



ALPA PILOTS RUSH TO THE RESCUE

Volunteers' response to hurricane
is a breath of fresh air.

By Susan Burke, Contributing Writer

The days following Hurricane Katrina's disastrous siege of the Gulf Coast turned out to be some of the best of times for untold numbers of ALPA pilots who shepherded hurricane victims through the worst of times.

The Category 4 hurricane made landfall in New Orleans on Monday, August 29, and levees started giving way, flooding 80 percent of the city. A mandatory evacuation order had been issued, but many people in the poorer sections of the city had no transportation and nowhere to go. The storm spread through Louisiana and Mississippi, killing more than 1,000 and leaving many thousands homeless.

ALPA pilots brought their individual skills and resources to situations of dire need. They flew airplanes that carried evacuees and supplies; coordinated relief efforts for charities, churches, and governments; donated supplies and financial assistance; and did backbreaking work on the ground, where the disaster was up close and personal. Many of them were profoundly affected by their experience. As First Officer Tim Turis (Delta) said, "It was the most rewarding 11 days of my life."

These are just some of the stories that ALPA pilots who responded to one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history have told *Air Line Pilot*.

Air lifts

More than a dozen U.S. airlines, plus military units, contributed equipment and crews to fly refugees out of New Orleans. On the Friday after the hurricane, Capt. John Eriksen (Delta) flew the second airplane that his airline sent to New Orleans Moisant International Airport.

"We were told that about 4,000 passengers were in the

terminal," Capt. Eriksen said. "Our biggest problem was trying to get direction from somebody. We had a heck of a time trying to figure out what we were supposed to do. They were trying to maintain a passenger manifest, but it turned out to be just a list of who was leaving New Orleans. I think that's how a lot of people got separated—they walked out on the ramp and just got on an airplane.

"The first load was mainly people who could walk and children who sat on laps. Everyone was very thankful and very docile—we didn't have a tiny hint of a problem.

"The biggest thing the passengers wanted was ice, and air conditioning.

"The flight attendants were great. One spent time listening to people's stories—they needed to talk and have someone hear them. Another made sure people had what they needed.

"We flew to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, [Tex.], which was no better organized than New Orleans. It took an excruciatingly long time to get the stairs hooked up, to get fuel, to get the paperwork done.

"Someone figured that Delta was doing a good job of handling people in bad shape, so on our second flight, we had people who couldn't walk. Four air marshals were on every flight out, and they carried people down the ramp and up onto the plane.

"It was sad how the offloading took place. The San Antonio Police Department told the passengers, 'If you have contraband, leave it on the airplane, and line up your belongings in front of you.' People stood out in the baking sun. Carry-off passengers on the second flight were lined up at 3 in the morning with dogs sniffing their belongings.

"One passenger, a former FAA tower controller, had been on the freeway overpass for three days, and at 3 a.m.



Two days into the evacuation of New Orleans, Capt. Mike Cross (US Airways) shot this photo at MSY, reflecting the disorder that marked the urgency of getting people out.

on the ramp, he wanted to tell me a joke he used to tell captains. Some people can handle stress very well. He really stood out in this misery.

“Ninety-nine percent of these folks had never been on an airplane before. One lady, wearing a dirty nightgown, was so apologetic. I told her, ‘Look, this is not your fault, just relax. We are happy to be getting you someplace safe.’”

First Officer Chris Chinman (United), on military leave in the Reserves at Naval Air Station North Island, flew relief flights with the U.S. Navy logistics wing. His crew flew 100 Seabees from Point Mugu to Biloxi to help with reconstruction and then were directed to New Orleans, the first Navy VR asset to support the evacuation.

“We took 100 people to Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio,” he said. “They looked weary and were probably frightened, confused, maybe not sure of their destination. But when they got in their seats, their shoulders relaxed—at least they were going somewhere.”

“We took 60 more people from New Orleans to Kelly. Airplanes and crews from our command brought in more TSA people and federal air marshals and went to Norfolk to pick up SEAL teams and their rip [rigid inflatable] boats.”

“It was somber, but at the same time inspiring, to be involved in that endeavor.”

The week after the hurricane struck, Capt. Mike Adams (Alaska) was longing to be more than a spectator. When he heard Alaska might do some relief flying, he put his name on the volunteer list and waited. Finally, a late-night e-mail summoned him to a meeting the next morning. “I got up, my wife made a really nice breakfast for me, and my oldest son drove me to the airport,” he said.

Hours later, he was on his way to Oklahoma City to await further orders. He left at sunset and flew into a pitch-black New Orleans.

“The whole airport was being run by federal air marshals,” Capt. Adams said. “They did a great job. Within

two minutes, we started boarding people and headed for Austin. People were shocked, dazed, and numb. Some were in their stocking feet, carrying plastic bags. One had a little bird in a cage. It was touching to see how little these people had. They were very polite and orderly. When they sat down, it became dead quiet.

“Austin had a greeting area, with water and food for the passengers. Huge buses were set up to take them where they were going.”

Capt. Adams returned to New Orleans, flew another trip, then headed home.

“All of us from Alaska were there for free, and the company donated the airplane,” he said. “It was the best use of an airplane I’ve ever made.”

Capt. Mike Cross and First Officer Steve Greif (both US Airways) signed on when their airline asked for volunteers to fly relief missions. On Labor Day weekend, they got the call to fly from Charlotte, N.C., to New Orleans.

“We had four flight attendants, four customer service

“Ninety-nine percent of these folks had never been on an airplane before. One lady, wearing a dirty nightgown, was so apologetic. I told her, ‘Look, this is not your fault, just relax. We are happy to be getting you someplace safe.’”

—Capt. John Eriksen (Delta)

agents, and a mechanic,” Capt. Cross said. “Plus we loaded several pallets of water, snacks, and maintenance supplies. We were a self-sufficient aircraft.” By the end of the holiday weekend, they had made four trips, two of them of their own devising.

In New Orleans, they picked up four air marshals, which brought their crew to 15. The airport “was a chaotic situation,” Capt. Cross said, but finally the passengers were boarded and taken to Lackland Air Force Base.

Their next trip was to Montgomery, Ala., where a wealthy Austrian from Canada was waiting to bus as many as 500 evacuees to his three-story facility at a race-track in West Palm Beach, Fla. But F/O Greif wondered at the time, “‘Why were we flying these people to Montgomery?’ For the next flight, we were able to change FEMA plans so that we flew straight to West Palm Beach.”

Aided by influential people back in Charlotte, they were also able to fly a plane full of passengers to US Airways’

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main hub, where the people of Charlotte were opening their homes to evacuees. “When we landed, we had a huge reception, with TV crews,” F/O Greif said.

He remembers one passenger’s bag was so heavy that a baggage handler couldn’t lift it. “It turned out it was a bag of change. It was all he could bring—his piggy bank.”

The 3 days were “sad and happy and frustrating and rewarding,” he said. “What impressed me most was the number of volunteers. I felt really fortunate to be able to participate and grateful to US Airways for making it happen. Mike Cross is our LEC chairman in Charlotte, and I was glad I could talk and fly with him.”

As for Capt. Cross, the crew’s spirit of togetherness was as important as their good work. “We really bonded,” he said. “Everybody forgot the hardships we’ve endured over the past five years. It put everything in perspective.”

Supply chain

People weren’t the only cargo that had to be moved after the hurricane. ALPA pilots helped deliver much-needed supplies as well.

An intelligence officer in the Air Force Reserve, First Officer Mark Bolleter (Continental) was scheduled to go to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, La., for his reserve work, when it became a FEMA staging area after the hurricane. So he changed gears and manned the communications center, coordinating the delivery of tents, generators, and sanitation supplies.

“I’m from New Orleans originally,” he said, “and I have three family members who lost their homes. That was the hard part.

“But the biggest challenge was where to house the FEMA people. Few places were available to put them, because Shreveport was saturated with evacuees.”

After the hurricane, Independence Air employees asked the company how they could help on the Gulf Coast, said Capt. Cary Yates, an instructor pilot. “We don’t serve that area, but the company learned that an AME [African Methodist Episcopal] church in Washington [D.C.] had two tractor-trailer loads of donations but

didn’t have any way to get them down there.

“The company called me and [Capt.] John Badger, pulled an aircraft off a Florida route, and somebody in Miami paid for the fuel to go to Baton Rouge. We took some mechanics, and 10 rampers to help unload. We bulked out the cargo hold, and 30 members of the church and a news crew went with us.

“You see all the devastation on TV, but you don’t see the faces as much. One lady, a teacher, said she was living hour by hour, just trying to get the basics of life.”

First Officer David Stricklin (Delta) worked for 2 weeks as the “shipping and receiving guy” at Meadowbrook Church of Christ’s hurricane ministry in Jackson, Miss.

“Our church was serving shelters here and farther south,” F/O Stricklin said. Through Internet appeals, “we took in food, baby supplies, blankets, cots, tents, paper goods. Ten different shelters in town were checking with us on a daily basis.

“Had it not been for the churches, I don’t know what would have happened. The churches had no red tape. They got the stuff to where it was needed as soon as possible. All of the stuff we sit around and worry about, it did not matter.”

Capt. Jay Schnedorf (Midwest Express), his pilot group’s MEC chairman and an ALPA executive vice-president,



COURTESY OF CAPT. DON BUENEMAN (POLAR AIR CARGO)

Capt. Don Bueneman (Polar Air Cargo), second from right, and Larry Bordish, center, pose with Bordish’s Cessna Skymaster and the dialysis patients whom they transported under the auspices of Operation Brother’s Keeper.

lives outside Memphis, where the American Red Cross was looking for help as evacuees from the Gulf poured into the area. One need was toiletry items.

"I put together a letter to the pilot group and recruited AFA flight attendants and the Skyway pilot group, and we collected soap, shampoo, and conditioner," Capt. Schnedorf said. "We made three deliveries over three weeks, about 250 pounds total.

"It was an easy way for crewmembers to help out, and I was surprised by how genuinely appreciative the Red Cross was. I wouldn't have thought something of that nature would be so valued, but it was."

A spontaneous spirit

Pilots' imagination and initiative went a long way toward providing effective relief.

Capt. Don Bueneman (Polar Air Cargo) and First Officer Alicia Hayes (Delta) were among many pilots who helped out at Operation Brother's Keeper, a clearinghouse to dispatch pilots and their privately owned airplanes with transport and medical aid for hurricane victims. The project was conceived by pilot/entrepreneur Milo Pinckney in Atlanta, Ga., just days before the hurricane struck, and used the Internet to recruit pilots.

F/O Hayes served as a flight coordinator on the ground, matching pilots with travelers and informing pilots of conditions and procedures. "It was amazing what we were able to do," she said. "It was loosely organized and a mess in its own way—we used Post-It notes as a flight tracking system—but people offered what they could, from piloting to clerical skills, volunteering their time or their airplane or both. Nobody cared about getting recognized, they just wanted to get things done."

Capt. Bueneman, who lives in Miami and has a Cessna 172, saw the link to Operation Brother's Keeper on the Cessna Pilot Association's web board while on a trip to Korea.

"I called the command center and talked to [Capt.] Randy Cash, who's a simulator instructor at Atlantic Southeast," Capt. Bueneman said. "I got home on September 9. They needed to fly a hangarful of medical supplies in Tampa, Fla., to Hammond, La. I carried what I could in my little Cessna. Larry Bordish, a Skymaster pilot, and I spent the night with a pastor who was running a shelter in Hammond. Brother's Keeper worked with faith-based organizations but had the government's permission to fly into these areas.

"The next day a call came in to fly two dialysis patients and a young girl from Houma, La., to Atlanta. We used the Skymaster instead of my 172 so they could bring their

bags, which were all they had left. These were medical patients, so I volunteered to fly copilot, so Larry wouldn't have his hands too full. One of the patients was really scared of flying, but we talked awhile and she calmed down. We gave them a nice ride to Atlanta.

"It was probably the most fulfilling experience I've ever had. These people didn't know me from Adam, but they were so grateful."

The next trip ferried two young men, carrying trash bags and backpacks, from Baton Rouge to their families



RAY CROWELL PAGE ONE

Delta MEC chairman and New Orleans resident Capt. Lee Moak tells ALPA's Executive Board how he and F/O Brady Muth (FedEx) guided Capt. Moak's neighbors out of the 4-foot-high waters surrounding their homes. Capt. Moak thanked ALPA for the Emergency Relief Fund, which is helping ALPA pilots affected by the storm.

in Atlanta. "Both looked like they could take care of themselves in the roughest neighborhood," Capt. Bueneman said, "but they were the most polite gentlemen I've ever met—humble, gracious, very soft-spoken. One told me, 'Everything I own is in that trash bag.' But he was so excited that he was going to Atlanta, where he could get a job and start fresh."

Capt. Bueneman flew with Pinckney on another mission, piloting Pinckney's Navajo, an airplane Capt. Bueneman hadn't flown in 20 years. He ended his 5 days with OBK working as a flight coordinator in Atlanta.

"On the 16th," he said, "I arrived back in Miami to find that Polar pilots had gone out on strike. First thing Monday morning, I was walking a picket line."

F/O Tim Turis—Navy veteran, degree in building construction—watched the hurricane news from his home in Atlanta and finally told himself, "I can't watch this any longer without doing something."

So he stocked up on water, tarps, tools—everything he would need to be self-sufficient for a month—and hit the road. He headed first for Pascagoula, to help a friend repair his elderly mother's wind-damaged roof in the



blazing Mississippi sun. Then he pressed westward.

"I got as far as Ocean Springs and stopped a policeman," F/O Turis said. "'Here I am,' I told him. 'These are my skills, and I'm ready to work.' He pointed me to the Sheriff's Department, which pointed me to the Fire Department, who pointed me to FEMA, who wanted to put me on the payroll. I said no, I was here to volunteer."

So he continued on to devastated Biloxi. "TV shows you a 10-degree arc of what's going on. When you see 360 degrees, holy criminy! I saw a three-story set of stairs going nowhere. Take everything out of your house and throw it on the beach, mix it up with sand, rotting vegetation, mud, and dead dogs, and that's what it was like.

"So I pulled into a parking lot where I saw a bunch of police officers, and said, 'Hey, guys, here's what I can do.' They weren't sure about me. Then I saw the corporal handing out ammunition—I had my own ammunition, 5,000 rounds—and I asked if he needed any. 'How much can you give us?' he asked, and that broke the ice. They hooked me up with the Bay Vista Baptist Church down the road.

"This humble Baptist church in Biloxi serving poor people welcomed me with open arms. It's not FEMA that's doing the work—the volunteers and churches are carrying the load. FEMA told them, 'You're not trained for this,' and they said, 'O.K.,' and kept on rolling. They didn't have a 'plan'—any planning you did would change every 20 minutes. They were addressing what was in front of them, which was 5,000 damaged homes.

"The most remarkable thing was that there was no power struggle, no one said, 'I don't want to do that, that's beneath me.' I was cutting trees off people's houses, and whether it was tree work or cleaning the nastiest, stinkiest mud out of someone's house, if they needed 10 volunteers, they had 20—people from all over—a retired North Carolina businessman, plain country folk from Tupelo, Mississippi.

"The church had sustained damage, but that was not their priority. They were worried about helping the people around them. The assembly building was turned into a grocery store, and donations would just show up. Volunteers, including a girl in a motorized wheelchair, sorted stuff as it came in.

Someone would put a can of soup on her wheelchair table, she'd drive it over to the pantry, and someone would take it off.

"I was cutting trees at a trailer park. Some people were living there under a tarp, their trailer destroyed. The trailer next door was livable, but they couldn't get to it—a tree had fallen on it. We recruited kids from the neighborhood to drag limbs away while we tackled the tree. After we got the place unburied, this little girl, living in poverty, came up and gave me a can of Pringle's potato chips, saying, 'I want to thank you for helping us here.'

"And there was 82-year-old Mr. Leon, whose wife just passed away. A huge oak tree had landed on his house; you couldn't even see it. I got 80 percent of the tree taken out before it got dark, and I had raked a path to his front door. He started sobbing because he couldn't believe people were here just to help and didn't want anything for it."

F/O Turis said everything he saw in Biloxi put a new light on the problems at Delta, which had just entered bankruptcy. "It's why, when I see what's going on at Delta, I feel like I don't belong here anymore. I belong in the Delta that was a family.

"I just up and went to Biloxi, and I didn't know what I was getting into, and I didn't know if they would let me in. If they hadn't, I would have dropped off the supplies I brought and come home.

"But they did let me in. And it was an honor and a privilege." 🌊



F/O Tim Turis (Delta), far left, wields a chain saw with other volunteers from Bay View Baptist Church to clear hurricane-downed trees in Biloxi, Miss.

COURTESY OF F/O TIM TURIS (DELATA)