

Testimony of Warren J. Riley

Superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department

before the

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Monday, February 6, 2006, 2:00 p.m.

To the Honorable Senator Collins as Chairperson, Senator Lieberman as Ranking Member, and to all members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security... Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak to you directly on behalf of the men and women of the New Orleans Police Department.

I am Warren Riley, Superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department. I was sworn in as Superintendent on November 28, 2005. When Hurricane Katrina struck, I was the second ranking officer under then Superintendent Edwin Compass. As the Chief Operations Officer, I was responsible for all field units, criminal investigations, and proactive crime fighting strategies and activities within the New Orleans Police Department. Over seventy percent of the New Orleans Police Department came under my direct command. When Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the NOPD had a force of 1,668 sworn officers. Again, I appreciate this opportunity to inform you on how we planned for and managed the crises that occurred as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

To begin, on Saturday, August 27, 2005, at about 7:30 a.m., I received a call from the Director of Homeland Security and Public Safety for the City of New Orleans, Colonel Terry Ebbert, and was instructed to meet him at City Hall as soon as possible. When I arrived at City Hall, I was met by Colonel Ebbert, Deputy Superintendent Steven Nicholas, the Assistant Chief for the Technical and Support Bureau, and Superintendent Edwin Compass. At that meeting, we were advised by Colonel Ebbert that Hurricane Katrina would in fact impact New Orleans in a drastic way. After a brief conversation with Colonel Ebbert, then Superintendent Compass called for an immediate Command Staff meeting. We met with every commander and most of the assistant commanders of each division and major unit within the New Orleans Police Department. That meeting began at 10:00 a.m. that same Saturday morning.

We advised the Command Staff that Hurricane Katrina was expected to be a very severe storm - Category 3 or 4, and we would possibly be in the direct path of the storm. We informed the Command Staff that Hurricane Katrina might in fact, cause substantial wind damage and possible street flooding.

The NOPD maintains an Emergency Preparedness Plan, which is reviewed and revised annually prior to hurricane season. The Plan outlines the requirements, duties and responsibilities of each respective Bureau Chief and major command within the department. The Plan was reviewed prior to the first meeting with the departmental commanders, and a summary outline was provided to commanders during the 10am briefing on Saturday, August 27th. The primary duties and requirements were discussed at that time.

All Commanders were instructed to, first and foremost, ensure their officers provide for the safety of their families. As per instructions from then Superintendent Compass, commanders were advised to be prepared for storm duty by 4pm on Sunday, August 28th. Vehicles were to be fueled and a limited number of vehicles were to remain in service. The remainder of the fleet was to be stored in prearranged, designated locations above ground where commanders believed they were safe and easily accessible. Those commanders who believed that they did not have, within their geographic districts, suitable parking facilities, were instructed to place the vehicles in one of two designated parking garages in the Louisiana Superdome. Our own limited number of full-size SUV's remained in service.

On Sunday, August 28th, we continued communications with all of the various commanders, assuring that all necessary actions were being taken in preparation for the storm. Later that day, Mayor Nagin announced a mandatory evacuation of all citizens in the City of New Orleans.

The responsibility of the New Orleans Police Department was to traverse all areas of the city with marked units, lights and sirens on, announcing through their public address systems that there was a mandatory evacuation – that all citizens must leave – must evacuate – the City of New Orleans. Officers were staged at numerous locations around the city, where bus transportation was provided to transport citizens to the Louisiana Superdome. This effort continued until storm winds reached 50-55 mph, at which time all officers were directed to relocate to their pre-staged locations to weather the storm.

On Sunday night, August 28th, I, along with members of my staff and Assistant Superintendent Steven Nicholas, reported to Police Headquarters. We prepared to weather the storm with our staffs, all essential communications personnel, recruits, and other units, as well as civilian employees, and family members.

Strong storm winds began to roll in about 5:30 Monday morning. I was in my office on the 5th floor of Police Headquarters and as I looked out of my window, I could see the wind. If you can imagine seeing the wind – that is how strong it was. I could hear the wind blowing, and hear the tornadoes coming. Once, sometimes twice in an hour. I knew they were tornadoes because they sounded like a freight train passing. Sometimes, that sound was too close for comfort.

As I was looking out of my office window, the window started to leak. The ceiling tiles began to fall and the entire frame for the window blinds came out of the ceiling. At that point we all moved from offices into the hallways.

At about 7 a.m. I went down to the communication section on the 2nd floor to contact my commanders and get a status report. When I walked into Communications, almost every Dispatcher and 911 Operator was crying. I asked one of the supervisors what was going on? She stated, “Chief, you have to listen in on the calls.” I was given a headset.

I did not know that only moments earlier, the Industrial Canal levee breached and had an almost two hundred yard opening and water was now pouring into the Lower 9th Ward. As I listened, I heard panicking mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and children desperately pleading and begging for help. They were asking if there were boats or helicopters available. They had water rising in their homes. Some of them were stating:

- “ I can’t swim!”
- “My babies can’t swim!”
- “My husband has drowned, please help me!”
- “The water’s to my neck and I can’t swim!”
- “Oh my God, the wind just blew my husband off the roof!”
- “GOD, please help me!!!”

When the water hit the Lower 9th Ward, it went from nothing to as high as 14 feet within twenty-three minutes.

We had over 600 - “911” calls within 23 minutes. The calls came in as the streets flooded from West to East. Water flowed down the streets, from - Jordan Road, Tennessee Street, Flood Street and into St. Bernard Parish.

Understand, our Dispatchers and 911 Operators heard the desperate pleas for help, but were powerless to assist. They could not dispatch officers because the weather conditions were too dangerous. We still had sustained winds in excess of 100 mph. Pursuant to the Emergency Preparedness Plan, we cannot respond to emergency calls once sustained winds are greater than 55 mph.

Around 9:30 a.m. that day, the levees in Lakeview breached and more desperate calls came from citizens trapped in their homes. Later that morning, the water overtopped the levees in Eastern New Orleans and then the London Avenue Canal breached.

As the day wore on, we learned that close to three hundred police officers assigned to the Fifth, Third and Seventh Districts were now stranded by flood water. Their vehicles were under anywhere from 8 to 13 feet of water and the officers had to be rescued. It took from 24 to 48 hours to rescue all three districts.

We had over 80 off-duty officers stranded on rooftops and in attics for many days.

The 3rd, the 5th and the 7th Districts were all located in three different medical facilities – two hospitals and a dental school – that were from 6-8 stories tall. When the generator failed at one of the hospitals, the 5th District personnel assisted medical staff in efforts to provide life support. The 5th and the 7th insured that patients were evacuated from those medical facilities prior to leaving. The 3rd and the 7th Districts had to be rescued due to high water. The 5th District walked out in chest deep water. All three of those units lost vehicles that were staged for their later use, due to high water.

The 1st, 2nd and 6th Districts immediately began to respond to 911 calls and assist in rescue operations. These officers also secured heavy equipment from work sites throughout the area and began removing obstructions from major streets, so that officers could respond. The 4th and 8th Districts, which did not sustain flooding immediately, deployed anti-looting units to shopping areas and businesses.

Using the three boats that we have, Special Operations Division began water rescue operations and responded to 911 calls. At this time, many officers, using their own personal boats, joined in to assist with rescue operations. The bottom line is - we shifted from traditional police response to search and rescue. Our priority was to save as many lives as possible.

We had numerous calls for assistance from off-duty officers who were not expected to report to work until 4:00 p.m.

Let me give you one real example of what our officers went through.

Very early in the morning, while the winds were still very strong, we received via police radio, a call for assistance from Officer Chris Abbott, who lived in Eastern New Orleans.

Officer Abbott advised that he was in his attic, water was up to his chest, and the water was rising very fast.

He stated, "I'm getting tired. I don't know if I'm going to make it this time." Officer Abbott had been shot in the line of duty twice before.

Captain Jimmy Scott, Commander of the 1st District and former SWAT commander, and now a Deputy Chief, began to communicate with Officer Abbott. He told Officer Abbott that he could make it, to hang on. He asked Officer Abbott to find the attic vent. Officer Abbott stated that he was near the attic vent. Capt. Scott instructed him to attempt to push or punch out the attic vent. Officer Abbott after several attempts stated he tried but he couldn't. He said again, "I don't think I'm going to make it. I'm getting very tired." He then began to thank everyone on the department for all that they had done for him.

At that time, Captain Scott asked if he had his weapon and if he had all of his rounds. Officer Abbott stated he had his weapon and all 45 rounds. Captain Scott instructed him to carefully fire each round around the base of the attic vent. Captain Scott advised him to "shoot them all." There was then no response from Officer Abbott for about 5 minutes. Many officers listened as officers continued to ask, "Chris, are you there? Are you OK?" After about 5 minutes Officer Abbott advised, "I'm halfway out. I'm going to make it."

Imagine the joyful relief of the many officers listening, including those who were stranded in other desperate situations.

And this is only one of the many adversities and challenges that the men and women of the New Orleans Police Department overcame.

In closing, there are many other heroic stories that were never told and may never have an opportunity to be expressed.

Much has been said about officers abandoning their position during the storm, and it is true that about 147 officers abandoned their positions. However, they are no longer a part of the New Orleans Police Department.

Our dedicated officers are still working hard every day. Eighty percent of our officers lost homes; families were displaced; some are living on a ship, in trailers, or elsewhere, separated from spouses and children and seeing their families only every three or four weeks.

Admittedly, we did not handle everything perfectly. We hold ourselves accountable. We are working to ensure that lessons learned are implemented in our future Emergency Preparedness Plan.

Madam Chair, Senator Lieberman and all of the members of this Homeland Security Senate Committee, one thing you should know is that 91 percent of the members of the New Orleans Police Department **PROTECTED, SACRIFICED, SERVED, PRAYED, AND STAYED** all the way through Katrina and its seemingly endless devastation.

I am now prepared to answer your questions....