



PHOTO: CARRIE PLYNE

The bodies of the dead are left lying in the median.

ers. But this is no time to do the arm drop test. This is triage on the run.

A military truck picks us up. As we drive through the masses on the overpass, we keep moving because when we slow down, some people chase us. A SWAT team moves with us to keep the desperate mob away. The officers are nervous. Little kids stand waving at us as we go by.

We arrive at the convention center and unload our bags. The military leaves. Then Mark [Reis] and our director, Dr. Juliette Saussy, make an appearance. They say a temporary communications center will be set up at the aquarium. We take our stuff over there. Mark and Juliette return to the Superdome.

We arrive at the aquarium, where they have generators producing electricity, but the curator says we can't stay. There are already too many people there. We can't reach Juliette and Mark. Somebody says, "We're dead in the water."

Darkness is coming, and we're outside the aquarium. Seedy-looking individuals start to show up. We've heard about the shooting and the looting. Some in our group get scared again.

We decide to go to a nearby hotel at the end of the convention center. Kenny Knowles, a paramedic who was injured when the storm hit, shows up unexpectedly, in his personal car—a brown Suburban. We load gear in and on top of it, and people ride on the

sides of the SUV to the hotel.

At the hotel, there's a pool that has been untouched by the flood waters. Most of us jump in with our clothes on for a chlorine bath. We're concerned about the filthy water we've waded through. One person already has a sore throat and fever.

At a condominium next to the hotel, we find a generator and some showers. The operator says he's happy to host us if we can help get him diesel fuel to run the generators.

But police come to say that another levy is breached. The water is rising. We must leave again.

I tell the crews to pack a single bag. There is much bitching and crying, whining and complaining. "Fuck the city," some say. "I'm quitting. Fuck Juliette and Mark for leaving us."

I feel as if we're an army retreating into a starlit night. With most of the lights off across the city and the skies clear, the stars are seen with vivid clarity.

Despite the one bag limit, most people bring two or three. One wheels an ice chest big enough for a body. We gather under a solitary light near the convention center. A group of police officers driving cars taken from the Sewell Cadillac dealership drive toward us. We've heard the police were commandeering Cadillacs.

Here come a Hummer, an Escalade and other Cadillacs. And there they go. They pass with some of our crews banging on windows yelling, "Stop!"

We set off to walk across the Crescent City Connection—a two-mile hike over the Mississippi River into Algiers. We don't have any specific

place to go, but we know there are more options on the other side.

We've abandoned all of our medical supplies, monitors and oxygen.

As we walk across the bridge, we call for help on the radio because some of our people are getting sick. One paramedic with hypertension and migraine headaches is having stroke-like symptoms. Another staffer in her 60s is struggling to make it across.

Out of the dark, here comes the New Orleans Fire Department. Some in pickup trucks and Expeditions; some in their own cars. They take us to the nursing home where they're staying.

Fire apparatus are parked all around the nursing home. Inside, firefighters walk around with shotguns and side arms. There are showers and food.

For a few years, they have been first responders with us, and we've developed a good relationship with the fire department. But on this night, they rescued us.

WEDNESDAY, AUG. 31

At 7:15 a.m., we wake up suddenly with people running through the nursing home saying the Superdome is on fire.

We're sent to give medical support to the firefighters. We load two ambulances with medics and follow the trucks across the river.

There are fires everywhere in the city, but the Superdome doesn't appear to be burning. We end up across the street from the Superdome, but we can't reach it because of the water. We're close enough, however, to see that the dome is not burning. It's a dumpster fire.

Build It & They Will Come

Editor's note: This lesson is from the perspective of WakeMed Health & Hospitals, Raleigh, N.C., one of many organizations involved in Katrina relief efforts. To read more about the N.C. EMS deployment, visit www.jems.com.

When citizens see a medical team arrive in their community, they see the team as the authority—and as immediate relief. This means before the team can even get set up, patients will be there. Have a plan in place to begin treatment immediately on arrival on a smaller scale while the rest of your team works on the main structure. It will facilitate an instant level of trust within the new community, which goes a long way in emergency situations. ▼ —Coleen Hanson