give me ten minutes I’ll get that name for you.” CE and Cops. If you’re looking for the heroes of Keesler, I’ll be happy to escort you to their buildings.

As for the rest of the folks in the shelter, they were just as amazing in a different way. For all but the first 16 hours of our 6-day adventure they lived in a hot, poorly-ventilated building with virtually no amenities but running water. Most slept on tile floors. All slept in puddles of their own sweat. All spent 5 days not knowing whether or not they had a home to go home to. Yet through all of it, they kept a sense of humor and worked together to make the best of a bad situation. Even in the darkest moments I never walked down the hall without hearing a constant stream of “Morning, Colonel!” “How’s it going, Sir?” or “Hey, Sir! When’s the beer truck getting here?” I was only chewed out once by a shelteree. I would argue that in a “typical” group of 731 people, I would’ve been chewed out several times a day at least.

In my 19 years of service I have never seen a better demonstration of the military “family”, or a better demonstration of true professionalism. I have to add, though, that what I’ve seen in the 12 days since has been just as impressive. The base and its leadership have been amazing. In addition to bringing our mission back on-line in less than 3 weeks, we’ve provided critical support to local communities. At last count, we’d sent nearly 50 missions out the gates to deliver food, water, and medical support. I was the CAT Director when a local cop showed up and said the shelter down the street had an outbreak of diarrhea and vomiting. The boss had medical teams, food, and water on site within 30 minutes. The list goes on and on.

The same is true for my own unit. With more than one-third of my squadron homeless, my troops (military and civilian) have done things that will bring a tear to anyone’s eye. Not one single person in my unit has cleaned out a storm-damaged home alone. We’ve had teams out every day helping squadron members and retirees (and sometimes people we didn't even know) cut trees and clean out flooded homes. They have made me proud to be part of their team and proud to be part of the US military. They have taught me when it comes right down to it they don't need leadership. They are, each and every one of them, leaders in their own right. Leaders with the willingness, the desire, and the compassion to do the right thing without being told. In truth, they don’t need a commander, they only need a cheerleader who will give them the support and the freedom they need to do what needs to be done. When I look back in years to come and ponder what Hurricane Katrina taught me about command that may just be the most important lesson of all.