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Inside a FEMA Search and Rescue Team

By Timothy J. Burger/Lake Charles, Louisiana

It's a dark Saturday night in a parking lot in Lake Charles, La. about 12 hours after Hurricane Rita tore through here, and Columbus, Ohio Fire Department Capt. Jack Reall is briefing his 35-person FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Team. "What you see is what you got. We have no idea what's going to happen," except that the promised roof to sleep under isn't going to work out. Nearby, McNeese State University's Burton Coliseum, most recently used to house those affected by Hurricane Katrina, is dark, with standing water and no working bathrooms, and is strewn with personal items from its last short-term occupants. Tomorrow, the team will drive, walk, wade and chainsaw its way through whatever stricken Lake Charles-area neighborhoods are listed by a FEMA liaison working off a state authorities needs list. But tonight, they'll sleep under the stars in this parking lot, where the stiff breeze is appreciated for whisking away hungry, aggressive mosquitoes and as natural air conditioning. Oh, and there's a tornado watch—so sleep near your vehicle. "We're on our own. Take care of it," Reall says, adding, "keep your boots on. Stay dressed. I ain't got a clue what's out there."

Welcome to life on a Federal Emergency Management Agency USAR team. TIME embedded with this group of 35 firefighters and other rescue professionals from Ohio for its first Rita response mission to glimpse the system at work. As everyone beds down, orange glow sticks form an eerie perimeter in the parking lot around the larger group, which also includes two more USAR teams, from Nevada and Phoenix. Many team members drop glow sticks near their cots to prevent any of the 100 or more total people—or the 30 or so trucks operated by the three teams that just arrived in a convoy on the 150-mile drive from Houston—from running each other over. "It's a little bit weird, because there's probably someone sitting in a house out there, and we're sleeping in a parking lot," says Marcus Chapman, 30, a Westerville, Ohio, firefighter his head resting on a John Deere tractor pillowcase given him by his wife. But the USAR teams are from everywhere but here, and they can't guess who needs help in rural Louisiana. So unless they're tasked to tackle a specific, known emergency, a team will wait for orders in the morning—when, by daylight, they can better negotiate potentially lethal downed power lines, for example. A USAR motto, says Pat Aungst, a structural engineer on the team—and a descendant of Woodrow Wilson and George Patton—is, "We shall create no new victims."

An hour after the troops rise at 7 a.m. for a breakfast of MREs and Propel Fortified Water, Reall gives them their mission: a "windshield survey," from their vehicles, of Westlake, a small community northwest of Lake Charles. "We don't want you getting out unless you come across a significantly collapsed structure that looks like it might have somebody in it," Reall says. Primarily, the team will log significant areas of damage. Dr. Randy Marriott gives a medical briefing. In addition to the usual hazards—such as the power lines—rescuers are told to watch out for pit vipers and coral snakes and "assume any wild animal to be rabid."

The scene on the road to Westlake is bad, but not as bad as it could have been—in no small part because so many residents had evacuated and the population is just far enough inland or on higher ground. Most buildings remain standing, though almost all are missing more or less of their shingled roofs. Road signs are bent or twisted; many billboards are shredded; the sign of the local McDonald's on Ryan Street is ripped off its frame, and the once-indoor Ronald McDonald playground is now exposed to the elements. Corrugated metal roofs have fared particularly poorly and many are now smeared across nearby fences, other storefronts or just spread out whole or in pieces on the ground.

By 9:10 a.m., the Ohio team is gathering at a Westlake Shell station across from some massive Conoco Phillips chemical tanks and a Burger King. "I'm going to try to work squads toward each other so when you meet you'll know you're done," says Mitch Ross, a team leader briefing the search groups on what part of the town they'll take. The local police and fire chiefs arrive with Westlake Mayor Dudley Dixon, who says he had no idea the Ohio USAR team was coming but thanks them for being there. Dixon gives the team what proves to be its most important briefing point of the day, about the downed power lines that entangle so many of the residential streets. "Everything you see in Westlake is dead," he says. "Don't go pulling on it, but it's dead."

Finally, the squads move out. One includes firefighters Mark Bond, Joey Lykins and Barry Mesley, a "hazmat" specialist from the Miami Township emergency rescue service who will operate the "AC hot stick," a crucial device which beeps a certain way if a power line is live. Within a few blocks they encounter the first set of fallen trees that will have to be moved. Bond hauls out a plus-sized Stihl chainsaw while his partners ready the winch and help move the logs.

While they are working, Debra Derouen, 37, walks up in a pink lace-trimmed tank top and jean shorts. She says the group is the first set of government responders to visit the street.

"You OK?" asks one of the guys.

"Got my family. Got most of my animals out."

A couple of young men looking to be in their early 20s come up, one wearing a cap with the "M" logo of McNeese State. "Our house got broken into," one says.

"You sure it isn't just wind damage?" Bond asks.

"It's got footprints."

Still, looting is a matter for the local police, and the USAR squad presses on.

"Mobile homes don't fare well, do they?" says Lykins, as they pass what appears to have been an abandoned trailer that has been wrecked and tossed on its side. Around the corner, Bond stops the big white Chevy 2500HD pickup again. A tree has crushed the roof of a good-sized bungalow, easily enough damage to have incapacitated anyone inside. "We got cars" in the driveway, he says. "We better do a check," says Lykins. The trio gets out to search, forcing their way in through the front door with a Haligan, a classic fireman's tool that resembles a crowbar with various edges at different angles. "Anybody here?" Inside, the ceiling and roof rafters and insulation are piled on the bed and exercise bike

in one bedroom, and the bunk beds in another. But no people.

If someone doesn't answer, they're either evacuated, dead or don't want to be found—all of which are matters for local authorities, neighbors and family to worry about. USAR teams are concerned only about human life in imminent danger. They are not part of the FEMA or Red Cross food and ice delivery operations, and they are not counseling teams. The teams generally force entry only if a place has been crushed or they see other signs that someone may be injured inside. They leave behind an "X" spray-painted in orange with a code denoting that the Ohio USAR task force has been there and hasn't found anyone.

Though they'd been told not to get out of the car unless they were virtually certain a person was in danger, the group finds itself stopping quite often, whether for downed trees or houses with crushed roofs. On Hobson Street, Mary Rasmussen, 61, comes out to declare that she's "been through many a storm, but nothing like this." Between drags on her cigarette, she tells of a Miss Carry who is between 90 and 100 years old, refused to leave for Rita and is all alone in her little home around the corner. Lykins goes and knocks on the door, and a wizened old woman in a pink nightgown answers the door. "I have water. I don't have no power," she says, insisting she's fine. Is she on any medicine? No, she says—which Lykins says is highly unusual for someone of her evident age. He makes a note to flag her for more attention from the local authorities, and moves on.

The USAR teams are where the workings of an inter-governmental bureaucracy are converted from local and state needs to federal action. Because the Feds feel they can't unilaterally move into a locality until they're told what the needs are, there's a lot of waiting involved, which doesn't sit well with the firefighters. The Ohio team stayed at the Reliant Center sports arena in Houston from Friday night, as the storm gathered off the shore and then struck, until around 7 p.m. Saturday to finally get word on whether they were headed to Lake Charles or Port Arthur—or home to Ohio. Even then, as the group broke camp and was ready to roll in 16 minutes, "we still haven't gotten the order—officially," said Aungst, rolling his eyes. Later, Dennis Waldbillig of Cincinnati explains. "We're all get up and go type of guys, and sitting around is tough. But we have to wait for the storm to quit," he says. Then "they got to find the places that we're needed. Once you find them, we're going to get to it."

That afternoon, two six-member squads are sent to search an area that was previously wetlands with numerous residents and businesses, but after Rita, now resembles an island near Cameron Parish. The plan is to insert USAR teams by Coast Guard helicopter. They'll be searching some 300 to 400 residential structures and 40 to 80 commercial buildings in a 2.5 square-mile area. The FEMA liaison, Capt. Larry Collins of the Los Angeles Fire Department, says an air survey showed 80-100% destruction, "nothing but slabs" in parts of the area.

Reall warns the six-member team to be ready to bivouac overnight, as the Coast Guard pilots are on the verge of exhausting their flight hours. "It was wetlands that were isolated. It's now an island. There may not even be anywhere you can lay down," Reall says. The group packs sledgehammers, MREs and medical kits. They're ready in a jiffy, and then they wait. Talk turns to food. "You plan on eating alligator?" one team member asks Lt. Chuck Wagoner of the West Chester, Ohio, Fire Department, pointing at a huge knife hung on Wagoner's shoulder strap. "Trust me. They're nice to have," says the tall and stocky former Navy SEAL. "It's for two-legged animals as well as four." Once shuttled to the Lake Charles Municipal Airport the group sits for an hour or more awaiting helicopters to transport them. "It's get geared up and then you wait," says Bond. "Unfortunately, that's how disasters work."

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