



LT. GENERAL RUSSEL HONORÉ (RET.)

COMMANDER, JOINT TASK FORCE KATRINA, U.S. ARMY

Even with 35 years of military experience, Lt. General Russel Honoré, commander of the Katrina Joint Task Force, knew that he and his troops had the challenges of a lifetime as they surveyed the flooding of New Orleans. “Katrina didn’t do too much damage to the city. When Katrina’s surge caused the levees and floodwalls to break, that’s what did it. That was the game-changer,” he says.

Honoré and his team arrived in the city on Wednesday, before the world knew the extent of the devastation. Early, and unverified, media reports suggested that 10,000 New Orleanians perished in the flood and murders and rapes were taking place in the Superdome. By circulating throughout the city, Honoré and his team saw a different story. “My investigations didn’t match the news reports. We knew we had an enormous search and rescue and logistics operation and got to work.”

Drawing on his military background and his experience in Florida, 2004, which was hit by four major hurricanes that year, Honoré describes his role as “defender of the people. In Katrina, the New Orleans citizens were the victims and survivors. Our No. 1 job was to keep the people alive and safe.”

Logistics were especially hard. Eighty percent of the city was under water, making travel impossible at times. The airport was shut down. The city was filled with debris, and utilities were non-existent. Traffic along the interstate between New Orleans and Baton Rouge was at a standstill. At each dip in the interstate, there was flooding. Many New Orleanians were trapped on rooftops waiting to be rescued.

“Initially, volunteers from the ‘Cajun Navy’ (New Orleanians in boats, wildlife and fishery staff and south Louisiana fishermen in I.B.B.’s: Itty Bitty Boats) rescued locals from rooftops. Then the troops from the First Army and the National Guard, along with more than 200 helicopters and 20 ships, arrived,” he says. “These were people who saved life after life.”

In the weeks following the storm, First Army worked in tandem with the Louisiana National Guard in keeping the city secure. General Honoré held morning press conferences to keep citizens and the media informed. His blunt manner earned him the nickname “A Category 5 General” by the media and phrases he coined such as “Stuck on Stupid” are now part of the Katrina lore.

Today, General Honoré is retired from military life and lectures throughout the country on preparedness, something he finds lacking in most cities, and he’s written two books on leadership and preparedness. “We are getting better,” he says, “but we need well thought out plans to care for the most vulnerable populations in times of disasters.”

Memories of Katrina stay with him. He often remembers rescuing two single mothers and their three infants on the corner of Poydras Street and Convention Boulevard after the storm. He and his troops took them get medical care and hydration and then placed them on a helicopter to find safety. “I still wonder what happened to those young mothers and their babies,” he says. “I’d like to find them one day, just to know they are alright.”