



Alive!

SPECIAL SECTION

HURRICANE KATRINA RESCUE EFFORT



Charlie Chang

LAFD Rescue Squad Officer and USAR Team Member Rick Denning (second from right) gives instructions to LAFD Tech Search Specialist and USAR Team Member Patrick Leising (right). LAFD Tech Search Specialist and USAR Team Member Carlos Calvillo is in the foreground.



Crowl

City USAR Team Members "core" a hole for search cam access.



Supplied by Jack Wise

The leaders of the two Los Angeles-area "Swiftie" (Swift Water) teams, from left: LAFD Batt. Chief Jack Wise; TV personality John Walsh; and L.A. County Fireman Bryan Wells.



Supplied by Jack Wise

The LAFD's Swift Water Team unloads after being airlifted into New Orleans' Ninth Ward.

Hurricane Katrina Brings Out Heroism in City Employees

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■ The City's response to Hurricane Katrina saved lives in the Gulf ... and changed lives back here in Los Angeles.

THE CITY — Approximately 100 City employees rushed to the Gulf after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the landscape and imperiled hundreds of thousands of Americans.

The City answered the call. From the LAFD's Swift Water Rescue Team, to the multi-department Urban Search and Rescue squad, to departments raising money for victims in need ... to empathetic Club Members writing poems to share their grief.

Last month's Alive! was right on deadline when the City's efforts kicked into full gear. But now, for November, Alive! has traveled from the Port to Bishop, from downtown to Pacoima to interview and document some of the City employees who responded in such a historic way.

It's hard to quantify exactly how much impact City employees made in this disaster, but some numbers might help. The Swift Water Team, in conjunction with other teams, saved more than 500 lives — almost 300 in the first few hours alone.

But more than the numbers, the impact is far and wide, from humble and sincere expressions of thanks from those who benefited directly, to long-term goodwill, and to more specific knowledge on how our country ought to handle disasters on a scale this large.

Almost everyone who returned from serving in the Gulf States made similar comments about double-checking our own emergency preparedness here at home. Are you prepared? Start at our Emergency Preparedness Department's Website: <http://www.lacity.org/epd/>

The other thing that those who returned have in common is the denial that they are heroes. We at the Club know better. Read the eyewitness accounts and see the pictures in our special section, and see if you don't agree.

Alive! thanks all those who gave us their time and attention while they were still trying to settle back into their lives. You are heroes to us.

> LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS

First In, Hundreds Saved

Alive! interviewed two leaders of the City's Swift Water Rescue Team – LAFD Battalion Chief Jack Wise and LAFD Capt. Chuck Ruddell – to get their eyewitness accounts of what they encountered in New Orleans. Other members of the Swift Water Team deployed to New Orleans are Capt. Ernie Ojeda, Capt. Robby Cordobes, Firefighter/Paramedic Alan Naole, Engineer Dan Arnold, Capt. Greg Terrill, Apparatus Operator/Paramedic Frank Garvey, Firefighter Jesse Franco, Apparatus Operator Chuck Mills, Apparatus Operator Brian LaBrie, Capt. Craig White, Apparatus Operator Thomas Kitabata and Capt. Thomas Hays.

The team was deployed for more than two weeks in the rescue effort. — Ed

An Interview with Batt. Chief Jack Wise

Alive!: How long have you been with the Department?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: 25 years now.

Alive!: How long have you been a member of the Swift Water Team?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Pretty much from its inception, within three months of its inception, I've been with it for a long time. I was actually program coordinator for the program from 1995 to '97. Back then, I was also working with the EOB, the Emergency Operation Board, to prepare the City for the El Nino, if you remember back then.

Alive!: Now your responsibilities now with the Swift Water Team are what?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: I'm on the USAR [Urban Search and Rescue] Working Group. I'm one of the chiefs that can be deployed with the Swift Water Rescue Team, because I have the background. There is a Swift Water program coordinator in the San Fernando Valley, but he

doesn't go out on the deployments. I'm one of the chiefs because of my past history and experience.

Alive!: How often are you deployed out of state

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: This is actually the first time that FEMA has asked for a Swift Water-type flood component to be dispatched out of the state, at least from California into an area. The USAR teams, the FEMA USAR teams, are 70- to 80-person teams, so they're self-sufficient for 72 hours and they're tasked with doing ground-type searches, like with an earthquake. Also, they have a HAZMAT component; they really don't have a Swift Water component in there.

Because of the flooding [in New Orleans] FEMA came out and said they wanted something a little bit smaller. We're truly the only ones that have the Swift Water/flood rescue component. This is the first time that FEMA has recognized us and tasked us with that. So it's kind of a boon for us because we've been trying to get them to send us to these floods for a number of years. Their policy in the past has been that they're not going to send out Swift Water Rescue Teams. And this was good that we got over that hurdle and hopefully it's one of many. We went out there we had a tremendous amount of rescues in a very short time. We were what I considered the backbone of a lot of the rescues that were done out there

Alive!: And you certainly proved being worth FEMA's while to invite you in.

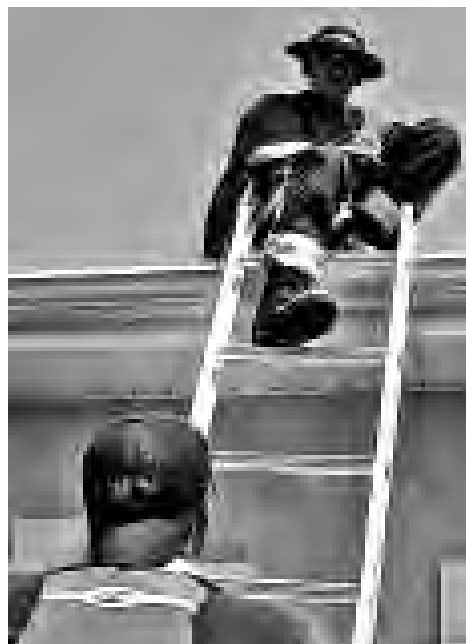
Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Yeah, I certainly hope so. One of the concepts behind these teams when we first designed them was that we'd be fast, light and mobile, and I think because of that we were able to get into areas that others weren't. We have in-water rescue capabilities,

and we have boats. So we're able to do a lot of rescues very quickly. Literally within a half hour of us hitting the theater of operations we were performing rescues. In our first three-hour operation we rescued over 250 people, which is a lot for a very short time. Like I said, we basically got to our base of operations, threw up our equipment, immediately went to work, and within a half a hour of getting into the theater of operations we were at work.

Alive!: Take me through those hours when you were on call. What were you thinking back here in Los Angeles before you left?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: We were given an alert through FEMA that says that they're getting us ready — they haven't actually tasked us with it yet but it looks that way. At that point we were spooled up ready to go. A 14-member team is fast, light and mobile, and within an hour, literally within a couple of hours we were ready to go out the door.

What we needed though is their authorization; of course we can't go without their authorization. I don't know what the delay was, or who the delay was, I know it certainly wasn't on the City's part. But it took a while for them to finally get the authorization or the request. But a number of hours later they finally gave us the activation orders, about 4 o'clock in the morning [Tuesday, Aug. 30] as a matter of fact. It was a restless night for us; we got all spooled up ready to go and we're standing by. At 4 a.m. we got the activation orders, and approximately two hours later we were on the road to March Air Force Base, where again we had a delay waiting for transportation. We were being flown out through the Air Force, Air National Guard, and we had to wait for the C5s to come all the way from the East Coast out to the West Coast to pick us up and take us out to Lafayette [Louisiana].



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, climbs onto a roof from a boat during a search operation.



LAFD Capt. Rob Cordobes, Swift Water Team member, cuts into an attic during a search operation.



The Swift Water Team's Response Vehicle navigates through the University Division in New Orleans.



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, at a Wendy's drive-through in New Orleans. The restaurant was flooded and closed.



LAFD Batt. Chief Jack Wise, Swift Water Team leader, rescues a cat from the ledge of a window.

HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF EFFORT: CITY HEROES

Alive! Special Section

LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS <

Alive! That has to come through the state, right? FEMA has to ask the state, and then the orders come from the state?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: What's unique about the Swift Water team is we're actually a state asset, through the Office of Emergency Service in California. So the request came from FEMA to the state, and the state is the one that's tasked with that. All eight Swift Water teams [from California] went, and that's how that request came down.

Alive! How did you get from Lafayette to New Orleans?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Well again, one of the advantages of the Swift Water Rescue Team is we were fast, light and mobile. We took our own transportation with us on the C5s. We loaded up our Swift Water vans and Swift Water apparatus and other ground transportation, and we were able to take all of our equipment, so that when we hit the ground in Lafayette we were able to unload and head on out to the theater of operations right then.

Alive! You drove right over to the New Orleans Saints' Practice Facility; that was that your base of operations?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Yes, that's correct.

Alive! And then within a couple of hours of landing, at that point FEMA told you where they wanted you to be stationed, is that right?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: They told us prior to us leaving where they wanted us to go. We knew all that stuff before we got on the plane. That's usually how the orders go, but you'll meet a member from FEMA at the airport where you're landing. They'll coordinate your travel over there, and we already knew where we were going as far as in what town we were going, where our base of operations were, and what we were going to be exactly tasked with. We had an idea we were going to be going in a flooded area, New Orleans and the surrounding parishes, but exactly where we were going to work we didn't know until we got there.

Alive! And once you were there where did they send you?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: They sent us about a half-mile down from Zephyr Field, on Airline Highway, it was called Airline and the Causeway. What used to be a freeway, was now our launch ramp. Three of the other Swift Water teams that got there a few hours before us were

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The LAFD's Swift Water Team tows its rig through downtown New Orleans, near the Superdome.



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, and members of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife team search in the West Gulf Division in New Orleans.



Aboard the Response Caravan heading into the Industrial Division of New Orleans.



Members of the LAFD Swift Water Team and a landing craft in New Orleans's Ninth Ward.



The LAFD Swift Water Team prepares to use Veterans Highway in New Orleans' West Gulf Division as a boat launch ramp.



The LAFD Swift Water Team decontaminates in Church Division, New Orleans.



LAFD Batt. Chief Jack Wise, Swift Water Team member, cruising Canal Street in New Orleans's West Gulf Division.



The LAFD's Swift Water Team sets up a command post in the West Gulf Division.



LAFD Apparatus Operator Tom Kitahata, Swift Water Team member, aboard the military helicopter on the way to the Ninth Ward in New Orleans.



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, goes from house to house during a search operation.

Supplied by Jack Wise

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> LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS

Batt. Chief Jack Wise Interview, continued

already at work there and needing relief. If you can imagine, the heat index was triple digits, I think it was 110 that day, and it was exhausting work. So we went up there and relieved them, who were in the middle of operation. They had rescued a couple of hundred people also. We came in and relieved them and continued operations; it was a seamless transition.

We carried that on through the evening until around I want to say about 10 o'clock that night. We wanted to keep going, but due to safety concerns they had to shut down, they wanted us to shut down at dark. We were able to convince them that we wanted to continue operations until 10 o'clock that night. I can't tell you how many more people we were able to rescue.

Alive!: Because you kept going?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Correct, because we kept going.

Alive!: Did it get less safe as your deployment continued?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: I felt safe every place we went. There was concern, but there wasn't an over-concern with it. We were able to get more and more force protection for all of our operations, and the more I became familiar with the areas the more I realized that the people there wanted us to rescue them or us to be there as much as we wanted to be there. So never once were we in an area that we had to make a tactical retreat [from] due to safety concerns.

Alive!: How many people did you rescue in that first day?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Well, in that first three-and-a-half-hour period, our Swift Water team rescued over 250 people.

Alive!: Just your 14 members, or you combined with other Swift Water Teams?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: At that division right there, we had two other teams working that area. So with us we had [rescued] 197 adults, and the rest were children. You know, one of the concerns we had was the children: What do you do with them if their parents aren't there? Normally out here we have police to take custody of them, but as you can imagine in an area that's been decimated, the infrastructure of the city is wiped out or nonexistent and government as we know it is nonexistent, there wasn't those same contingencies, and that was a big thing. That first night, I had a boat that came in and it had three children, three minors on board, one was five, one was nine and one was 15, and I asked "Okay are the parents here?" And he said "No." I said "Okay, are they all related?" No, they weren't all related. So what do you do in a situation like that? Normally out here we would get the police to take custody of them. But the police department was overtaxed. We tried to get them there, but they didn't have the personnel to deal with that. Finally I was able to get some of the evacuees to take responsibility for those children. As we got them to the evacuation center, we hoped eventually to be able to marry them up with their parents, or their guardians.

Alive!: Tell me some stories that stick out in your mind.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: One of the other issues, especially that first night is, as we had more and more people come up that ramp, there was a lot of convergent volunteers that we had there, and we were using those volunteers to assist us in the evacuation. The problem we had is that there was no organized evacuation center at that point. There was an impromptu evacuation area after the Red Cross eventually got there, and that's where we were taking people. But the only reason why they were being taken there is because we had some people volunteering buses that were taking them over there. Those buses wanted to go home, and we had to send the police out there to get them so they'd come back. As the people started piling up it got more and more crowded on the ramp and they weren't able to get to an area where we had enough food and water and shelter for them, and they started getting, well, uptight is a

good word. Not hostile, but they were getting frustrated as they'd been out on the bridge for a number of days. We got them over to an area, and they wanted to get over to an area where they could get some rehab and food and water. We had some there but not enough for the hundreds of people that we were getting. It became a concern that, as people's anxiety increased, my concern was, "Let's get them out of there." So we had to try to get police over there to provide some protection, more of a show of force than anything else. Fortunately we were able to get the buses to evacuate that ramp in a timely fashion, so it didn't go any further than that.

But as you can imagine all those things, you don't think about them. You think that people are going to a safe area, and at the same token if the other part of the system isn't there to get them to an area where they can get competent care and more protection, then that is a concern and we were dealing with those type of issues.

Another issue was just a human tragedy in the area, people who lost their homes and lives and loved ones. We had many people come up to us as we were doing our search and rescue operations and say, "I haven't heard from my dad in so long, I need you to check this house out," and we took all those and we made those a priority assignment, because they were a known commodity.

We had a number of animals that were walking around starving and we tried to feed them, but they'd been in some really nasty, nasty water and things, and a lot of them that were even starving didn't even want to eat. That's hard, just because you see them walking around. The adults were able to get to evacuation centers and help and care for them. But I think that some of the tragedies that were out there were those children who didn't have anybody there for them, the animals, and just the mass devastation that we saw. We saw whole communities wiped out, whole communities under water. That was really, really tough. I've been to the widespread floods up in Yuba and Sutter County, [and] I was there for the World Trade Center. I've been to just about everything that this City has gone through, including the earthquakes, and this was such widespread devastation that it's hard to conceive.

I was given areas [to be] in charge of [and was] tasked with searching and the response and recovery, and those areas are almost as big as my whole battalion here. I was responsible with maybe 20 people to search those areas, and that's tough to do, especially when you're on boats, you're going door to door.

We're talking about tragedies but I want to focus on some of the great things that we did and we found. Eight days into our operations, the Swift Water teams were still finding people alive in the attics, which is just phenomenal. It's a testimony to the strength of the human spirit, because in triple-digit heat indexes, I don't think I could live an hour in one of those attics, and these people were living days up there. One was an 83-year-old man who was on his last bottle of water.

Alive!: Did they cut into his attic?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: That's how they found him: They cut into the attic and found him in there.

They found another lady in her attic. They talked her down into the room, and she didn't want to open the front door 'cause she's afraid the water would rush in. And you have to remember they have survival emergency preparedness out there, just like they do here. They taught their people to go up to your attic, and take survival items, food and water and some type of axe or something like that to get out of the roof if you need to. A lot of people were doing that but didn't take their axes. That they were up there surviving for those many days is just a testimony to the human spirit and the ability to endure things.

Alive!: Tell me about the moment when you found them. What did they do, what did they look like, what was the reaction?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: One of the problems is that, somebody who's been in the attic that long in that heat is barely coherent. They don't know what's going on. It's amazing that we're able to find them in areas that we'd already searched. We'd already gone through and went house to house.



The LAFD's Swift Water team in front of a water pumping station in the West Gulf Division, New Orleans.



Batt. Chief Jack Wise standing amidst the wreckage in the New Orleans Marina, near Lake Pontchartrain.



LAFD Capt. Tom Haus, Swift Water Team member, in New Orleans.



LAFD Capt. Tom Haus, Swift Water Team member, on a rooftop.



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, checks another home.



LAFD Capt. Rob Cordobes, Swift Water Team member, cuts open a roof, looking for victims in the attic.



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, stands in front of a hotel that the team searched.

HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF EFFORT: CITY HEROES

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LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS <



Two Swift Water Teams, one from the LAFD and another from the L.A. County Fire Department, establish a command post for the day.

Once the 911 system came up, we had a backlog of calls from people that were in distress or needed assistance. We went back to each one of those addresses and checked them out. That's where we found a couple of the people, because of these 911 calls. We'd already gone through there and knocked and yelled and screamed and everything, but they were so out of it they didn't hear or couldn't respond.

Alive! It was the second time around or even the third time around.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Yeah, yeah. I don't know how a person could last half a day up there, let alone that many days.

Alive! Was it the worst water you've ever been in?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Without a doubt, it was the nastiest smelling stuff I've ever seen. It was a cross between sewage, petroleum – raw petroleum products like crude oil, human waste and dead things; [it was] just the nastiest smelling stuff I've ever been in.

One of the concerns we had as the days went on, as they were draining the areas, is that the mud would turn to dust. All these other nasty chemicals and things that were in the water would become airborne as we went through it. It became an inhalation hazard. That's when we stopped the airboats, those big boats that look like they've got a big engine on them and a big propeller. We stopped those from being used in our areas because they were loud and noisy and they blew all that water, which was hazardous, all over the place. It mystified it and made it an inhalation hazard. You have to think about the pesticides, the chemicals, the heavy metals, all those things were in that water, or we presumed them to be in that water.

Alive! Tell me some of the great things now.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: One of the great things that happened was the spirit of the people of New Orleans and that area, to put up and survive in those areas that had no food, water or electricity, or anything else. Like I said, government as we knew it had collapsed, and they survived.

Another thing that was just awesome to witness was that we were able to work with the military, police and local agencies, and we coordinated with them all. We worked in these areas to provide rescue and response with people from the New Orleans Fire Department and the New Orleans Police Department. It was really a unified and joint response by us in coordination with them.

We heard some of the stories from the New Orleans firefighters who were out there, as they went door to door and house to house swimming because all their apparatus was down. They were doing CPR at these convalescent homes in rotations for hours and hours and hours because there was nobody there to get them out.

You look at the testimony of these doctors. At some of the hospitals we were evacuating, so many of the doctors and the nurses stayed when they could have evacuated because they had patients there. These hospitals had no electricity. Their backup generators were all gone. They were without everything and in high heat, and patients were literally dying on them. They stayed there to provide the best possible support that they could because they felt obligated, even though they had family and loved ones also in the impact area. That to me is just amazing, an amazing feat. We would have that same type of response and the same type of dedication out here in this City, and I'm sure all the City employees would do as well here.

One of the things that I want to pass on to the City employees is [to make sure] your family's prepared and has the emergency preparedness packets, has the out of state contacts. Know that you've done everything you can to prepare for them. That allows you to focus on your responsibility and your task to save people. You might be a doctor, you might be a worker out here; if you know that your family's taken care of then that allows you to focus on your job and not worry about needing to get home. Many times in my career I've had to leave my family, or I haven't been able to get to my family, but I know that they're prepared with their emergency preparedness supplies and the drills that we've done with them. I know that they're going to be taken care of, I know that they know how to take care of themselves and, more importantly, that we've got those emergency supplies. That's one of the things that I want to make sure that you get out of this interview: Prepare your family so that when you're not there, they're able to survive.

Alive! Did the people of New Orleans make you feel appreciated?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Without a doubt. In the area we were working, there were a lot of fire and police officers and hospital workers who lived in that area, and they had been on duty. So they needed to know what had happened to their houses. They had some valuables they needed to get. And I made sure that they were taken care of, that we were able to get into the military and police and firefighters' and doctors' homes because they were doing the emergency services and not able to take care of themselves. So we made sure that we took care of them and we went out there and allowed them to get their stuff so they'd go back to work also. It was amazing to see how thankful they were. The doctors from East Jefferson Hospital ... coordinated shots for us all. That was so very nice.

The people in the areas would come and bring us food and water and were so thankful, it was tremendous. We had a [man] in the area who normally provides food service for PGA golf tournaments. He set up a huge food camp and opened it up to any of the responders out there. It was great food after eating MREs [military meals ready to eat] for weeks.

That type of outpouring and outreach from the community and from all over the nation, was just tremendous to see.

Alive! What do you remember about working in the Ninth Ward?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: The Ninth Ward. Well, that was one of my most challenging areas. We were given that area and because of the devastation, we weren't able to get in by ground. They air-inserted us in, they used the big double-bladed Chinooks, and they brought our two teams in there. The Chinooks can land only in certain areas, and they put us on an area where we were still about a quarter of a mile away from the water, and here it is a Swift Water Team. They lifted us out there, dropped us off and left, and basically all we had was our inflatable rescue boat, and the stuff we had on our backs, so we had to try to find some vehicles.

“We saw whole communities wiped out, whole communities under water. That was really, really tough. I've been to the widespread floods up in Yuba and Sutter County, [and] I was there for the World Trade Center. I've been to just about everything that this City has gone through, including the earthquakes, and this was such widespread devastation that it's hard to conceive.”

– Batt. Chief Jack Wise, LAFD

My first job was trying to find some transportation. At that time I tasked a couple of our guys with finding that transportation. They were able to go to the local sugar mill, which still had some operators in there. And because of the devastation there was a fire truck that the local fire service had abandoned and was not operational due to mechanical problems. One of our guys was able to get it running, so we utilized that as one of our vehicles for a convoy. Hold on just a second.

I laugh about it now, but we were able to get a fire truck that we used in our convoy, able to get a dump truck and get that thing started, and had a forklift also. That was our convoy. It was quite amazing.

We had to go very slow 'cause there were wires and trees down. We had to cut our way in numerous areas. But once we got in the area we were able to start our search ops. As you can imagine it took a long time to do that. That evening, they weren't able to get us a flight back out, which created a little bit of concern on my part because we didn't really have anything to spend the night with. All we had was our dry suits. We had enough food and water, but nothing else. And I needed to get the guys decontaminated. We ended up finally getting a “deuce and a half,” which is a big truck. I'm not sure how that got over there, but we were able to grab a “deuce and a half” and we got 29 people on that thing, which normally is for about 10 people max. We had to go the long way back



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, looks out of a military helicopter as he is being airlifted into New Orleans's Ninth Ward.



LAFD Firefighter Jesse Franco, Swift Water Team member, uses a ladder bridge to move from one rooftop to another while searching attics for victims.

through about six feet of water most of the way in an uncharted area with 29 people on board. So that was a huge challenge and it was interesting. I look back on it now and can laugh about it, but it was quite amazing. There was no moon there, so the only light we had was the light from the spots that we had on the rig. It's kind

of eerie going through areas that are under six feet of water and you can't see what's in the road. You're going around things and through things and trying to find your way to these main roads. You don't even know if the main roads are good. What normally would've been about a half-hour ride, it took us about four hours to get back to our base of operations.

Then the next day we were sent out to the Ninth Ward again. I wanted to complete the operation. The Ninth Ward was devastated when the levy broke. It looks like a quarter of a square mile area in which all the homes were knocked off the foundation. And that area was also one of the ones with predominantly lower income, so the people in there didn't have a lot. They couldn't afford to get on an airplane and get out of there, so I think there was a lot of people still left in that area.

The next day we [tried] to go over the bridge, but the bridge was stuck open [up] over the industrial canal. So that day our operation was just going back and trying to retrieve our equipment, which we were finally able to do.

The third day we were finally able to coordinate and get the bridge down and get in and do some great operations in that area. The whole infrastructure was down, and it seemed many times that our operations were hindered not by anything we had done but just by the disaster, the things that had happened.

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> LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS



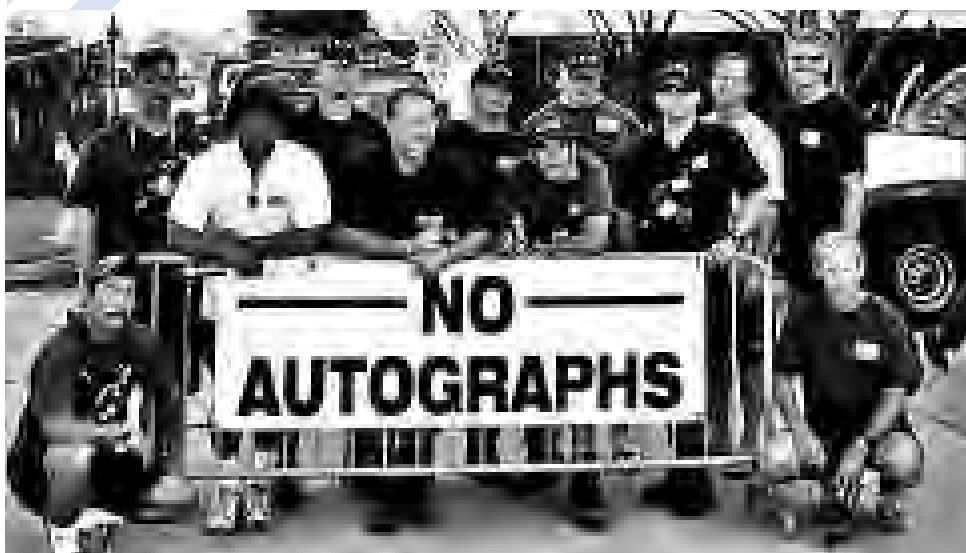
The LAFD's Swift Water Team unloads the C-5 military transport after landing in Lafayette, La.

Supplied by Jack Wise



Two Swift Water Teams, from the LAFD and L.A. County, acquire a dump truck to assist in their rescue efforts in New Orleans's Ninth Ward.

Supplied by Jack Wise



The LAFD's Swift Water Team poses at their base of operations, the New Orleans Saints practice field. The "no autographs" sign belongs to the Saints.

Supplied by Jack Wise



An aerial photo: LAFD Batt. Chief Jack Wise, Swift Water Team member, performs a reconnaissance mission over Church Division in New Orleans.

Supplied by Jack Wise

Batt. Chief Jack Wise Interview, continued

Alive! You must feel really great about what you did though. You do hero stuff every day, but still this must've been extraordinary, and you must feel pretty good about it.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Without a doubt. One of the things that I always say is that, you know, if you ask any of those guys out there they're not heroes. We are just given the opportunity to do things that probably everybody else would like

system. Our generator has a cigarette lighter on it, for 12 volts. So they took a cigarette adaptor and split it and crossed the wires and made it so it would power the 12-volt systems. We used our portable water, put it in the ice chest, and it had a little pump on it and we would use that so we could shower.

After about four or five days of that, they were able to get out into a town that actually had a Lowes. Brian and Craig went out and bought a bunch of PVC pipe and fittings and shower heads that you would have on your normal shower. They got a car cover-type tent, left the top open, and they ran this plumbing system up

"One of the things that I want to pass on to the City employees is [to make sure] your family's prepared and has the emergency preparedness packets, has the out of state contacts. Know that you've done everything you can to prepare for them. That allows you to focus on your responsibility and your task to save people." — Batt. Chief Jack Wise, LAFD

to do, and we're given the training and the equipment to do that.

We feel that we carry a part of Los Angeles with us wherever we go, and that we're responding for Los Angeles. It's not necessarily for ourselves, although it is rewarding for us. Everybody out there in the City can take pride in what we're doing because we carry that message with us, and we're responding for all of us. And I think that's probably the biggest message that I could send out there, that we carry that with us. We're all part of the family of the responders.

Alive! Tell me about your guys who set up your showers.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: The infrastructure was shut down. One of the biggest hazards is the contaminants on our skin and on our bodies. There's no good way of getting that off. Soap and water is the best thing, and bleach. We take a small Hudson sprayer and bleach with us so we can do kind of like a mobile de-con. The problem is the guys need to take those showers to get it off their bodies. They were able to rig some showers the first few days, prior to any other portable water or showers. We were using our drinking water so that we could take what they call a four-bottle shower: four bottles of water. It was great for the morale, because they were able to take showers, and nobody else had those.

Alive! Was this the guys who work for you?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: Two guys who work for me, Brian LaBrie and Craig White, are what they call logisticians. They're the MacGyvers of our unit. They can take a paperclip and make a shower out of it. At the facility where we were, on the side of a football field they had these misters and what looks like a portable ice chest. [Under normal conditions] they put ice and water in it and it feeds up through a tube into these misters.

What the guys did is they took the ice chest, with the hose, and it was powered by a 12-volt

top there and got a little portable pump that they put in a clean trash can. We ran a generator, put the water in, pump it up through the system. And now we had a big secluded shower area that had about six or seven heads on it. As the days went on, we never did get water that was plumbed.

Alive! Tell me about the air conditioning.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: These guys are the MacGyver. Give them a problem and they love solving it; they come up with some great ideas. They actually got us bathrooms before anybody else did, too. Before that we were basically going to the bathroom in cans. They were able to get some Porta-Potties for us.

It was so hot, with no electricity. They had us sleeping on a [football] training field. It was a hundred yards long and was covered by metal. It was hot, and you had hundreds of people in there coming and going. It wasn't a really good place where you could leave your stuff and get a good night's sleep.

So they got some tents, what they call Western Shelter, from Lowes. And they were able to get some portable window air conditioning units. They set up the generators, and we were able to sleep all night in a cool area. It rehabbed our people and allowed them to be refreshed and work a lot harder and longer than they normally would have. It was so hot at night there. People from New Orleans, God bless them, I don't know how they put up with that, it's so bloody hot and humid is the thing. You sweat day and night. But I'm sure you get acclimated to it, but to me coming from California, we have the dry heat, it just sapped everything out of you. It was really nice when they did that. They took the window air conditioning and cut a hole in the tents and stuck those in there, and we got air conditioning.

Then they went out and got a barbecue for us. We had the first hot food there.



Swift Water Teams from the LAFD and L.A. County, plus the United States Coast Guard, pull their inflatable rescue boats (IRBs) out of the water in New Orleans's Ninth Ward.

Supplied by Jack Wise

HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF EFFORT: CITY HEROES

Alive! Special Section

LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS <



The LAFD Swift Water team decontaminates their equipment at their base of operations, Zephyr Field in New Orleans.



LAFD Capt. Chuck Ruddell, Swift Water Team member, rides along in a Coast Guard johnboat in the West Gulf Division, New Orleans.

Alive! Kawasaki came through, too.

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: In a big way. We weren't able to bring our jet-skis with us on the aircraft. We have a contract with Kawasaki that provides the jet-skis for us here. Once we got there, they arranged Kawasakis through a local dealer for our use. Those were a tremendous help to us in those devastated areas.

You can imagine the inflatable rescue boats, the Zodiacs, in an area that's been flooded. There were all kinds of hazards, and we kept rupturing those [boats]. The jet-skis were one of our prime rescue craft. We were able to get the Kawasakis up there.

Alive! One final question about FEMA. There's been a lot of talk about FEMA and how it did its job or didn't do its job. What are your thoughts on that?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: After every response there are areas that we can improve, and this is no different. There are certain areas that we're doing After-Action Reports to address some of those issues. If you look in the response alone and how many people were physically rescued in the area, you can't really complain about that.

Were there areas that need to be improved? Certainly. Are there areas that we need to improve every time we go out? Without a doubt. I think this is all part of a learning process. We really haven't ever seen anything quite like this. With this massive devastation, we've never seen a response like this where we've taken all these different agencies from all over and put them all together and said "Make it work." So there are issues that we need to work through and work at and I know that we're working at all levels to fix those.

Alive! Anything else that I didn't ask that you think is important?

Batt. Chief Jack Wise: The city of Los Angeles can be very proud in the response. All City employees can hold their head up proud, every one of them. When we go out the door we represent the Fire Department, but we represent the whole City. When they see LAFD coming in they know it's from Los Angeles.

Los Angeles has a history of going in there and doing the right thing. We've personified that in our response to this disaster [and] all disasters. [City employees] have a lot to be proud of. Not only every City employee, but also our elected officials. They allowed us to go, and provided us the opportunity. My hat's off to them. It's a direct result of the mayor, Councilmembers and every City employee that we're able to provide this. When we went out there, it wasn't just us out there. It was all of you out there too, so thank you. ■

> LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM

An Interview with Capt. Chuck Ruddell



Alive! Tell me about the LAFD's Swift Water Team.

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: We operate when there's more than one inch of rain in any 24-hour period, or when it's anticipated. That's when we're deployed. Or when the ground is saturated.

We're at Fire Stations 100, 86, 44 and 62, which gives us full coverage of the City. We cover all the major channels in the City.

Alive! Is the Swift Water Team part of the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue effort?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: The Swift Water Team is not part of the City's USAR Team that went down to Mississippi. We were in New Orleans.

Our base of operations was at the New Orleans Saints training facility, off Airline Highway. They used one of the football fields for us. There were teams there from Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and L.A. County. They put up 1,500 people at that facility. That's where we would stay, recuperate and receive our plans.

That was our "Boo." That stands for Base of Operations.

Alive! When did you get the call to mobilize?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: It was Monday afternoon [Aug. 29]. We got a call from the OES [California's Office of Emergency Services]. There are eight Swift Water teams in California, and they are the only organized Swift Water Teams in the United States. They're run by the state, similar to the fire strike teams.

In this case, they sent teams [to New Orleans] from both Northern and Southern California.

Fourteen of us went, as part of the L.A. City Fire Department's team. Fourteen went from

each of the Swift Water Teams. We also took equipment with us. We have a standard cache of equipment that the state buys for us: three inflatable rescue boats; outboard motors; and ropes, dry suits and floatation devices.

But the City also supplies us, too. We brought four City-owned trucks with us. We went with some of the finest equipment around. It was all brand-new. We had no equipment problems at all. Some [Swift Water] teams had problems getting through the [flood] water. But we had no problems.

Alive! How did you get the equipment to New Orleans?

Chuck: We flew from March Air Force Base in Riverside County down to Lafayette, La. At that point, we were under the control of the military. They transported us and our equipment in a C-5 transport.

It took us about 36 hours to get to New Orleans. We had to wait for the aircraft. We arrived at March at 7 a.m. Tuesday, but we didn't depart until 18 hours later, at 2 a.m. Wednesday.

The state's OES didn't allow us to take our watercraft [jet skis].

Alive! Why not?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: Well, I think it's because not all the Swift Water teams had the same equipment.

Once we got to Lafayette, we knew we needed the best tools of our trade [the jet skis], but we hadn't brought them. So we called the Kawasaki Corp. [the manufacturer of the kind of jet skis the team uses] – we've had an agreement with them for the last eight years, providing us with watercraft – and they told us to go immediately to Lafayette Kawasaki. We did, and they got us two watercrafts within 10 minutes. The Kawasaki people were really good to the [rescue people] in New Orleans, too.

So, around 7 a.m., we picked up our watercraft and drove with them through the traffic. Within

— continued next page

> LAFD SWIFT WATER TEAM IN NEW ORLEANS

Capt. Chuck Ruddell Interview, continued

six hours of landing in Lafayette, we were in the water, pulling people out. We were in operational mode.

Alive!: What's the first place you went?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: To the intersection of the 10 freeway and Airline Highway, for the first six hours, until 11 p.m.

Right off the bat, we wanted to get the watercraft in the water and see what we were dealing with. The first thing we noticed at that intersection of the 10 freeway and the 610 was helicopters landing, continuously. There were 10,000 people in the grassy area of the intersection, just standing there. The helicopters were taking people out of the water, but had nowhere to drop them. So they dropped them off there.

The number of people surpassed their ability to move them out of town.

Once we deployed, it was us and two other Swift Water teams. [In the first six hours,] we pulled about 300 people from homes, schools and churches, and dropped them off right there.

There were a lot of disgruntled citizens; they had nowhere to go. We provided them a dry place to stand, but not much else. How they eventually got out [of town], I don't know. I think they took them to the airport.

Alive!: What was your mission?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: Our first mission was to work at a school with a reported 50 or 60 people in it. We took the watercraft out and did an assessment. We found a wide boulevard [Airline Highway] with cars fully submerged. We couldn't go fast, or else we'd hit a roof and get knocked right off.

The highway off-ramps became our boat launch ramps. And 15 feet away from one of those ramps was a chemical plant. You could tell that it was already leaking into the water; the entire facility was under at least four feet of water. You could see the chemicals. You could smell it, whatever was leaking. We had no clue what was in the tanks. Fortunately, we had on our dry suits, but we all wanted to decontaminate at the completion of every day. We tried, but we had no water. So we took the bottled water they gave us to drink, and used it to decontaminate.

Alive!: Tell me about some success stories that come to mind.

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: I remember an 86-year-old female inside her house, four or five days after the hurricane, in at least three or four feet of water in her house, that had come down to about one foot that time. She was covered in mud and dehydrated. Well, the spirit of this Southern lady ... how she survived, was just amazing. "Oh, no, guys, don't worry about me, I'll just walk out" ... her spirit just brought me up every day. She didn't focus on her needs. She was worried about us getting muddy! Amazing. That was on Sunday, the Fourth [of October].

Alive!: You have to feel good about the lives you saved.

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: Yeah, but the second day, they didn't allow us to go back out because that was the day of all the shootings. I told my crew [the night before] that we would go back out in the morning, but we couldn't.

No one shot at us. We entered into some of the more dangerous areas in town. We had local sheriffs, the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] and the Coast Guard with us. And the last week, we also had the National Guard, plus the [Air Force] 82nd Airborne and Fish and Wildlife teams from the Southern states. We had them protecting us.

Alive!: Tell me about the Ninth Ward [reported-

ly one of the areas that got hit hardest]. I heard you were there.

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: We entered the Ninth Ward on [Oct.] 5th, I think. FEMA resources had not been there yet. It was completely submerged. And it was landlocked.

A St. Bernard Parish sheriff told us that there was no police presence in the Ninth Ward. "Good luck," he said. "I hope you have some weapons with you."

At a local sugar plant, they gave us a dump truck and a forklift. We put our boats on them. And an hour later, we were on our way into the Ninth Ward, in water that looked and smelled like pure crude oil. There was an oil leak in Chalmette, which was a long way from the Ninth Ward. It was the worst water I have ever seen in my life.

When the levy broke, it pushed 200 homes all together in one big bundle. They would not have known what hit them.



LAFD Capt. Tom Haus, Swift Water Team member, cuts into an attic as part of a rescue mission in New Orleans' West Gulf Division.



The LAFD Swift Water Team goes through the streets of New Orleans, moving into their operational area.



The LAFD's Swift Water Team performs its search and rescue operations. The United States Coast Guard provided force protection and transportation for all the "Swiftie" teams. The Coast Guard was one of the many teams that provided assistance.

Alive!: Did you encounter any dead bodies?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: We saw maybe 40 bodies [in the water] throughout our deployment. We were still on a rescue mission [as opposed to a cleanup effort] until the day we left. When we saw a dead body, we would send the GPS coordinates and flag the location so that those responsible for picking up the dead could do it. And then we'd move on.

People would tell us to check in the attics, because, as part of the area's emergency preparedness plans, they told the citizens to go up in the attic in case of a flood. So we'd go to the roofs, cut them open and check inside. Near the end [of their deployment], after the 911 system was back up and running, we'd get reports of the 911 calls [in their area]. One day, about nine days after the hurricane had hit, the guys from New Mexico found an 86-year-old man who survived eight or nine days. How he did it, I have no idea. I would cut open the attics and feel the intense heat coming out of them.

On our last operation, 15 or 16 days after the hurricane, near the University of New Orleans and the lake, the water levels were still really high, up to a guy's waist. But there he is, standing on the porch.

Alive!: How would you rate the FEMA effort before and during the Katrina crisis?

Capt. Chuck Ruddell: Personally, the extent of the emergency was truly overwhelming to the point that vast resources were needed so quickly, with that large of a number of people — I challenge any group or organization to properly manage it. Nobody could have managed the true extent of the emergency. Once those levies broke ...

And they couldn't ignore the devastation in the other states, either.

Even those who don't have a water problem [like New Orleans] ... if an earthquake hits here, we could have a similar situation. Access, egress, food, water ... we'll encounter the same issues here. Do we have enough water to last a week or two? How do you deal with that?

Some people don't want to leave. If we had a tsunami warning today, I think 10 percent of the people would head right for the beach, to the water.

Plus all the bad elements, the looters. Nothing stops them from taking your water. We heard a lot of stories of being shot at, but in 14 days, no one treated us poorly. Not at all. Maybe the protection forces made a difference. But the people realized we were there to help them. ■



LAFD Capt. Tom Haus, Swift Water Team member.