

Back from Louisiana's front lines

By James Kushner

The last three weeks flew through my life like Hurricane Katrina blew through Louisiana.

I worked the search and rescue Zodiac boats with a CERT (Civilian Emergency Response Team) out of Battery Park City under the supervision of Brigadier Gen. Sidney Baumgarten. It was our small way of thanking the good folk around the country for the aid given to New York City during the 9/11 rescue and recovery operation.

Each CERT member, Bill Betz, Bing Chen, Chris Velez, Hank Wisner, Susan Blake, Donald Reilly and Cesar Lara, manned commando-type landing craft powered by a jet motor. Outboards would never make it in the foul soup we patrolled. Each of us crewed with a Zodiac skipper. I worked with Sean Workman, Capt. Eugene Ferris and four 82nd Airborne troops. On our best day we picked up and off-loaded about 50 people and 15 dogs from flooded houses in the French Quarter.

Equal suffering

Few neighborhoods were spared; the rich and poor suffered equally, and when the waters receded, whole neighborhoods were left destroyed. Anything below the waterline, which rose in some places to eight feet, was devastated, leaving everything brown and dead to the very last blade of grass.

When the CERT team left, I teamed up with Todd Shea, a musician from Maryland. We ran a supply line from New Orleans to Baton Rouge and back, in a 25-foot Budget truck, commandeering goods from FEMA, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, the Parker and the Lamarr Dixon animal shelters, and anyone else we could hook up with on our runs along Interstate 110. We kept a local phone directory on the dash. Cell phone service was bad, but we called Papa John's Pizza and they supplied us with 2,000 pies, which were delivered to the Algiers Naval Depot, to the 82nd Airborne. Coca-Cola gave us seven pallets of Coke, energy drinks and water.

GPS's and vaccine

We trucked-in 18 six-man tents from the Salvation Army to house NYC fire volunteers on the base. We carted in donated global positioning systems, depth-finders, dog and cat carriers, thousands of doses of anti-rabies vaccine, anything we could get our hands on.

We sent requests for much needed goods to Helen Bowers of the Elmsford Rotary Club and received them in a shipment of medical supplies from Dorita Urrata of Nutmeg Rescue in Waterbury, Conn. And we slept four hours a night.

Working through Chaplain Carl Trost who liaised with Cmdr. Mark Scovill, the CO of the USS Tortuga, I was given permission to coordinate Camp Otis and Milo,

named after the dog and cat movie. There we housed the animals brought in by Search and Rescue. With the help of crew members DC 1's Tony Graves, Josh Peach, Lt. Conor McClintock, HTFN Whipple and others, we were able to requisition veterinarians Jeanine Avelloni, Kim McClure, Mary Beth Morgan, Ann Thatcher, Kelly Crowdis, Angie and technician Kim Fred. All these good people and more kept the whole shebang afloat. The animals were cleaned, medicated, fed and watered. Over a hundred and some dogs and cats passed through our hands safely.

Armed with luck

We picked up Elizabeth Perez from the Upper West Side and converted our truck into a dog-catching operation. We were armed with one catch-pole, charm, luck, guts and a list from the Humane Society and the SPCA, of owned missing animals and the addresses where they were left. Those fleeing Katrina didn't know the levees would break and that they would not be able to return for their pets. We picked up plenty, maybe 50 or 60 dogs and cats before I returned to New York coughing and feverish.

I'm sitting home now, coordinating with Todd and Elizabeth who are still in New Orleans rounding up animals.

James Kushner, born in Washington Heights, is a freelance writer living in Inwood.