

KATRINA: THE STORM WE'VE ALWAYS FEARED

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HURRICANE EDITION

CATASTROPHIC

STORM SURGE SWAMPS 9TH WARD, ST. BERNARD

LAKEVIEW LEVEE BREACH THREATENS TO INUNDATE CITY



By Bruce Nolan
Staff writer

Hurricane Katrina struck metropolitan New Orleans on Monday with a staggering blow, far surpassing Hurricane Betsy, the landmark disaster of an earlier generation. The storm flooded huge swaths of the city, as well as Slidell on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, in a process that appeared to be spreading even as night fell.

A powerful storm surge pushed huge waves ahead of the hurricane, flooding much of St. Bernard Parish and New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward, just as Betsy 40 years ago. But this time the flooding was more extensive, spreading upriver as well to cover parts of the Bywater, Marigny and Tremé neighborhoods.

As with Betsy, people scrambled into their attics or atop their roofs, pleading for help from the few passers-by.

The powerful Category 4 storm crossed the coast near the mouth of the Pearl River shortly after daybreak with winds of 135 mph. Naval Air Station-Joint Reserve Base in Belle Chasse reported an early morning gust of 105 mph.

With the power out throughout the area and fierce winds raging throughout the day, officials barely began Monday to assess the full damage of the monstrous storm, which was expected to leave thousands homeless and many more coping with damage from the wind and water.

Meantime, 5 miles to the west, engineers worked to close a breach along the New Orleans side of the 17th Street Canal.

Huge drainage pumps ordinarily can drive millions of gallons of rainwater uphill through

STAFF PHOTO BY ALEX BRANDON

NINTH WARD: An elderly resident is rescued from chest-high floodwaters by two New Orleans police officers.

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Flooding wipes out two communities

By Brian Thevenot
and Manuel Torres
Staff writers

As Jerry Rayes piloted his boat down St. Claude Avenue, just past the Industrial Canal, the eerie screams that could barely be heard from the roadway grew louder as, one by one, faces of desperate families appeared on rooftops, on balconies and in windows, some of them waving white flags.

The scene wouldn't change for the next three hours, as Rayes and his son and nephew boated down St. Claude Avenue and deep into St. Bernard Parish, where water smothered two-story houses, people and animals. The men had to duck to miss streetlights that towered over Judge Perez Drive, the parish's main thoroughfare.

The people Rayes rescued all told the same story, already written on their stunned and shivering

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INSIDE

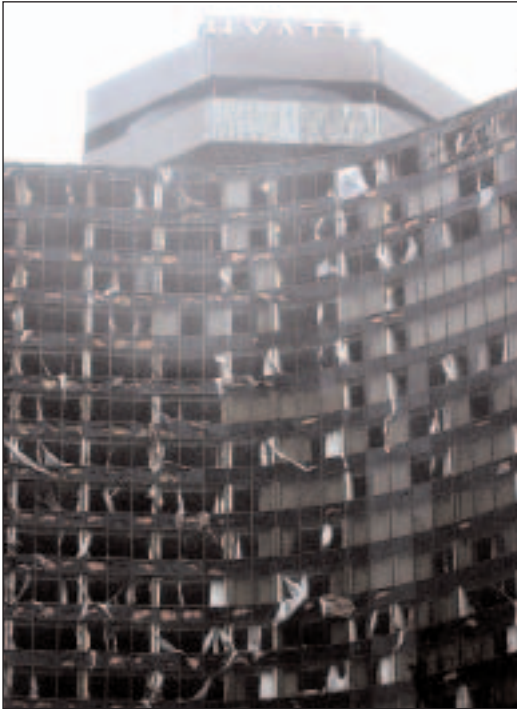


PHOTO BY A.J. SISCO

DOWNTOWN: The damage to the Hyatt Regency on Poydras Street shows that vertical evacuation is no solution to the dangers of a Category 4 hurricane. See story, A-15

After the mighty storm came the rising water

By Doug MacCash
and James O'Byrne
Staff writers

A large section of the vital 17th Street Canal levee, where it connects to the brand new 'hurricane proof' Old Hammond Highway bridge, gave way late Monday morning in Bucktown after Katrina's fiercest winds were well north. The breach sent a churning sea of water from Lake Pontchartrain coursing across Lakeview and into Mid-City, Carrollton, Gentilly, City Park and neighborhoods farther south and east.

As night fell on a devastated region, the water was still rising in the city, and nobody was willing to predict when it would stop. After the destruction already apparent in the wake of Katrina, the American Red Cross was mobilizing for what regional officials were calling the largest recovery operation in the or-

ganization's history.

Police officers, firefighters and private citizens, hampered by a lack of even rudimentary communication capabilities, continued a desperate and impromptu boat-borne rescue operation across Lakeview well after dark. Coast Guard helicopters with searchlights criss-crossed the skies.

Officers working on the scene said virtually every home and business between the 17th Street Canal and the Marconi Canal, and between Robert E. Lee Boulevard and City Park Avenue, had water in it. Nobody had confirmed any fatalities as a result of the levee breach, but they conceded that hundreds of homes had not been checked.

As the sun set over a still-rolling Lake Pontchartrain, the smoldering ruins of the Southern Yacht Club were still burning, and smoke streamed out over

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'We lost everything: cars, art, furniture, everything'



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG MACCASH

LAKEVIEW: Firefighters deliver residents they had rescued to the levee near the corner of Orleans and Filmore avenues.

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the lake. Nobody knew the cause of the fire because nobody could get anywhere near it to find out what happened.

Dozens of residents evacuated to the dry land of the Filmore Street bridge over the Marconi Canal were stranded between the flooded neighborhood on their right, and the flooded City Park on their left, hours after they had been plucked from rooftops or second-story windows.

Firefighters who saved them tried to request an RTA bus to come for the refugees, but realized was no working communications to do so.

Ed Gruber, who lives in the 6300 block of Canal Boulevard, said he became desperate when the rising water chased him, his wife, Helen, and their neighbor Mildred K. Harrison to the second floor of their home. When Gruber saw a boat pass by, he flagged it down with a light, and the three of them escaped from a second-story window.

On the lakefront, pleasure boats were stacked on top of each other like cordwood in the municipal marina and yacht harbor. The Robert E. Lee shopping center was under 7 feet of water. Plantation Coffeehouse on Canal Boulevard was the same. Hynes Elementary School had 8 feet of water inside.

Indeed, the entire business district along Harrison Avenue had water to the rooflines in many places.

Joshua Bruce, 19, was watching the tide rise from his home on Pontalba Street when he heard a woman crying for help. The woman had apparently tried to wade the surging waters on Canal Boulevard when she was swept beneath the railroad trestle just south of Interstate 610. Bruce said he plunged into the water to pull her to safety. He and friends Gregory Sontag and Joey LaFrance found dry clothes for the woman and she went on her way in search of a second-story refuge downtown.

The effect of the breach was instantly devastating to residents who had survived the fiercest of Katrina's winds and storm surge intact, only to be taken by surprise by the sudden deluge. And it added a vast swath of central New Orleans to those already flooded in eastern New Orleans, the Lower 9th Ward and St.



STAFF PHOTO BY JAMES O'BYRNE

LAKEVIEW: At sunset Monday, the listing old Coast Guard station was silhouetted against the smoldering remains of the Southern Yacht Club.

Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. Beginning at midday, Lakeview residents watched in horror as the water began to rise, pushed through the levee breach by still-strong residual winds from Katrina.

They struggled to elevate furniture and eventually found themselves forced to the refuge of second floors just when most in the neighborhood thought they had been spared.

"It would have been fine," refugee Pat O'Brien said. "The eye passed over."

But his relief was short-lived.

"It's like what you see on TV and never thought would happen to us. We lost everything: cars, art, furniture, everything."

Scott Radish, his wife Kyle and neighbor Brandon Gioe stood forlornly on their Mound Street porch, where they had ridden out Katrina,

only to face a second, more insidious threat.

"The hurricane was scary," Scott said. "All the tree branches fell, but the building stood. I thought I was doing good. Then I noticed my Jeep was under water."

The water had risen knee-deep during the storm, but despite the clearing skies, it had continued to rise one brick every 20 minutes, according to Kyle Scott, continuing its ascent well into the night.

"We were good until the canal busted," Sontag said. "First there was water on the street, then the sidewalk, then water in the house."

Officials of the Army Corps of Engineers have contingencies for levee breaches such as the one that happened Monday, but it will take time and effort to get the heavy equipment into place to make the repair. Breach repair is part of the

corps' planning for recovery from catastrophic storms, but nobody Monday was able to say how long it would take to plug the hole, or how much water would get through it before that happened.

In Lakeview, the scene was surreal. A woman yelled to reporters from a rooftop, asking them to call her father and tell him she was OK — although fleeing to the roof of a two-story home hardly seemed to qualify.

About 5 p.m., almost as if on cue, the battery power of all the house alarms in the neighborhood seemed to reach a critical level, and they all went off, making it sound as if the area was under an air-raid warning.

Two men surviving on generator power in the Lake Terrace neighborhood near the Lake Pontchartrain levee still had a dry house, but

they were watching the rising water in the yard nervously. They were planning to head out to retrieve a vast stash of beer, champagne and hard liquor they found washed onto the levee.

As night fell, the sirens of house alarms finally fell silent, and the air filled with a different, deafening and unfamiliar sound: the extraordinary din of thousands of croaking frogs.

Still wondering if he would spend the night on the Filmore Street bridge over the Marconi Canal, Gruber tried to be philosophical.

"I never thought I would see any devastation like this, and I've lived here more than 30 years," Gruber said. "But at least we have our lives. And that's something."

Staff writer Mark Schleifstein contributed to this report.