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Mark Cave

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# Through Hell and High Water: New Orleans, August 29–September 15, 2005

Mark Cave

**Abstract:** In October of 2005 the Historic New Orleans Collection initiated an oral history project entitled “Through Hell and High Water: New Orleans, August 29–September 15, 2005.” The intent of the project was to capture the stories of first responders who worked in the New Orleans metropolitan area during the storm and the weeks that followed. The interview process has been linked with the after-action studies done by some of the local first-responding agencies and has provided a much-needed outlet for first responders. To date over three hundred subjects have been interviewed, and our work thus far has shown us that top-down methods of documentation do not work with an event like Katrina. The almost total loss of communications made it impossible for high-ranking members of the different agencies to control or even know what lower-ranking members were doing. As a result it will be necessary to cast a wide net in our documentation effort.

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**Keywords:** disaster medicine, disaster preparedness, Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, oral history

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**Mark Cave** is Curator of Manuscripts/Oral Historian at the Historic New Orleans Collection. He is the former chairman of the Acquisitions and Appraisal Section of the Society of American Archivists and is currently a member of the steering committee of the Oral History Section. He has published numerous articles related to the history and culture of New Orleans and is the author of a forthcoming book, *Saving Wednesday's Child: A Short History of The Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children*. E-mail: Markc@hnoc.org

In early October 2005, New Orleans was the embodiment of every postapocalyptic nightmare imagined in science fiction films. The air itself reeked; downed trees and debris still blocked many streets in the few habitable parts of the city; National Guard units patrolled once-idyllic neighborhoods; body recovery efforts were just getting under way in the Lower 9th Ward; and the greater part of one of America's

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most historic cities, along with its eastern suburbs, lay ruined, abandoned, and at night still in total darkness.

The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC), located in a complex of buildings in the city's French Quarter, was unscathed by the storm and, as a private institution funded through the Kemper and Leila Williams Foundation, was able to continue to pay its employees. At this point, five weeks after Katrina, very few residents had been able to return, and those who did felt outnumbered and sometimes in the way of the emergency response personnel who were occupying the city. The role of a local historical institution in such an environment was not clear to those of us who were able to come back. Some, of course, wanted to embrace old routines, to reestablish some normalcy in their lives; others saw the importance of the city's long history as a means to galvanize community pride and began to plan exhibits and lectures; while others feared that the scattering of our community and the uncertain future of the city might cause significant gaps in the historical record unless formal documentation efforts related to Katrina started immediately. All three of these options were indulged.

It was determined that the first stage of our formal documentation effort related to Katrina would be to capture the stories of the first responders who worked in the New Orleans metropolitan area during the storm and the weeks that followed. We entitled this effort "Through Hell and High Water, New Orleans, August 29–September 15, 2005." There was urgency from the start. It was estimated that more than 75 percent of the local first responders had lost their homes, since they predominantly lived in the middle-class neighborhoods of the destroyed Lakeview and New Orleans East sections of the city, and it was likely that many would choose to move rather than rebuild. This concern proved well founded: over four hundred New Orleans Police officers have resigned since Katrina, and many of the individuals who we interviewed early on in the project no longer live in the New Orleans area.

As this article goes to print, over three hundred subjects have been interviewed. The interview process has provided a much-needed outlet for first responders, many of whom had been discouraged by their agencies from talking about their experiences for fear that they would be misrepresented in the media, causing additional PR concerns for departments already publicly maligned for their perceived inadequacy during the response. Local agencies such as the police and fire departments have faced issues of declining manpower and shrinking budgets due to post-Katrina economic realities; as a result, the necessary intensive self-evaluation of their response to Katrina was not always feasible. Our interviews, many of which have already been transcribed, have been an important tool for the creation of departmental after-action reports and will influence the agencies' planning for future storms.

We began our effort in October 2005 with the New Orleans Police Department. Our initial efforts to establish a relationship with the department failed, probably because of the department's difficulties with the media following the storm, and the inability to distinguish what we were doing from what the media was doing. We enlisted the help of the New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, a private organization devoted to defending the interests of police officers and their families. This organization had a great deal of pull within the department and was interested in seeing that the positive contribution of the many good officers be represented in the historical record. Through the foundation's efforts we were able to establish

an ongoing relationship with the department and have subsequently been allowed into district headquarters and given access to those officers willing to share their stories.

Morale within the police department was and continues to be very low. Some have been distrustful of our project, but many have opened up, and their stories will hopefully lead historians to have some empathy for a department that was clearly overwhelmed and honor those officers who did conduct themselves heroically. Captain Kevin Anderson noted:

Since the storm, I've lost about 45 pounds. And it's not a diet I really wanted to go on. The stress started then [Katrina] ... I think maybe once we get past the one year anniversary it may get better. But it has been very difficult. I had to take two officers' guns from them. Emotionally, they became a wreck. We monitored them. There was no place to send them. No place to put them. All we could do was keep them from hurting themselves or hurting others.<sup>1</sup>

Several police officers did commit suicide during the first week following the storm, and 7th District Commander Bob Bardy recalled one of these suicides:

One of my officers killed himself. Committed suicide. From a multitude of different challenges and different pressures. The guy was a senior guy with the district, definitely an impact player. A role model. It really weighed heavy on them [the other officers]. It was probably two, three weeks before we could actually bury him. I have done a lot of things, but in 32 years I never thought I would have to put an officer, one of our own, in a body bag, and carry him into an elevator so that our officers did not have to look at him.<sup>2</sup>

Another early relationship was initiated with the St. Bernard Parish Fire Department. St. Bernard Parish is a suburban area to the east and south of New Orleans and was one of the areas hardest hit by Katrina. The interviews were conducted at the government complex in Chalmette. At the time these interviews were conducted, during the spring of 2006, it seemed unlikely that the community would recover. Aside from government workers and national guardsmen, the parish was virtually abandoned. The firemen were living in trailers that surrounded the government complex; their families lived out of town. Fireman Mark Melancon commented on what was lost:

You lost your community, you lost your friends, you lost going around the corner to Tom's house to play cards, or Dave's to have crawfish, or go visit this one or go get a tool from that one. None of that's there. It's something. It's something that most people don't understand. And hopefully they won't live through it too to understand. I would never wish this upon anybody. It's not just your house or material things. It was a way of life that's no longer there. You lived here because it was a safe place, it was a great place, everybody knew everybody, you wanted to raise your kids here. Now, why would you want to live in a fish bowl? Well, we never thought we lived in a fish bowl. We thought we lived, or we did live, in a wonderful community.<sup>3</sup>

The substance of the fire department interviews focused on two critical places of refuge: Chalmette High School and St. Bernard High School. Firemen stationed at Chalmette High received word of rising water in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans

and immediately began evacuating people up to the second floor. They indicated that they just had enough time to get people up the stairs before they were inundated with more than 12 feet of water. As residents of the parish were rescued by the fire department, they were brought to these two schools by boat. Some arrived at the schools with the bodies of drowned loved ones. Captain Eddie Appel expresses the discomfort with the lack of dignity that he and his men were able to give one man's deceased mother:

Well, we wound up putting her in a, uh ... I hate to even say this. We put her in, ah, one of them carts they push around. I don't know if they dump trash in it or whatever, one of them big gray carts. Finally we decided to put her in there ... just to get her out of the boat. I mean, we didn't have any place to put bodies. We weren't storing bodies in Chalmette, but we had to do something. So, we put her in there and then we wound up with one other body, I think, in the school. We didn't want to start a morgue or nothing. We didn't have anything for that. We had enough trouble just trying to keep the people we had alive. We just had to do something ... we had to do something. So we put her in a little closet, storage room ... and she stayed there for a couple days.<sup>4</sup>

St. Bernard Parish, being on the eastern side of New Orleans was virtually cut off, the only access being by the river or through the air. The efforts made by the St. Bernard Parish Fire Department in keeping thousands of citizens alive until help could arrive was one of the most heroic stories of Katrina.

A series of interviews done with the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office focused on the evacuation of nearly six thousand inmates from the parish prisons. Facing near-riot conditions by September 1, Dr. Richard Inglese, medical director for the Sheriff's Office, describes his experience:

Wednesday was personally tough for a lot of us, because the inmates got really, really unruly. You know, you tried to reassure them, but it would become too dangerous at some point. They would start to find ways out of their tiers. You know, if left in the dark long enough, the inmates found creative ways to get out. And they broke through the pipe chases behind the toilets and behind the showers and got into control modules and some of them went into duct works and made their way to the fire escape stairwell, which runs the length of the building. We had security pushing them back and trying to keep them contained but safe. Security was doing their best to try to keep there from being a full scale conflict. The last thing security wanted was to have a fight. So they were trying to keep them restrained, but not to use any kind of force ... and then security went out to put down some inmates acting up and the inmates started running and they trampled one man and fractured his leg; actually they dislocated it, but it was ugly, he was just hanging off to the side. One of the nurses and I broke a cot and made a litter out of it. And we went up with armed escorts into the middle of that riot. I use the term riot, for lack of a better word. I mean, it wasn't full scale, but there were loose inmates in the stairwell in the dark. And so we went up there and had to carry him down. You know, people are going around the corners with their guns, clearing the way for us. Security's trying to keep the inmates down. And, for a while there it got a little scary. You know, they were still lighting fires and ... and it really got tense.<sup>5</sup>

The New Orleans Fire Department (NOFD) was perhaps the best-prepared city agency. The department had an effective hurricane plan, and its implementation enabled the NOFD to protect almost all of its apparatus from flooding, while also preventing some of the accountability issues experienced by other agencies. The department has been engaged in an ongoing after-action study of its response and has linked the process with THNOC's oral history project: everyone in the department with the rank of captain or higher has been mandated to participate in our interview process. In return, we have been providing NOFD's after-action committee with copies of the transcripts of the interviews. As a result of this formal link, the interviewees have approached the interviews with professionalism and a desire to provide concrete logistical information that might lead to improvements in planning and procedures. Interviews with higher-ranking members of the department have averaged between three and five hours in length. Like first responders from other agencies, the firemen weathered the storm in places of last refuge located throughout the city. Many had the foresight to bring their own personal boats to these places and were able to begin rescue efforts as soon as the winds died down. In most neighborhoods these firemen were the first rescue assets deployed. Captain Robert McCoy describes one of hundreds of rescues that he and his men made on Monday, August 29. They had found a man standing in water that was up to his bottom lip, after the rescuers had broken through the roof and then the ceiling:

So three of us leaned in there ... well, actually, I grabbed him ... got his leg up and we dragged him to the rafters and then he just lays there. So it was getting dark, and we want to get out because I had no working lights. And so we get this man and we drag him across the cross rafters, out the hole. He was like a sack. He just lay down on his roof ... my boat was right there. He slid right into the boat ... he just laid there. He looked like a fighter that's been beaten. He just laid there with his face in the deck and he didn't blink or nothing. And I'm looking at him. He was a light-skinned black gentlemen and I realized that what was wrong with him was that his skin was all wrinkled from being in water ... I mean, wrinkled up real bad. So I went and got a bottle of water and I poured it on his face and noticed that he was licking his lips, but he is not blinking. And I said, "Oh God, he's going to go into shock on us." And finally, we made him sit up and kind of tapped on the face and we're saying, "Come on, talk to us, talk to us." So finally, very slowly he asks us where is he? "We're outside your house." And he says, "What day is it?" And we said, "It's the day of the storm." We asked him, "How long have you been like this?" He said, "Well since about 8:30 in the morning, 9:00 in the morning." "Well, it's 7:00 at night." So he's been like this for almost, what, 9 or 10 hours? We asked, "What happened?" He said, "Well, the water came up." He was asleep, then he woke up and he said when he went to open the door, he couldn't open it. The water rose so fast. That's what everybody said, it rose so fast. He didn't think of going to the attic. And he starts stumbling around the house. And, here he is in the dark this time, and he's starting to get sensory deprivation, he's getting hypothermic, he's had nothing to eat or drink. It's like people caught in caves ... they get very goofy. And so we got him out, but he just sat there. He was like you know, it was like he'd gone twelve rounds and had been beaten. You know, he was totally out of it. Well, we kept talking to him and

we gave him water. And we didn't have anything to wrap him in, to help him get warm. Even though it was a hot day. But, you know, I'm just thinking, if this man stays here that night ... I think that's how a lot of people drowned. They probably just got tired.<sup>6</sup>

The coast Guard helicopter rescue units out of the Belle Chasse Naval Air Station in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, were the first airborne rescue resources in the city. They had evacuated their helicopters to Houston and Lake Charles, Louisiana, for the storm, and then returned to the city just after the worst had passed. As Lieutenant Commander Olar Saboe flew back into the metropolitan area, he

expected to see, you know, trees down, houses blown over, and I didn't really see that until we got to the Mississippi River and we crossed over to the eastern side over in the south part of St. Bernard Parish. And I still remember, to this day, my flight mech all of a sudden yelling, "Sir! Sir!, mark position ..." which means hold your position ... I tried to ... so I slowed back into a hover. And we had about 60 knot winds. We were, you know, at the tail end of the storm, the outer ... outer bands. We were hittin' some pretty good weather. And still, you know, some pretty good rain, but it wasn't that bad. As soon as he said, mark, I started to hover around here and I said, "Well what do you see Mike?" —Mike Colbath was the petty officer at the time who's taking care of the flight mechanic responsibilities—and he said, "I see a guy climbing out of his roof." And I said, "What?" And I looked down and, sure enough, there was water up to the eaves of this house and there was a guy that was—you know, I think it was a saw or a hammer; I can't remember what—but all of a sudden you could see like his hand as he's climbing out onto his roof ... and that's when I told the flight mechanic, I said, "Well, I think we're in for a new normalcy here. This is what it's going to be all about ..." and we pulled into a hover and at that same time, the rescue swimmer was looking out the other side and he said, "Sir! Sir!, we've got another guy climbing out at 3:00—oh, excuse me, at 9:00." And then the co-pilot, "Sir, you know, we've got a guy climbing out of a roof at 11:00—there's three people up there, right off the nose."<sup>7</sup>

Col. John C. Edwards of the Arkansas Army National Guard 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team had heard of our project and approached us about doing interviews. He was concerned that his team's contribution to the response would be misinterpreted by historians because of comments made by Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco during the crisis. She mistakenly gave the impression, in a rather impassioned statement at a press conference during the crisis, that the Arkansas National Guard had just returned from Iraq and was willing to use deadly force in order to quell the crisis in New Orleans. The guardsmen wanted to make it clear that their mission was humanitarian in nature and that in no way did they intend to use deadly force to quell the chaos in the city. Col. John Edwards describes the unit's arrival in downtown New Orleans:

It's interesting ... the very first person that came to me that day was not someone from New Orleans but was a reporter from the BBC. And this gentleman came to me and introduced himself and he had a tape recorder around his neck and there were camera crews wading in the water. It was

almost as though we were being surrounded as we were getting off those buses.... It seemed like half of the European press was there when we were getting off those buses. The very first thing this BBC reporter said to me. He said "Excuse me sir can you tell me about the shoot to kill order." And I was quite stunned. And I said, "Sir I don't know what you are talking about." And he said, "Governor Blanco has issued a shoot to kill order here in Louisiana." And I told him my role and who I was and that I had been the one who had personally briefed everyone who was getting off those buses now and that we in no uncertain terms had not, we had not issued shoot to kill orders. We were not going to kill people and shoot people for basic looting ... and he accepted this quite well. What I did not know at the time, because we had been in pretty much a media blackout since we had gotten on the plane in Little Rock, was that Governor Blanco had held a press conference where she said that the Arkansas National Guard was coming to Louisiana. She made mention that we had just come back from Iraq. And I think she made mention of a phrase 'they had just come back from Iraq and they know what to do' and the quote-unquote, "they know what to do," a lot of people interpreted this in their own way and that's where the allegations of shoot to kill orders came from, but again those were never issued. They were just not true.<sup>8</sup>

The brigade had in fact returned from Iraq months prior to Katrina. A small group was in the city as early as Wednesday to help evacuate a VA hospital. During this mission they did note being shot at. The main body arrived later and was assigned to deal with the situation at the New Orleans Convention Center. They provided emergency medical care, dealt with crowd control issues, helped get the area ready for evacuation, and then facilitated the evacuation when it finally occurred. After all the people had been moved, they conducted a thorough search of all the buildings and the surrounding area and turned found bodies over to local officials. They were later assigned to the initial recovery of St. Bernard Parish and noted the similarities in this assignment to their experience in Iraq restoring infrastructure following the initial U.S. takeover. A number of the guardsmen interviewed discussed difficulties in assembling the necessary assets (vehicles, etc.) in order to deploy, since so many of their own assets were still being used in Iraq. They stopped short of admitting that this delayed their response, but since so many of them mentioned this difficulty, it is likely that the deployment of vehicles in Iraq did negatively impact response.

The congressional staffs of Charles Melancon and William Jefferson agreed to participate in our project. The Washington offices were critical centers for gathering and relaying information during the crisis. Erin Daste of Congressmen Melancon's office describes the role of the Washington office:

The phones started ringing off the hook almost immediately after the storm passed. It was strange because we were watching it happen on television and then the levees started breaking and the city started filling up and then we started getting calls from people in St. Bernard Parish or from their family members saying, "You know, my husband stayed behind," or "I know family stayed behind; I haven't heard from them." It just turns into a madhouse. Phones start—don't stop ringing. What's scary about this situation is that



we can't call anywhere in the state because all the lines are down. People were calling us saying, "Look, I know someone who's trapped," or "I know a group of people who are trapped." You know, people are, for hours now without food and water. People are starting to go nuts. It's a very scary feeling to have someone beg you for help because someone's life is on the line.... But you just sort of have to steel yourself and not really deal on an emotional level with what's going on. Because at that point, we couldn't afford for anyone to crack. And if anything—I mean, there was—if there's a time to crack, it's when your world is basically blowing up. But I knew—and all of us knew—that we couldn't do it. There were too many people relying on us to keep it together.<sup>9</sup>

The offices were eventually successful, through text messaging and eventually satellite phones, in relaying important information and in facilitating the distribution of lifesaving aid.

We initiated a project with WWL-TV, Channel 4, the only local television station that was able to continuously broadcast throughout the immediate aftermath of the storm. News anchors, reporters, cameramen, and producers were interviewed. The interviews were filmed, used as part of the station's 24-h Katrina anniversary coverage, and made available on the station's Web site. The cameramen and reporters were excellent eyewitnesses to events going on throughout the metropolitan area, but the interviews are also telling of the moral conflicts journalists had in covering the crisis. Tom Moore, a cameraman, talked about an instance when his need to comfort another, an elderly woman, superseded his job.

We went down to Plaquemines ... on Tuesday.... As soon as we got [to the parish line] there was a roadblock and there were guys pointing guns at us. But we had a marked vehicle. The guy at the roadblock said "What's going on in New Orleans is not going to happen down here." So we cleared it and went down to Belle Chasse High School. In the parking lot there was a family sitting in a car with an old woman about 80 trembling in the back seat. I started to take pictures of her. And then I stopped and I put my hand on her hand and asked, "Are you ok?" She was just emotionally torn. And I stopped for a second and started listening to these people.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently the family had lived in a trailer. They were caught inside when the tidal surge arrived and spent ten hours floating and spinning in the wind before being rescued.

We did a series of interviews with DMAT CA-6, a Disaster Medical Assistance Team headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area. The team was prepositioned in the region just prior to Katrina's landfall. They headed into town once the storm passed and set up a clinic at the New Orleans Arena to provide medical assistance to those at the Superdome. They replaced the DMAT from New Mexico which had been there during the storm. At first, operations went smoothly: the crew was busy but was able to get critical patients out via helicopter. But soon things got ugly. The helicopter evacuations stopped for some reason, and the crowd became more aggressive. There were multiple confirmations of a national guardsman who was treated for gunshot wounds, and all interviewed confirmed that the team treated a

large number of assault victims. The team's chaplain, Rev. Toby Nelson, had these provocative comments:

The newspapers will say that there were only five people who died at the Superdome and I wish you would get the answer to this; we have direct knowledge of 60 to 70 people who died there. Everybody has the same story except. We have direct knowledge, eyeball knowledge. I had eight or nine people die in my arms. They say there weren't gunshots and that's just a lie; we had gun victims in our clinic. Even one of the army soldiers had a gunshot wound that we took care of. It was very disconcerting to see the spin put on that thing ... I have never had direct knowledge of our government lying to us, but I'm sure they do, but I'm talking direct knowledge ... they just lied to us. I tell people back at my church then they would come back the next week, "Well gee, we read in the paper that only five people died there," and they'd look at me as if I'm making stuff up ... it was truly apocalyptic. I'm surprised, actually, I'm surprised that all of our team got out of there. We had to run for our lives.<sup>11</sup>

As the crowds began to swell and become angrier, the situation became too much for the National Guard assigned to that area to handle. People forced their way into the clinic, and one psychotic man physically assaulted some of the DMAT members and had to be restrained and chemically sedated. After this episode the commander made the determination that the team would pull out. They retreated to their trucks in teams of two so as not to attract suspicion, and then headed to Baton Rouge, abandoning their patients. The guilt of having to abandon their mission was a major theme of these interviews, and not everyone agreed with the commander's decision. The commander, however, indicated that he was responsible for his people and could not protect them in that environment.

There has been a perception that the initial media accounts of what was going on at the Superdome were exaggerated. The interviews with DMAT CA-6 seem to contradict this reevaluation and support initial perceptions. Walking the streets of downtown New Orleans today, it is difficult to image the events of August and September of 2005. It would be easy for us to tell ourselves that things were not that bad and that things were just blown out of proportion by journalists looking for a story. A shame-driven impulse to block horrific images from our memory would lead us to raw just such conclusions—as would the incentives of a tourist-based economy to minimize the damage done to the city's image. Oral history will play an important role in insuring that the scale of suffering during the crisis, how our society responded to it, and the degree to which these efforts succeeded or failed are firmly established in our collective memory. We owe this to those who lost their lives and those who lived through it.

Our work has shown us that top-down methods of documentation do not work with an event like Katrina. The almost total loss of communications made it impossible for high-ranking members of the different agencies to control or even know what lower-ranking members were doing. As a result it is necessary to cast a wide net in our documentation effort. A five-year plan for *Through Hell and High Water* has been established and includes, in addition to the relationships discussed

in the article, projects with the Louisiana National Guard, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (instrumental in boat rescues), as well as various DMAT and urban search and rescue teams that were deployed during the crisis.

## NOTES

- 1 Kevin B. Anderson (Commander of the 8th District, New Orleans Police Department), interview with the author, New Orleans, LA, July 27, 2006.
- 2 Robert Bardy (Commander of the 7th District, New Orleans Police Department), interview with the author, New Orleans, LA, February 6, 2006.
- 3 Mark Melancon (Inspector, St. Bernard Parish Fire Department), interview with the author, Chalmette, LA, April 17, 2006.
- 4 Edward Appel (Captain, St. Bernard Parish Fire Department), interview with the author, Chalmette, LA, April 17, 2006.
- 5 Richard D. Inglese (Medical Director, Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office), interview with the author, New Orleans, LA, August 16, 2006.
- 6 Robert McCoy (Captain, NOFD), interview with the author, New Orleans, LA, December 29, 2005.
- 7 Olav Saboe (Commander, U.S. Coast Guard), interview with the author, Belle Chase, LA, September 19, 2006.
- 8 John C. Edwards (Colonel, Arkansas Army National Guard 39th Infantry Brigade), interview with the author, Little Rock, AR, October 26, 2006.
- 9 Erin Daste (congressional staff member for Louisiana Representative Charles Melancon), interview with the author, Washington, DC, August 9, 2006.
- 10 Tom Moore (cameraman, WWL-TV), interview with the author, New Orleans, LA, August 14, 2006.
- 11 Toby Nelson (chaplain, DMAT CA-6), interview with the author, Palo Alto, CA, January 20, 2007.