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NATION NEEDS
THEM HERE

LOCAL NEWS

SEP 08 2005

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2005

Received

Midstate offers care to storm victims

118th Airlift Wing moves dozens from New Orleans to area hospitals

By NATALIA MIELCZAREK
Staff Writer

Leroy Crawford joked that he must have taken the longest shower of his life yesterday — nearly a half-hour.

He and his wife, Diana, who is partially paralyzed, hadn't showered since Monday, when Hurricane Katrina hit their home in New Orleans. Both were trapped at a flooded motel for five days until they were rescued by authorities Friday, he said.

The couple, in their late 50s, arrived at Vanderbilt University Medical Center yesterday afternoon.

"I'm doing pretty good," Leroy Crawford said, his voice hoarse from dehydration. (My wife) is doing pretty good. They're going to run some tests on her to make sure she's OK. Her (blood) pressure is

More about Hurricane Katrina

► The latest reports about the hurricane's aftermath and evacuation and relief efforts.

On 1A and 13A-15A

fine. I had her medicine because I (had) just bought some in the drug-store" when the storm came through, he said.

The Crawfords were among more than 100 Katrina victims from New Orleans — half of them unable to walk by themselves — who received medical help at Middle Tennessee hospitals yesterday. Another 130 hospital patients and evacuees from New Orleans

► Please see **HELP**, 4B



David Sewell, a district chief of the Nashville Fire Department working as the staging officer at the Tennessee Air National Guard base last night, briefs ambulance drivers on the runway. The drivers were preparing to rush people evacuated from New Orleans to Nashville area hospitals once their plane arrived. The waiting group eventually were told the plane would not be coming until today.

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Worried relative



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Soldiers: 'We've got to help these people'

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FROM PAGE 1A

poised to relieve battle-hardened units in Baghdad's Green Zone. Instead, they were heading to another city, one under a different kind of assault. "Welcome home," one of the men shouted with sarcasm over the din of the plane's four propellers.

What they saw did not look like anybody's home, at least not in this country before a virulent atmospheric mass larger than Connecticut struck the coast with furious abandon.

It resembled a war zone down there. First Sgt. Michael Butler, who lives in rural Carroll County and is an electrician at the DuPont plant in New Johnsonville, looked down at the wrath of nature and thought about what he has read, seen and heard since Katrina placed its indelible mark on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast one week ago.

Mass looting from greed. Survivors stealing food to survive another day. Corpses lying in boulevard medians, covered by sheets.

Thugs ruling city streets with impunity, firing shots at those who came to help.

"People are anxious. We've heard a lot of rumors. We've seen the stories on TV. We don't know what to expect. There are a lot of desperate people there that need our help, but I'm worried about my people. I just want us to come back safe, all of us," said Butler, a man who barks orders with a slight smile.

The 115th is primarily an artillery unit, but in this era of cross-training, the unit's members are also military policemen. This will be their job in New Orleans; they left their big guns behind on this trip. Officially, they are known as the 115th QFR, for "quick reaction force."

Staff Sgt. Greg Thomas, a factory worker in Henderson, Tenn., said he's been in the National Guard for 26 years and this is the first time he's been deployed. He brings to the task a healthy measure of resolve and trepidation.

"No doubt, we've got a job to do. When I heard about this on the news, I figured the call would be coming soon enough, but I think it's probably going to be worse than what we've seen on television," he said.

Dead people. Desperate faces. "We'll just deal with it."

Their own living conditions will be trying, too. They were told to expect no creature comforts. No air conditioning. No hot meals, just MREs — "meals ready to eat" pouches of pre-cooked food. No showers, for a while. And mosquitoes for all.

The men of the 115th had less warning of their deployment than the citizens of New Orleans had that Katrina was headed their way.

"We got about 24 hours' notice," Butler said.

One day they were toiling away at their regular jobs. The next day they were mustering on the runway at McKellar-Sipes Regional Airport in Jackson, awaiting a bone-rattling C-130 ride to the site of one of the worst natural disasters America has ever seen.

It was the same for members of the Air National Guard's 118th Airlift Wing, based at Berry Field at Nashville International Airport, who have been flying these disaster relief missions since Tuesday, sometimes six a day.

For Sgt. Leroy White III of Savannah, Tenn., receiving the order to deploy was not a surprise.

"I saw that one coming," said White, a U.S. Postal Service letter carrier when he's not wearing the Army's green camouflage.

"Everybody's got a little bit of a case of the butterflies, but we've got to help these people because they need it so much. Order has got to be restored so the city can begin to rebuild," White said.

Even at the expense of his family time. His son is a new student at the University of Tennessee. The sergeant will miss the first home game of the Big Orange.

It's not the first time the unit has been sent away from home and family.

THE 118TH CONTINUES TO SERVE. DON'T TAKE OUR UNIT

Received

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PHOTOS BY LEON ALLIGOOD / STAFF
Sgt. James Hudgins of the Tennessee Army National Guard peers out at the destruction below as their C-130 prepares to land in New Orleans.



Members of the 115th Quick Reaction Force from Henderson, Tenn., unload their equipment from a Tennessee Air Guard C-130 in New Orleans. The military police unit was sent to New Orleans to help in relief efforts.

White spent a year at Fort McPherson, Ga., doing Guard chores.

Others in the unit returned earlier in the year from a year in Germany or Hawaii standing in for units that had been in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Now, less than seven months since many returned from a year's absence, they have been asked to give up 30-45 days helping the "Big Easy."

Not all of his soldiers were thrilled, Butler said. Many are truck drivers and bricklayers and carpenters and policemen and business owners who were just beginning to restore normalcy to their domestic lives from their previous deployment.

"It's hard on some more than others," Butler said. "But this is what we're here for."

The C-130 emitted a groaning noise from below its belly, a signal the landing gear was locking into place. Out the windows, the flooded landscape grew closer.

Finally, dry land appeared, a mile-plus strip of concrete runway at the Naval Air Station Joint Venture Base-New Orleans, a long name for a usually sleepy military airstrip in Belle Chasse, La., about 15 miles south of the big city. On a normal day, the station sees only a handful of landings and takeoffs.

Yesterday, it was overwhelmed. For the 20 minutes that "No. 86," as the crew refers to their Nashville-based aircraft, was on the ground in

New Orleans, the crowded facility welcomed two C-17s, three more C-130s, four UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters and one CH-47 Chinook helicopter. On the ground already were no fewer than 25 aircraft, C-130s, KC-135s and C-17s.

All had the same mission as the 118th, to ferry troops or materiel to the Gulf region. More than 10,000 troops are expected to arrive before the Labor Day weekend is over.

After transferring their gear from the rear of the plane to waiting trucks, the men of the 115th were loaded onto two buses to be taken to a staging area where they would receive their orders and have their questions answered.

But before they got on the bus, several members of the unit just had to see if their cell phones would work. To their delight, most had "two bars." They hurriedly called wives and girlfriends to let them know they had arrived. Others had "no service," leaving them to wonder whether they should change cell providers.

The sun was going down in New Orleans. "We don't know what in the world to expect," Butler had said earlier.

But he and his men went anyway, hoping to deliver a seed of hope to people who have given up believing such a thing exists. ■

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