U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Katrina Archival & Historical Record Team (KART)

Hurricane Katrina, 2005

Interviewee: CAPT Bruce Jones, USCG

Commanding Officer, Air Station New Orleans

Interviewer: PA3 Susan Blake
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CAPT Bruce Jones presents the Air Medal to AET2 Warren Labeth, AIRSTA New Orleans, for valorous service after Hurricane Katrina. At left is CAPT Frank Paskewich, Commander Coast Guard Sector New Orleans, and next to AET2 Labeth is LT Craig Murray, AIRSTA NOLA.

Abstract:

CAPT Bruce Jones commanded Air Station New Orleans at the time of Hurricane Katrina and was at the center of the aerial SAR response throughout the ordeal. A day before the hurricane hit, CAPT Jones flew to Lake Charles and on Monday August 28 flew towards Grand Isle and Venice and then followed the storm northwards. “It looked like an atomic bomb had hit the state.” They conducted their first rescue of the storm at 1450 that day when they rescued three generations of women from a boat stuck underneath a tree in ten feet of water.

Jones said that communications were intermittent. They were able to periodically communicate with the sector. Air operations were conducted in a very decentralized fashion. The SMC maintained a loose decentralized command and control oversight - it would have been too difficult otherwise because there were just too many cases. “People knew what they had to do.”

Tactical control was split between Mobile and New Orleans. “ATC Mobile was both a huge staging area for manpower, aircraft, and equipment as well as an actual tasking unit. The difference between the two - Air Station New Orleans was the battleground, in the middle of the firefight- they (ATC Mobile) were the large depot level operational and staging area in the rear echelon.

CAPT Bruce Jones presents the Air Medal to AET1 Galen Farris of AIRSTA New Orleans. At center is AIRSTA NOLA pilot LT Shay Williams.

Q: Okay, please state your first name, your last name, and spell your last name?

CAPT Jones: My name is Bruce Jones; J-O-N-E-S.

Q: Okay, and your rank is?

CAPT Jones: I'm a Captain and Commanding Officer of Coast Guard Air Station New Orleans.

Q: Okay, and how long have you been in the Coast Guard?

CAPT Jones: I started OCS in October of 1983 so I've been in for 22 years.

Q: Okay, and I was going to ask you to give a brief overview of your career that led to you being stationed here at the air station.

CAPT Jones: Okay. After OCS I went right to flight school and became qualified in the H-52 and served at Air Station Houston for four years flying the H-52 most of that time. I flew the H-65 my last few months there and then went to Naval Air Station Whiting Field as a Coast Guard flight instructor instructing Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard students in the H-57. After that I transitioned to the H-60 and flew H-60s for four years at Air Station Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and subsequent to that went to graduate school in public administration and then four years at Headquarters in the Strategic Business Planning Division; G-CPP, the last year there as the division chief. And from there to XO at Air Sta Traverse City and then CO of Air Sta New Orleans the summer of '04.

Q: Okay. Prior to Katrina hitting the gulf coast what information were you getting about evacuating the air station or preparing for the hurricane coming in?

CAPT Jones: Well as with every hurricane, when the hurricane got within 96 hours of landfall in our AOR the district ordered all the units to set increasing levels of hurricane preparedness; Hurricane Condition I, II, III and IV, so it was very formalized and there was no question in any of our minds as to what we were to do. We had the district hurricane instruction and we had our own unit instruction, so as the hurricane got within 72/48 and then 24 hours of striking we had very specific tasks to attend to and we were obviously following the *Weather Channel*, which is the best. You know frankly we don't rely on the Coast Guard to tell us what the storm's doing. The *Weather Channel* and NOAA are much better. They're the proper sources of information anyway. The only real question was when do we evacuate and where to evacuate to and the district commander left that to our discretion, which isn't to say he didn't care where we went to or when we left, but that he let us advise him on what we were going to do and then he concurred. So in our case we elected to stay onboard the unit until the day before Katrina hit; until about 1400 the day before, which is about 18 to 20 hours before landfall to ensure that we could respond to any pre-hurricane SAR, which turned out to be, there wasn't anything to speak of. So we took off at 1400 on the day before Katrina,

went to Lake Charles with three helicopters and I sent my other two to Houston, and I stayed with the first three helicopters in Lake Charles where we spent the night.

Q: Now were you watching the hurricane coming in; were you watching the news stations or how did you pass the time away in planning to come back here?

CAPT Jones: Yes, we spent our time in Houston and Lake Charles watching the Weather Channel to monitor the storm's progress and it progressed as forecast. There really weren't any significant changes. Then we just made sure we had adequate crew rest because we knew we'd be busy flying the next day. So we set a tentative plan to get airborne late morning to head back towards New Orleans and then to land somewhere suitable to wait until weather conditions permitted actually flying over the city and beginning recovery operations, which we guessed on Monday morning; the day Katrina hit, we guessed at that time that we'd be able to get over the city before dark. We were thinking probably between 1800 and 2000 we'd be over the city. We were hoping it would be sooner so we'd have some daylight to work with instead of coming over initially in darkness. So we directed the Houston helicopters to get airborne and got our Lake Charles helicopters airborne and we flew our five helicopters to Houma, Louisiana, which sits 35 miles southwest of New Orleans and we sat on deck at Houma.

When we landed at Houma the winds were about 65 knots. It was just on the edge of where the significant destruction had started and it was tropical storm force winds. And at that point of course there was no weather information coming out of New Orleans because all the power was down in the city and the radar transmitter was down, so at that point we had to sort of guess. And based on the winds at Houma and what we knew was the northward 15-knot track of the hurricane we made a guess that we could be over the city at 1600 and that would be safe for flying. At that time the winds would be less than 60 knots. So we sat at Houma for a couple of hours and then we decided to launch our first two aircraft to the southeast to go down towards Grand Isle and to Venice with the idea that they could safely fly to Grand Isle and Venice at about 1400 or 1300 and then they could work their way northward sort of following the hurricane to the north and report on what they found. And if they found a lot of people in distress we could get airborne from Houma and help them out or if they didn't report a lot of distress we would just wait two more hours at Houma, and like the remaining three helicopters, we would get airborne in order to get over the city at about 1600. And so that's the plan we stuck with and the first two aircraft got airborne and flew down south to Grand Isle. They saw a lot of destruction but nobody in distress and they headed up from Venice northwest up the Mississippi River.

There's a whole bunch of small towns that line the Mississippi River from Venice northward; Boothville, Port Sulphur. There are a lot of towns. There are a lot of people who live there. There are schools and businesses and they immediately saw utter devastation up the coast of Mississippi. It just looked like an atomic bomb had hit the place: houses just shredded into bits; boats everywhere up on top of the levee, on top of bridges, in the woods; heavy, heavy flooding; none of the pumping stations were

working; homes underwater. There's a prison down that way that was underwater. You could only see the rooftop of this prison, which was an eerie sight, and the tops of the barbed wire fences. The search lights sticking out were all you could see. And they found a lot of people in distress and they began recovering. The first rescue, I think, was at 2:50 on that first day. They actually received a radio call on VH-FM, from three people in a small boat that were stuck under a tree I think. It was actually three generations of women. It was a four-month old baby and a mother and the mother's mother; a grandmother.

So they started working their way northward and then we got our other three helicopters airborne back to New Orleans.

Q: Now how were the communications at that time? The other surface units, they couldn't contact one another because the cell phones were out. How did you communicate?

CAPT Jones: We had a satellite phone in Houma and I remember shortly before we got airborne from Houma to fly back to New Orleans that I talked to Todd Campbell who is the air operations representative on the District Incident Management Team up in, I believe he was in Alexandria; Alexandria or Saint Louis. I think he was in Alexandria. But we had his number. We told him our intentions and District concurred with our intentions to have two pilots work their way behind the storm northward and have the other three wait and see?. So we communicated with District that way. Once airborne we could communicate with other helicopters but it was difficult talking to the sector because the high-sites were down; the antennae had been knocked down, so communications were very difficult. When we got back to the air station in New Orleans our landlines did work for about 18 hours and then they went down; something happened to them, and at that point it was intermittent cellular phone and intermittent satellite phone. So communications were intermittent but they occurred, just not with the regularity you would normally expect.

Q: So you were able to communicate up the chain of command pretty well to inform them what was going on and get approvals and things like that back and forth?

CAPT Jones: Yes, we could periodically communicate and get updates. We did not have constant communications. Essentially the air operations, I don't want to say were conducted independently but they were conducted in a very decentralized fashion. I think it's a real strength of the Coast Guard because we train so much and because we do 24/7 emergency response ops. Emergency response ops are, for us, routine, and everyone knows each other's roles. Everyone knows and has common expectations about procedures and how to prioritize. And so in the absence of continuous communications with higher authority we weren't hampered in any way. Because even if I can't talk to the district commander for eight hours the district commander knows what the air response units are going to be doing and we're confident that we have the district commander's intent delivered prior to Katrina. We know what his priorities are. So we

can operate without communicating with them and it's not chaos, it's really SOP almost. But we were able to communicate periodically, just not continuously.

In terms of the search and rescue tasking, because there were thousands of search and rescue cases, if you want to call it that, thousands of individuals that were stranded and each one was an individual case really, there was no way that an SMC, whether it was a sector or district, there's no way that anyone could maintain SMC of all the SAR cases and sort of be tasking individual aircraft on individual rescues.

As the week progressed and we started getting cell phone text message distress calls and other reports from survivors of, "Hey, can you check out 274 Ferguson Street", then we would get specific tasking that came in but at the same time most of the units out there were freelancing. They were very easily able to identify distress cases on their own. They didn't need to be coordinated by an SMC. So SMC maintained a very loose decentralized command and control structure which was very effective for this situation and I think was really necessary. It would have been impossible to maintain a tight command and control oversight of every search and rescue case happening, and you had to empower your people to do the work.

Q: Now could you tell us about when you first came back to Air Station New Orleans and what that was like when you got here?

CAPT Jones: Yes. When we took off with my three helicopters; when we got airborne from Houma, before we did any search and rescue our intent was to assess the status of the air station and whether or not it was a viable operating base for recovery operations, because we knew if we couldn't use Air Station New Orleans and if none of the other surrounding airfields were useable due to flooding or damage or loss of the fuel farms or fuel trucks, then we would have a real problem. We'd have to respond from 35 miles away in Houma or 30 miles to the north and have a lot more transit time and less time on scene. So our first order of business, even before saving lives, was to assess the status of the air station and establish it as an operating base for recovery operations. As soon as we landed we saw there was significant damage. We dropped off the XO, Petty Officer Gordon and the OPSO - they were each a passenger in the back of our helicopters -and they took a look at the unit, ensured that we had fuel, and then our other three helicopters – (unintelligible) commanded one of them - got airborne and went to the city to check out the city. Meanwhile the three people back on deck ensured the fuel truck was working, noted the damage at the unit and what parts were accessible and not accessible, and noted the heavy damage to the hangar building and surrounding attached lean-to's. All the locker rooms, engineering office spaces, maintenance shops, crew lounge, eating area, all the berthing area, was all pretty much destroyed by flooding which came from the rain coming through the roof after the roof peeled back on the hangar and on the surrounding buildings. So we knew that we didn't have any berthing and we'd have to sleep on essentially cots on the floor in the admin building, which we did for the next four days, largely without air conditioning or power for much of the time.

Q: And also there's an EM2 Rodney Gordon; he helped restore power here. Could you tell us about that?

CAPT Jones: Yes, the emergency generator kicked on when power was lost to the base and so our admin building was working on emergency generator power. It's an emergency generator that had been on a backlog for replacement for several years. As you know, Coast Guard shore construction and repair money has been very tight and there are lots of essential items that are still on backlog. That was one of them and that generator ran for, I don't know the exact hours but well under a day before that generator gave up the ghost. And Rodney Gordon went out in the middle of the night with a flashlight in his teeth and spent hours fixing it and getting it running again. And that, over the next four days, that generator and then another under-powered generator that we obtained that was not designed to power a building like this, that one also gave out and Rodney was out there, again in the middle of the night with a flashlight in his teeth working on hot pipes trying to get the thing running again. So he did a remarkable job of keeping power on in this building as much as we did have power.

In addition to that, the Navy's fuel farm which provides fuel for all of the National Guard, Air Force, Air Guard, Coast Guard, Navy/Marine Corps, Army Reserve units of this base, they couldn't get it to work and it was Petty Office Rodney Gordon from the U.S. Coast Guard who went over and got that thing working again, thereby providing fuel to hundreds of aircraft over the next week.

Q: Now did you stay here or did you go out to Mobile and could you tell us about the relationship between the air station here and what was going on with Mobile; like was that the staging area and was that the major place where they had all the aircraft and this was a fuel stop, and how did all this work?

CAPT Jones: Yes, Mobile was both a huge staging area for manpower and aircraft and equipment as well as an actual operational tasking unit. I guess I would describe the difference between the New Orleans Air Station and ATC Mobile as that Air Station New Orleans was sort of the battleground. We were the ones that were in the middle of the firefight and they were the large depot level operational and staging area in the rear echelon, you know a 50-minute flight to the east for New Orleans operations. Now keep in mind, ATC Mobile also had its own AOR that suffered severe destruction and they were conducting operations in the Mississippi and coastal Alabama AOR in addition to supporting New Orleans, so I can't really speak about what they did in Mississippi and Alabama except that they were obviously very, very busy working in that AOR. We didn't have the ability to support the extensive berthing requirements primarily as well as the maintenance requirements that ATC Mobile could support here in New Orleans. Our operations involved our ramp and we took over immediately the VR-54 ramp, which is the Navy's C-130 squadron next door. They evacuated and never returned. They still haven't returned. So we took over their ramp. So we had Coast Guard H-60s, H-65s, C-130s and Falcons, and Army Guard aircraft, Army aircraft, Navy and Marine Corps aircraft that were next door on VR-54's ramp. At one point we had upwards of 70 aircraft that were on our ramp and the VR-54 ramp that we controlled. We were fueling those

aircraft. We were providing operational tasking to those aircraft. We had, on the second day I had Rear Admiral Kilkenny from the Navy come in and he said, “We’re here. What can we do to help? I’ve got H-60s. I’ve got H-53s.” So we provided operational mission taskings in Navy H-60s and H-53s. We had Army aircraft that came in that we provided tasking to. We had a Navy H-3 from Pensacola that we provided tasking to. Some other Marine Corps aircraft came in. So we were providing informal; without anything formally agreed to or written down on a wiring diagram, we provided informal operational tasking to aircraft in about four Department of Defense services as well as Coast Guard aircraft.

In terms of tactical control of aircraft it really was shared between Mobile and New Orleans. Mobile would get some operational information. They would launch the aircraft from around the country through Mobile to New Orleans on original Mobile operational tasking and then they would come into Air Station New Orleans to refuel, their crews would eat with us, get water, come into our operations center and get additional tasking. So for the aircraft that were returning to Mobile every night I would say the tactical control was split between Mobile and New Orleans as necessary, and as it develops - and I think that works pretty effectively based on the results - it wasn’t possible for Mobile’s operations center to have all the current information that we had. I maintained a liaison officer here on the Navy base with the Navy, with the task force. Once the task force stood up here at Belle Chase we had several Coast Guard officers that were just a quarter-mile from here so we could keep in continuous touch with them to know what was happening with the task force and what mission requirements were developing. We also had a liaison officer at the Superdome with the National Guard’s Eagle Base, which is their massive search and rescue effort. Essentially the National Guard and the Coast Guard were conducting two simultaneous search and rescue and evacuation and recovery air operations. Now I’ll say almost independently of each other they established their operation. We sent them a liaison officer so that we could know what they were doing and we also provided them aircraft. When they needed something done our liaison officer would call us and we would send them an aircraft to get it done. It was not a fully integrated air operation between Coast Guard and National Guard. Frankly it was just too large. I think it worked effectively to let them do their bit and we did our bit, and there was enough mission requirement out there that both organizations; the National Guard and the Coast Guard, could sort of run independent search and rescue coordination and tasking and still both be very busy and both contribute without getting in each other’s way.

Q: So you were able to coordinate what sectors you were going to do with the other agencies?

CAPT Jones: That came later in the week. That came starting about Friday. As long as there were people on the rooftops everywhere we did not grid the city. The necessity to grid the city came when . . . well I would break it down into what I would call initial search and rescue and secondary search and rescue/recovery. Once you’ve picked up everyone who’s waving a rag on a rooftop, now you’ve got to more systematically go back and sweep the city and you’ve got to identify whose left and who still needs to be

picked up. And the former, which is the initial search and rescue, that can be done by helicopter and small boat without gridding the city. It's not that big of a city. You can just fly over . . . the first three days anywhere you went you saw people waving for assistance, but by the second day; by Wednesday, I identified personally to General Honore and to Mayor Nagin and to Colonel Ebert at the New Orleans Homeland Security Department and the National Guard in the meeting we held at the Superdome on the 31st, I identified to them that, "You need to get literally", I told them, "I think 2,000 small boats and hundreds of troops and trucks and you need to start sweeping the city street by street and door to door, and you've got to look in attics and you've got to make sure people aren't trapped in there. Because if there are people trapped in an attic and they can't wave for help then the Coast Guard helicopters can't rescue them." I said, "We've picked up people off rooftops now for a couple days. Now you need to start sweeping the city door to door and looking in the houses, and if there's somebody in there you need to be able to pop a smoke and call in a helicopter; National Guard or Coast Guard helicopter, to rescue those people." So that's what I would call secondary SAR and recovery operations. And frankly, they waited until NORTHCOM came in with the Task Force Belle Chase and Coast Guard officers went and worked on Task Force Belle Chase; a SAR task force, and set up that grid system which then the Army and the Marines executed.

Q: Okay. And so the timeline pretty much is, on Monday you had your assets late in the day coming up through Grand Isle and Venice, is that correct?

CAPT Jones: Yes, the timeline, yes.

Q: Okay, and then you get here to Air Station New Orleans. You're here overnight or are you doing operations overnight? What is the schedule?

CAPT Jones: Yes, Air Station New Orleans was on-scene over the city in the early afternoon and began rescue operations. Very shortly thereafter Coast Guard Air Station Houston helicopters arrived as well as Aviation Training Center Mobile helicopters arrived and began also augmenting the rescue operations.

Q: Were these operations 24/7 or how did that go?

CAPT Jones: Yes, those operations were 24/7.

Q: Okay.

CAPT Jones: The last Air Station New Orleans aircraft landed at 1130 p.m. on Monday the 31st and that was my aircraft actually with 8.7 hours on it. So then what we did not have is, because our other crews had all evacuated the airfield, we didn't have the status of the airfield and we didn't have fresh crews for my five Air Station New Orleans helicopters flying in to replace the bagged crews. So those helicopters sat until first light when the bagged crews got up and started flying again. But in the meantime, overnight, we had Air Station Houston, we had ATC Mobile, we had other Coast Guard units

coming into the area and they were flying, so there was continuous Coast Guard search and rescue presence over the city for the first six days after Katrina. There was no time where there was not Coast Guard helicopters flying with the exception of, I believe it was Day Two or Day Three, at about three in the morning the crews reported severely reduced visibility due to haze and fog, and so we recalled all the aircraft at that time. So there's about a three-hour gap where no aircraft were flying because it was extremely dangerous flying at night with Night Vision Goggles with all those other helicopters and not being able to see very well.

Q: Now were you able to track how many sorties were done during the day, an average day?

CAPT Jones: Yes, we have all that information. We had Operations Officer LCDR Tim Tobiasz and the folks helping him – all pilots who had flown all day - who worked very, very hard with flipcharts all over the wall to gather the data every night and we knew the data would be needed for a variety of purposes later on. And so we did gather the data from each aircraft. When they were done for the day, from each aircrew we got all their flight information; how long they flew, where they flew and how many lives were saved, so we were able to keep track of all that data.

Q: Okay, and can we get a copy of that for what we're doing here?

CAPT Jones: Yes.

Q: So describe what was going on with the command during that time. You were getting spotty communications with the command but you were able to update them. Is there anything that you could recommend as an improvement in the future on that kind of communication since you're in an area that gets walloped by this kind of activity with the weather and everything, because satellite phones weren't coming on?

CAPT Jones: Well yes, there are two things I guess. One is you want to have the best technology available at every unit in the case of an emergency that you can communicate with, whether that's satellite phones or some other means. But the other thing frankly is you really ought to assume that you're going to lose all your communications and make sure you have established operational doctrine and procedures that allow you to function effectively and successfully in the absence of communications. So don't put all of your hopes on, "Let's get better radios." Put all your hopes instead on, "When the radios go down let's make sure that our people are trained and instructed in such a way that we know that even if we can't talk to them for the next 48 hours we know they're going to do the right thing and they're going to get the job done." I think that's the most important thing you can do. And then if the communication system doesn't go down, well that's great, that's just a bonus. But if you don't have the confidence that your people can operate safely and effectively in accordance with your priorities then that's a problem and that wasn't the case here. In this case Admiral Duncan had made it very clear of what his Commander's Intent was. We knew very well what the priorities were and frankly I would have been happy to go for five days without

ever talking to the district. In terms of operations I'm sure we would have been very successful. Now it was critical that we talked to the district daily in terms of giving them updates on requirements for support. It was very important that we talked to them daily to let them know the severity of the situation; to let them know we needed more aircraft, we needed more air crew, we needed generators, we needed berthing, we needed food and we needed water. So we were able to communicate those things daily up to the district and they were able to provide support through the logistics side of the Incident Command - Incident Management Team.

Q: Was the logistical supply chain delayed though since the hurricane had been through here, and you know I guess flying in is pretty easy but were there any things that you needed that you couldn't get or were delayed because of weather or the conditions around there?

CAPT Jones: Yes, I would have to say that really I'm very impressed with the response of the logistics system. I mean we had people here pretty quickly. Certainly our logistics system worked much more quickly than the Department of Defense's logistic support system. They require much greater spool-up time. Our folks were able to work, if necessary, on the basis of phones calls in the absence of formally drafted tasking orders and message instructions so I think we were able to get help in here quickly.

The biggest thing that we needed that maybe took an extra couple of days to get was pretty early on, I think by the second day, we identified that I needed extra staff officers here at the air station. Because every, if you don't know, at the air station every officer is a pilot and I needed every single pilot flying and yet I also had a tremendous amount of staff work that had to get done, and what I needed was about a half-dozen officers; lieutenants, lieutenant commanders, to come in and man the operations desk and do aircraft scheduling, mission assignment, keep track of data, keep track of sortie information and lives saved, and report up to the district. And so it took several days to get those folks in here as well but then they were pouring resources into the entire New Orleans and Mobile/Mississippi area so I can't really say that it was slow. It's just that even a one-day delay was too long for us. But certainly I'd identify for in the future that one of the first things that's needed in the aftermath of a big disaster is those operational units need staff. They just don't need operators to be sent to them TAD. They need staff to be sent to them TAD because there's a lot of staff work that has to take place at an operational unit and the operators are all out there operating. And I was forced, unfortunately, to have folks that were flying around the clock also sitting on the desk around the clock so it made it hard to get crew rest.

Q: Well would you say that's one of the policies or procedures that needed to be improved is to provide that support? Are there any other things that you could see as far as improvements on procedures?

CAPT Jones: It turns out the lessons learned, other than communications technology and identifying the specific logistics requirements that are needed in the aftermath of a disaster like that, you know I frankly see in lessons learned many more strengths than

weaknesses; many more, “Hey, I guess that works”, rather than, “Gee, that was screwed up” type of items. I think the Coast Guard’s response really was phenomenal given our numbers. I mean look at what the other agencies brought to bear, particularly when you compare the Coast Guard against the Department of Defense. When you look at the assets that they had; the resources they had available, and then the relatively miniscule assets and resources the Coast Guard was able to bring to bear because of our smaller size, it’s phenomenal what the Coast Guard accomplished. So I think you have to really . . . any thorough post-Katrina investigation and report really needs to look at not so much what went wrong, certainly you want to look at what we can do better next time, but you need to look at, “What worked and why did it work?” We want to be sure as the Coast Guard moves forward in the coming decades of change that we identify what it was that made us successful in Katrina and that we hang on to those things; that we don’t lose them. And I think it’s really important as we move forward with the Incident Command System; with ICS, which you know we’ve been moving forward with ICS over the last several years, it’s the mantra that’s preached. I know when I went to Contingency Preparedness, Command and Control School in Yorktown they preached to all of us who were 0-5 and 0-6 commanding officers that, “Hey, you need to get onboard with ICS. That’s the way we do it”, and we need to make a distinction between the incident command system as it exists as a fairly large administrative bureaucratic organization to make logistics requests and to do tasking orders and to document and to do financial reimbursement and tracking, we need to differentiate between that and our traditional Coast Guard operating principles. Because it would be very easy to just focus on ICS and lose the focus on our traditional operating principles, which are frankly what enabled us to succeed so well with the support in the background of ICS. So I see it as ICS enables us to get the proper funding during the crisis, to get logistical support and to keep track of information that has to be reported up. But in the first 48 hours of the disaster what saved lives had nothing to do with ICS. It had to do with the Coast Guard’s traditional operating principles, the principle of clear objective; a clear objective as established by the commander’s intent. That’s what we talked about earlier where you have to be confident that all your field commanders know what the priorities are. On-scene initiative, which is where every small boat coxswain, every helicopter pilot knows that he or she is empowered to make decisions on-scene without asking permission or without waiting for guidance. Flexibility; where if you have a certain set of operating orders and you get to the scene and you discover that it’s a completely different situation, you don’t have to sit back and scratch your head and ask, “Now what should I do?” You simply take action using your training and your judgment and your risk management practices. So it’s critical, I think, that we build into ICS and all of its permutations, including the National Response Plan, an emphasis on those key operational qualities that allow you to succeed and save lives in the first 48 hours of a disaster. And again, that’s on-scene initiative, its flexibility, its independent operations, it’s clear objective and it’s unity of effort. Those are the things that help you succeed and none of that’s really part of ICS. ICS is more of an administrative organizational structure to the operator that’s out there doing the mission.

Q: Well I was going to ask you if there was any training that you thought would be beneficial to Coast Guard personnel after this event. Is there anything that you would

recommend? I mean some people have said that additional ICS training would be more beneficial but in your eyes what do you think about that?

CAPT Jones: Well I don't want to say ICS training is not beneficial. I mean I think it's very beneficial. The folks that are up in Alexandria and Saint Louis who are using the ICS system, they accomplished great things using the ICS system. So I'm just differentiating. I'm making sure that we understand that there are two components to response to a disaster, whether it's an oil spill or a search and rescue, and ICS isn't the whole thing. It's the background. It's how it all works sort of in providing logistic support and then after the first 48 hours are over once you have to start bringing in a lot of forces to augment the effort. But the initial response to any, whether it's a law enforcement action or a search and rescue case or an oil spill, the initial response is always going to be based on our core operating principles and that's based on a clear objective, on-scene initiative, flexibility and independent action. It's not based on ICS. So they're both very, very important and I think we have to focus on both of them.

Q: Well do you see any training in rescuing in an urban environment? There are certain search and rescue groups who specialize in that. Do you see that as a beneficial thing that the Coast Guard should participate in or is the training that they're getting right now, like the rescue swimmers, sufficient enough along with the fact that they are first responders and they have to make on-scene decisions? So what I'm saying is, is there any other additional training say for operational people that would be beneficial to them in the future?

CAPT Jones: Right. Well I think New Orleans is a pretty unique environment. And coastal Louisiana, in terms of the type of flooding we had here during Katrina and Rita, there aren't many places in the country where the Coast Guard is ever going to have to respond in the way it responded to Katrina and Rita. We've got Wilma headed for Florida right now. If Wilma comes across the tip of Florida as a CAT 5, which I don't think it will. It's going to be a CAT 2. But even if it does, if it just shreds the coastline, the fact of the matter is, the next morning the sun's going to be out and there's going to be homes that are shredded and lots of recovery that needs to be done but there are not going to be people on rooftops in 12 feet of water. Coastal Louisiana is a pretty much unique environment in that regard. So whether the entire Coast Guard needs to have instruction in urban SAR and flood ops based on Katrina, I don't think so. I think the Coast Guard aviation training and rescue swimmer training served our people pretty well in responding to Katrina and Rita. There are some minor adjustments. We certainly want to capture the rescue swimmers' lessons learned and have an extra supply of crash axes on hand and things like that. In terms of our training, I don't think it needs too many changes to accommodate a future Katrina-type situation.

Q: Well is there any training that you received that you fell back on that really helped you to get through this ordeal as the CO of this air station?

CAPT Jones: I can't think of anything specific. No, I guess maybe 22 years of experience was useful [chuckle].

Q: Well what was it like being here with the crews? What was the mood like? Give us the atmosphere and how you were dealing with your personnel.

CAPT Jones: Yes, I think the mood at Air Station New Orleans was just phenomenal and indescribable, and maybe in all the other interviews you've done you can capture some bits and pieces of it. But we were here at what we felt was the ground zero of a battlefield and I don't use battlefield to imply shooting but just people working around the clock under extremely stressful and arduous conditions. So we had folks coming back from eight hours of flying, utterly exhausted, sucking down bottle of Pedialite to keep from passing out, and then yet somehow a few hours later those folks were out turning aircraft around. They were working. They were offloading pallets of food and water. After they got some sleep they were flying again. And the level of adrenalin and morale in the face of almost unbearable physical hardship the first four or five days here where the air conditioner wasn't working consistently and its 98 degrees out and 95 percent humidity, so people were exhausted. And yet I've never, in that first week after Katrina, I've never seen either people that were more exhausted and more beat up and tired and at the same time had a higher morale in my life. It was just phenomenal to see these people from around the Coast Guard . . . every air station in the Coast Guard had people in the theater and every one of them was walking through my hangar deck. And every one of them I knew . . . you see the animation in their voices when they were talking and doing hangar flying and it was just the highest morale I've ever observed anywhere despite the fact that people had never been more tired, which tells you something about what morale is all about. It's not just about having liberal leave policies. People that work hard and accomplish things have the highest morale of anyone regardless of other factors.

Q: Now did you have an opportunity to go out on one of these missions or at certain points were you making overflights to assess the conditions?

CAPT Jones: Well whenever we have a hurricane evacuation I always fly as a pilot on one of the helicopters within the unit. Now if it's a hurricane a hundred miles from here and we stay in New Orleans I don't fly. I stay here at Command and Control and I send the crews out. But I sort of . . . the Captain stays with his ship. Well my ship's the helicopters when we evacuate the unit so I stayed with the helicopters, and on the first day flew quite a lot, almost nine hours until almost midnight on the first day. After that I flew limited amounts; a couple hours a day, to just keep my hand in it and make sure I had a good sense of what was going on but I didn't do much flying after that first day - I turned that over to the aircrew - and it was quite exhausting enough just trying to retain control of the situation. I made sure everybody was taken care of.

Q: Now at some point you were sending people over to Mobile for rest and relief.

CAPT Jones: Right, by about the fifth day we had a lot of aircrew pouring into the area and we were able to rotate all of our crews out, so we started rotating folks to both Houston and Mobile. Mobile was pretty full up but they provided some berthing in the

barracks there. Houston was able to provide hotel rooms and rent-a-cars and they did just a . . . Air Station Houston did a phenomenal job of helping our crews out. So we rotated everybody out for 24 to 48 hours of rest, myself included. I went to Mobile for two nights. I was up there for about 36 hours. The operations officer and the XO also got away for a couple of days, because frankly, by about the fifth or six day we were done; we were tapped out. I was well aware that I was losing effectiveness and functionality just from shear exhaustion so I rotated out with the urging of [chuckle] repeated phone calls from Captain Paskewich telling me the Chief of Staff was demanding to know when I was leaving.

Q: So what did you have, like a couple hours sleep, kind of sleep, during the day?

CAPT Jones: Yes. I mean the first night after Katrina, again, I flew until almost midnight and I spent two hours in the operations center with the ops officer and the XO getting things squared away at the unit and trying to talk to the district and tell them what we needed, and keeping track of the aircraft that were in the air. And then about two o'clock I went on the little two-seat mini-couch; loveseat in my office. I curled up on that and slept maybe two hours. I got up the next day. The next day I stole a mattress from somebody and I said, "I've got to have a mattress." So I put a mattress on my floor and slept on a mattress on the floor for the next couple of weeks after that. And everyone was sleeping on cots or on mattresses on the floor or in a corner on the floor. Crew ops require adequate crew rest and the adequate crew rest here was you're in the training room with 40 other people on a cot, head to head, toe to toe, and with the air conditioner not working half the time and sweating profusely, and eating MREs and drinking bottled water, and without a shower.

And as far as the facilities; we had one porta-potty outside for about a hundred people and so we said, "Unless it's Number Two you're going to have to go in the ditch." So we had a ditch out behind this building that everyone used. We probably don't need this in the official record, but anyway, it is now.

Q: [Chuckle] We have the real story.

CAPT Jones: Yes, the real story; everybody peed in the ditch.

Q: I mean the sector had the same problem.

CAPT Jones: Oh yes, exactly.

Q: And they had four or five days without any kind of facilities because they couldn't get anything trucked in.

CAPT Jones: Right. We finally got . . . the logistics guys were able to get us a dining facility, which is a truck essentially with refrigerators and stoves in the back and that was on about Day 11. So the first ten or eleven days we ate MREs and I can't complain about that because folks over in Iraq are eating MREs.

Q: When did you get the porta-potties, or the one?

CAPT Jones: The one we had already and/or got it quickly. We didn't get multiple ones until the fourth or fifth day and that's the first time people didn't have to go in the ditch anymore [chuckle].

Q: Well I imagine that improved morale a little bit . . .

CAPT Jones: A little bit.

Q: . . . to start seeing the supplies coming in.

CAPT Jones: A lot of people enjoyed going in the ditch.

Q: So did you have much contact with the sector as time went on or did communications improve?

CAPT Jones: Yes, I mean I was able every day to talk to Captain Paskewich at the sector; our sector commander, and to the district. They were calling constantly and we just couldn't get back to them all the time because there were only one or two phones working and you've got, you know you get a phone call, "You've got to call the district right away." Well in the meantime five other people come up to you that have urgent needs that have got to be addressed right away and so you just can't stay on the phone constantly. And to some extent the limited ability to communicate helped us operate because we spent more time operating and less time reporting and talking, but we were able to report and talk enough that I think they got what they needed from us although not as timely as they would have liked.

Q: Now the helos; the 60s and 65s, what kind of air time do they have? If they launch out of here . . . ?

CAPT Jones: Yes, a 60 with three external fuel tanks can fly for almost six hours; about five and half hours I think typically. An H-65 can fly for about . . . well here's the difference. Of course you have H-65 Bravos and Charlies. The Charlies are the new ones and we only had a few of those in the theater and those worked great. They've got a lot of power. They can stay on-scene about a half hour longer. The 65s, although technically they can fly for about two and a half hours, the problem was the only way you fly for two and a half hours is with a full load of gas. And once the winds died down from the hurricane, for the next four days the temperatures were in the high 90s with humidity in the 90 percentile, which meant that, yes, you could put two and half hours of gas in the helicopter but it's only a five-minute flight to the scene; to where there are people that need to be rescued, so you fly five minutes and now you have to either dump an hour's worth of fuel or fly in circles for an hour. So for the most part the 65s had to take off with a limited fuel load in order to begin conducting rescue operations as soon as they arrived on-scene. And so that was a severe hindrance to operations

having these 65 Bravos, a very power-limited aircraft, in the worst possible condition, which is very hot and very humid and lots of people needing to be picked up.

Q: What's the payload capacity? Like if you filled it up halfway, about how many people weight wise . . . ?

CAPT Jones: It was difficult in most circumstances to pick up more than about three adults. I had, I think, nine kids on there at one time but those were just little kids.

Q: That's in a 65?

CAPT Jones: In an H-65 Bravo.

Q: Okay.

CAPT Jones: Yes. So for the most part it was difficult to pick up more than about three adults and in many cases you'd pick up only one or two and then had to go drop them off before you could pick up anybody else. If you were to listen to the hoist camera tapes – I listened to my own hoist camera tape from the first day which captured about 90 minutes of hoisting – I was surprised to remember by listening to the tape how many times the non-flying pilots were calling out, "Power, power", and were showing yellow segments on the engine indicators, even red segments occasionally. It was very difficult and stressful flying because of the fact that you were operating the aircraft on its margin all the time in the worst possible environmental conditions.

Q: So you actually participated in some of the hoists the first day?

CAPT Jones: Yes, the first day I flew all day and all night.

Q: Do you know how many hoists you did?

CAPT Jones: I think that day we did about 25.

Q: And how many people did you transport do you think?

CAPT Jones: I don't even know. We don't really keep track of those. I mean we kept track of lives saved, which we define a life saved pretty much as someone picked off a rooftop. If we landed somewhere on a runway and loaded up people and transported them we really didn't count that as a life saved.

Q: Now was the Coast Guard the first people on-scene or did you see any Navy?

CAPT Jones: Oh absolutely, no. The Coast Guard was absolutely the first folks on-scene; H-65s from Air Station New Orleans followed quickly by H-65s and H-60s from Houston and Mobile, and then soon after that from other units around the Coast Guard. And now Monday night; on the first night, National Guard helicopters were flying too.

They had 6 helicopters, 2 UH-1s and 4 H60s rescuing their own people trapped in Jackson Barracks. We were out there first and they were out there not too many hours behind us. Navy and Marine Corps helicopters started showing up in small numbers the next day and subsequent couple days and it was about the third day that large numbers of active Army and Navy/Marine Corps helicopters started showing up.

Q: So Wednesday or Thursday, that's when the congestion really started?

CAPT Jones: Well no, it was very congested even by the second day just from the Coast Guard helicopters and the National Guard helicopters. The sky was dark with helicopters; definitely very, very congested. And it was not possible to provide air traffic control to all of them because they were simply operating too close together. You know air traffic control is based on the concept that you keep aircraft far apart. You know in the instrument flight rules world of air traffic control, when two aircraft are approaching within a mile it's considered pretty scary stuff. In our case we had helicopters that, by the nature of the mission, had to be operating within a few hundred yards of each other. So the idea that anyone could be watching a radar screen providing separation to all those aircraft is simply just not possible. It really relied on the individual aircraft pilots and crew to keep their heads on a swivel; to keep alert to avoid a midair collision in that way, which they did.

Q: So they were basically communicating within the crew cockpit and basically having to block out what's going on on the radio because maybe people were stepping on one another?

CAPT Jones: Well there was a frequency established by the overhead air - well we gave it to them – the overhead aircraft on Coast Guard Common 345.0 but that radio was so busy that it was almost impossible to get a word in edgewise. But we were able to communicate with other aircraft periodically just by saying, "Hey, aircraft over LSU Hospital, this is so and so 200 yards behind you", and that type of thing.

Q: Now how did that work in nighttime operations? That must have been the ultimate stress to have the communication lines filled with talk and then you're trying to look around in a dark environment and rescue these people. The stress level must have been phenomenal.

CAPT Jones: Yes, it was pretty stressful at night because there were no lights over the city. The towers were unlit. Cell phone towers, radio towers, power lines; all the things that normally would be lit at night were unlit. And of course by the nature of the mission you're flying very, very low. So fortunately on most nights the Night Vision Goggle conditions were pretty good. You could pick up cell towers and radio towers and power lines on your goggles if you were very alert. We did require any aircraft flying into New Orleans, we required them to come in in the daytime and fly in the daytime before they fly at night or to have mixed crews so that they would put in a New Orleans pilot in a helicopter from Savannah, for example, so that one of the pilots was familiar with the local area. It's bad enough flying at night over an unlit city but if you're unfamiliar with

the city than that's pretty unsafe, so we didn't do that.

Q: Well what would you say was your main concern that you really worried about as far as your operational people going out there?

CAPT Jones: Yes, the two things I was concerned most about continuously the first four or five days was a midair collision. I was very concerned about a midair collision. And it's a tremendous tribute to the alertness and the professionalism of all the aircrews of all the different services that there was no midair collision. And the second thing I was concerned about is that there would be some sort of crash and we wouldn't know about it. Typically when a Coast Guard aircraft goes flying you establish a radio guard with a Coast Guard unit and you give them your call sign, your position, and then every 15 minutes you update your position. So the worst case scenario is 15 minutes goes by after you've crashed and they notice you're missing and start looking for you. Well there was no unit anywhere that was capable of maintaining a radio guard for all those aircraft. I mean can you imagine having some poor OS2 somewhere in a comm center listening to 20 different helicopters calling in for their every 15-minute position check? It's just not physically possible, particularly with the poor comms that we had. So we were tracking what aircraft were in the area as they arrived and departed. But frankly for much of the time that they were overhead, had there been an accident we would not have known it until someone reported it or until several hours went by and we said, "Hey, has anyone heard from the 6522 lately? They should be here for gas by now. Where are they?" So that was a great cause of concern and one that we discussed at length at, "How can we get around this", and there was no answer. It just simply wasn't possible. You would have had to put about five different comm sta's to work keeping track of all the different Coast Guard helicopters and keeping updated position reports. It just wasn't possible.

Q: Now did you have any involvement with the Auxiliary at all? Did they provide any kind of assistance?

CAPT Jones: Yes, the Auxiliary provided extensive logistics support. Some of it we arranged. Other, it was arranged through the district; the air liaison office. We had several individuals who served up at the district air boss staff at the IMT who coordinated the Auxiliary and the Air Auxiliary did a tremendous job as they always do.

Q: Mike Baker is the DSO, right?

CAPT Jones: Yes.

Q: Okay. Now can you tell us one of the most memorable moments? I know there are many stories that you might want to recount but is there something that stands out in your mind that you'd like to recount for us now for Coast Guard history?

CAPT Jones: Oh gosh, the most memorable stories. There are so many. Yes, it is hard. It's hard to really single anything out. You know honestly the most . . . I guess the

things that impressed me the most aren't really the specific details but just the overwhelming . . . there was . . . I never go to *Fred's Place* but I went to *Fred's Plac*e a couple times in the last month because I was curious what people were saying. There's a guy from Kodiak that – I'll give you a copy and send it to you; print it up for you – he wrote a great piece on what he observed as an outsider who came to Air Station New Orleans about what was happening here and that was just tremendous; just observing countless times individual petty officers just working their tails off around the clock, and just being amazed; over and over and over again to be amazed at people's performance and the morale and their enthusiasm. I'll never forget that; to see guys like Rodney Gordon out again and again with an old piece of junk generator that we were stuck with, crapped out again, and he's out there in blistering heat, not having slept probably in 36 hours. He's got his sleeves rolled up. He's got his hands on hot pipes dripping hot oil on him and he's working and laughing, "Hey Captain, the damn generator crapped out again", just laughing and working and getting it fixed; and countless guys on the hangar deck doing the same thing; and folks who have never parked more than five helicopters before figuring out a way to put 12 H-65s on our little ramp, parked perfectly so that they could be started up in the morning and taxi out and they could taxi in during it to get gas and get out without any mishaps - nobody ran into any light poles.

Nobody hit anything - and just extraordinary professionalism; and the folks working around the clock maintaining the aircraft and somehow keeping track of the paper records so that they knew what aircraft were due for inspection; and to see aircrew from around the Coast Guard chomping at the bit to get here and help out and participate; and to see people facing situations that normally any one of them would have required a CISM debrief and take a week off, and just going back out there and doing it again, and then seeing the CISM counselor show up; you know the Chaplain show up and the logistics folks who did show up. But I guess just the overwhelming displays of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of instances of overwhelming dedication and devotion to duty is what sticks with me about this whole thing.

And then of course just the success of the whole operation, the fact that somehow all these people from around the Coast Guard got together and pulled off literally tens of thousands of rescues between the helicopters and the boats. And the fact that you can take a rescue swimmer from Savannah and stick him on a helicopter from Houston with a pilot from Detroit and a flight mech from San Francisco, and these guys have never met before and they can go out and fly for six hours and rescue 80 people and come back without a scratch on the helicopter. There is no other agency that can do that. I don't care if you're talking about a commercial outfit or DOD. The DOD wouldn't dream of putting a person from one squadron in an aircraft from another squadron and doing a mission. They would never do that. They'd be terrified of an accident and yet we did it routinely. And the same is true with the small boat community. I know they did the same thing. You need a body, you grab someone, you go do the mission and they'd come back successful and safe.

Q: Now were you also concerned about the fact that some people were panicking? I

know some of the rescue swimmers said that people would panic and they kind of felt threatened. Did you hear anything about those kinds of missions?

CAPT Jones: Yes, we heard some of that. We were very concerned. We made sure we told the rescue swimmers and pilots not to go into situations where they didn't feel comfortable and if they needed to back out, then back out. We did hear the reports throughout the week of gunfire, which we never were able to find out if they were true or not. Now seven weeks after the fact we know that some of those reports were true. There were shots fired at aircraft although we don't know if any were fired at Coast Guard aircraft. We do know there had been arrests made for firing at aircraft but we don't know who did the firing or why. But at the time, yes, there were many instances like that that caused us concern. But what we told our aircraft commanders, pilots and crew was just, "You have to make the decision on that. Sitting back here in the comm center I can't make the decision for you whether it's safe to proceed. You have to rely on your judgment", and I think that that proved very effective because I think they made good decisions and used their judgment well. I don't think any of our people ran into an untenable situation and I think they backed away when they needed to.

Q: Now the concern about the water as far as having the rescue swimmers go down in it; was that early on or did people realize as it went on that . . . ?

CAPT Jones: Well we always talked about it well before Katrina came. We always said, "You know if the big one hits New Orleans and it's underwater that water is going to be some nasty stuff." It's going to be full of sewage as you would expect. But the unique charms of the New Orleans area, which includes Benzene and MEK and God knows what other chemicals besides gasoline and oil that they produce around here, those things are all in the water as well. If you happen to be hoisting someone from the house next to a dry-cleaning shop, you know who knows what's in the water there. So we were very concerned about that. There was nothing that we had and nothing I'm aware of even now that we could do to prevent swimmers from being exposed to that water other than not allowing them to go near the water. So what we did was the next best thing. We tried to mitigate the effects of exposure, which meant as soon as they came back we hosed them off, hosed off all their equipment and clothing and themselves, and we obviously made notes of who had been exposed so we could track that. But that was one of those things where, again, we told people, "You have to make the decision on-scene. Do you want to go down in the water or not? Is someone's life at stake? Is there another way to do the rescue without going in the water?" And it's always up to each individual swimmer to decide what he or she is willing to accept in terms of a risk. We don't know of any exposure effects at this time that were lasting. We had a few people that had mild, what they thought were chemical burns at the time that quickly went away. So I don't know if there are any lasting effects. I hope there's not. I don't believe there will be.

Q: Is there anything we haven't gone over that you'd like to share with us?

CAPT Jones: Oh gosh. Oh, there are a lot of things. I could go on for hours I guess.

Q: Go on [chuckle]. Were you personally affected by the hurricane? Did you have any damage to your home in the area?

CAPT Jones: The damage to my home was not significant. Personally how I was affected, as everyone else, my family left and so I'm a geo-bachelor now. My family went to Michigan and resettled up there. The kids are in school. All three of my kids attended Orleans Parish public schools last year in the elementary, junior high and high school level. And Orleans Parrish schools are very challenging, let's put it that way. It's a bad school system. Louisiana is ranked about 49th in the country in education and New Orleans has the worst public school system in Louisiana so that tells you that. So it's challenging getting them into good schools in Orleans Parrish and those schools are not going to reopen this year. So my family, like many other families, went away and resettled in a place where they could find a home and get the kids in a good school. So that's how I was personally affected.

Q: So you're going to go back and forth for a temporary amount of time?

CAPT Jones: Well for the school year. So for this school year my family will be there and I'll be here and I'll try to get home about once a month.

Q: Do you want to resettle them down here?

CAPT Jones: My tour is over next summer so that's really not in the cards.

Q: Oh, okay.

CAPT Jones: We'll move somewhere else next summer. I don't know where.

Q: Alright. Well thank you very much.

CAPT Jones: The other thing I would say is, you know the . . . let's see. Well I'll say a few things. On the second day of the operation the Coast Guard identified the need for water and food and we were taking people off of rooftops and putting them down in temporary staging areas in hundred degree heat. And we were frankly, as the hours went past and then the days past and there was no food or water; no sustenance, no tent cities were erected; no provisions were made for all these refugees that we had picked off rooftops and put on high ground, we were pretty shocked. And on the second day; on the 30th, I had conveyed that very firmly to the district and the district conveyed that up the chain. And so on Tuesday the 30th provisions were made. The Coast Guard officers, essentially using a unit credit card, bought water; pallet loads of water, and flew a C-130 from Clearwater to Dobbins Air Force Base, picked up pallets of water, and it was actually a Coast Guard C-130 that flew in the first water to the city; the first aircraft that landed at the international airport two days after Katrina – it was 8:15 in the morning on Wednesday the 31st of August – and that was the first water we brought it. And that water was then distributed by helicopter to people on rooftops and people in

these areas. So we view our role as initial response. We don't have the capacity or the manpower to do an entire city evacuation or sustenance of tens of thousands of survivors. We do initial response. We move survivors from immediate danger to a preliminary staging area with the expectation that other agencies will come in subsequently with hospitals, with food and water, with tent cities, with evacuation plans, and those things didn't happen. It was very, very late in the week that we saw any action at all on the part of the agencies you would think would be the responsible parties to provide support to all the survivors that we picked up. So that was a big disappointment to us, which we tried to mitigate by simply bringing in MREs and water. And again, it was Coast Guard C-130s that first brought in pallet loads of water and MREs, which we then immediately established an SOP here at Air Station New Orleans that no helicopter, whether they came from Mobile or wherever, that came through our doors to get gas; nobody would take off without food and water. And so every helicopter that took off after Wednesday took off with food and water and the first order of business was drop off your food and water and then start picking people up.

Q: Did they have designated places that they were dropping the food and water?

CAPT Jones: Yes, by about the second or third day they were set at about three or four places; the Cloverleaf, Lakefront, MSY, those were designated drop-off points.

Q: But there were no personnel to receive them. You just lowered it down.

CAPT Jones: Well in some cases there were people there and other cases we'd get word at 5 o'clock that, "Hey, Lakefront's closed. You can't drop anymore people off." "Okay, well where do we go? Where do we take the people?" "I don't know. Try the Cloverleaf." So you'd contact the Cloverleaf. "No, we're overwhelmed. We don't have anymore food and water. We have a near riot on our hands. You can't drop any people off here." "So where are we supposed to drop them?" So then what do you do? So sometimes we dropped them off against the wishes of the people there but there was just no choice because the cognizant authorities in other agencies were not evacuating the people and making the room or bringing them more support. So we had some very difficult situations where we were told . . . if we had injured people the hospitals very quickly; by the second day the hospitals were telling us, "Unless they're on death's door do not drop them here. We can't take anymore patients. We're in dyer straits ourselves. We don't have power. We've got six feet of water on the first floor. We can't take anymore patients." "Okay, where do you want us to drop them off?" Nobody knows. So until the Air Force came in with a C-141 and established a field hospital at International Airport – I don't know what day that was. I think it was probably the fourth day; like Thursday or Friday, that Thursday - until that point the first three days you had almost no place to take people that needed medical attention so they just suffered.

Q: Well did you have any problems with any of the agencies that you were working with?

CAPT Jones: I wouldn't say we had problems with them. I would simply say that they

didn't seem to be taking the actions that we would have expected if Coast Guard people had been in charge. And frankly, if a Coast Guard officer had been in charge of the Katrina response from Day One I think you would have seen a very different situation because Coast Guard people know . . . because of the fact that we are an operational response agency in addition to an administrative agency – and obviously we have a huge bureaucracy that does our finances and our personnel – but we do both. Other agencies that maybe they're primarily administrative in nature; they don't have an operational side. They had difficulty adjusting to the concept of, "You know there's people dying here and so let's throw the rules out the window." The Coast Guard doesn't have a problem throwing the rules out the window and save lives. We do whatever it takes to get the job done. Whereas in some other agencies I think there's a greater reluctance. They've been programmed to be very cautious and conservative because if they ever step out of the box they get spanked and so they don't have an operational mindset like some of these other agencies to go ahead and break the rules and just do what it takes and get permission later. And we act first and get forgiveness afterwards. We do that during a crisis.

Now if you tried doing that during a non-crisis time, you know the Coast Guard is like any other organization, you'll get in trouble. But when there's a crisis we are very forgiving of people taking the initiative to take whatever actions are needed to get done and that's really not true of a lot of other agencies. We also found during the Hurricane Rita response; during Rita, the Department of Defense came in with this very elaborate planned out grid system for searching and comments were made to the effect that, "Well Katrina response was a chaos. It was a train wreck." One general said it was a disaster. "So we're going to come in and we're going to save the day. We've got this great grid system that DOD developed for Task Force Rita." And it was all well and good with the exception of one thing: DOD is not flexible. DOD can't respond quickly to changes in the situation. They have to get permission all the way up the chain and all the way down again to do anything that deviates from the plan.

And with Rita what happened was the Coast Guard forces recognized the night before that, "You know what, it's not going to be in Texas. The SAR is going to be in coastal Louisiana. There's going to be destruction in Texas but there aren't going to be people that need to be rescued there." And so we had our game plan set up to immediately fly into Southwest Louisiana and start plucking people out of floodwaters, and guess what happened? That's what happened. Rita came in, it flooded heavily and we sent all of our helicopters in in tropical storm force winds; 60/70 knot winds, and they started plucking people off rooftops. And where is DOD? They were out doing their grid search in areas that didn't have any search and rescue. And to get them to deviate from that it took them hours and hours, and the only DOD assets that actually did any rescues during Rita were the ones that deviated from the assigned grid over the objections of their superiors in the chain of command. So that spells a big distinction between Coast Guard and DOD in terms of search and rescue, is that it's the Coast Guard and local responders; the sheriffs, the ambulance workers, the fire departments. They know how to do initial search and rescue response; the first response that requires great flexibility, on-scene initiative and low careenage.

The DOD's value comes in a couple of days later when you need to do the secondary SAR sweeps to make sure there's nobody left and when you need to bring in thousands of trucks and heavy lift aircraft to move supplies to people. The Coast Guard can't do that. DOD does that. That's what they specialize in. But the initial response really is the province of first responders and that's sheriffs, fire departments, police and Coast Guard. There were designated staging areas for Rita, which was seen as an attempt to overcome the fact that they didn't have good staging areas for Katrina, but the problem was the designated staging areas were in Houston and other places like that. So we had helicopters that actually lifted people off rooftops for Rita and were told by the overhead Department of Defense aircraft to take them to the designated staging area. That was almost a two-hour round trip flight away and we had to explain to them that, "You don't understand. We need to drop them off somewhere within five miles from here so we can immediately get back and do more search and rescue." And so our folks worked with the local Parrish officials down there in Abbeville and they established the Abbeville High School parking lot as the staging area, and the local fire department folks were there with food and water and medical care and it worked out very, very nicely but it required an ability to completely deviate from the plan like that on a moment's notice. It's flexibility, on-scene initiative, on-scene judgment, a clear objective which empowered search and rescue units. The field commander has delegated them the authority to make the decisions without getting permission and that's what spells the difference between a quick and effective rescue operation and a slow and laborious response.

Q: Now did you have any contact with the command post over at Zephyr Field at all? Did you have any communication with them?

CAPT Jones: We had pretty limited contact with them except just indirectly working with the sector because we talked to the sector every day and the sector had staff up at Zephyr Field. So in that regard we did but we didn't work directly with them.

Q: Yes. Can you describe the damage here at the station and what you need to do to get the infrastructure back up and running? You have an RV city over there and what's going on with that?

CAPT Jones: Yes, part of the hangar roof peeled back and then the roof peeled back on both of the side buildings that are attached to our hangar which contains maintenance spaces and berthing and lounges and offices, and so that enabled the floodwaters to come in from above during the heavy hurricane rainfall. And so those spaces were all pretty much destroyed because they were just soaked with water and they'd been condemned by MLC for black mold, so they're going to have to be gutted. So in the meantime our people that can't go back to their homes, which is the majority of our people, are living on base in an RV park. We basically have about 40 trailers and RVs. We have double-wide mobile homes set up to be classrooms and a dining facility and locker rooms and a rescue swimmer shop.

Q: And how long do you see this transitional period for this station?

CAPT Jones: I see it lasting until next summer but it's going to start phasing out during that period, so it will start phasing out . . . as more people are able to get into their homes fewer people will need to live on base. But it's going to be a transitional period that will last until, I think, next summer of 2007 and hopefully by then we'll have found places for people to live. But right now, even if we decided, "You know what. It's not healthy to live in an RV on the base. You need to get an apartment", which you'd have to find, there aren't enough places. There's a very great housing shortage right now and they're charging a premium for rentals so it's difficult right now to move people off. And the other thing is if people's schools; if their children's schools have not reopened you can't, you can move them off base and tell them to go back to their house but their families can't come back until the schools are open, so that would be enforcing geo-bachelorhood for them until the next school year; so for the next eight months or so.

Q: And that's taking a toll a little bit on the morale here, hasn't it . . . ?

CAPT Jones: Oh sure.

Q: . . . that they've been split up; the families.

CAPT Jones: Yes, splitting up families; it's bad enough being a geo-bachelor when you plan it, but when it's thrust upon you overnight without your knowledge and I mean you suddenly wake up and say, "Geez, I'm not going to be seeing my wife much in the next year. I'm not going to be able to go to my kid's ballgames." You're not going to be able to attend parent-teacher conferences. You're not going to be able to be a parent effectively for the next year or so, whenever you can scrape up the money to fly – or depending on where they are – fly to see them or drive to see them. So we're being as helpful as we can with our liberty policies and leave policies to allow people to . . . you know for some people having a three-day weekend is great. For some other people, if there family is in California they don't want a three-day weekend. They want to save up their three-day weekends until they can take eight days and go and make it worthwhile to spend $500 on airfare to go visit their family across the country. I will say that the Coast Guard's personnel system has been bending over backwards to find loopholes in the law and to change policy and waive requirements to give people support in terms of entitlements; per diem and expenses, and also entitlements for household goods storage. And so there are a lot of very difficult situations people find themselves in and my understanding from past disasters is the Coast Guard didn't work as hard and diligently to provide people that support as they are now. They've been working very hard now. I've been very pleased frankly with the amount of attention we've gotten from CG-1, "W", and the legal system, and MLC, ISD. They've all been very, very helpful. I really feel like the Coast Guard's bending over backwards to help our people out. I can't complain at all. It could be much worse.

Q: Now what's going to happen with the hangar? You said portions of it have been condemned.

CAPT Jones: Yes, they're going to basically . . . the buildings on the inside of the hangar are going to be gutted. They're in the process of putting a new roof on now and then they're going to gut the building down to bare cement and steel and they'll rebuild it, so actually when its all done it will be a very nice facility; nice new walls. And for the crew lounges; the chief's lounge, the crew lounge, the officer's lounge, the berthing, it's obviously going to be newly outfitted with new sheetrock and new furniture and new pictures, and all that kind of stuff.

Q: And today you're having an MWR event . . . .

CAPT Jones: Right, we had some of the spouses; Mrs. Paskewich – Mrs. Captain of the Port - and some other spouses band together to get a barbeque chef in and they're putting on a cookout for the troops, so that will be very enjoyable. We're looking forward to that. So little touches like that make our happy campground a great place to live.

Q: By the way, did you have any VIP visits like the President or anybody like that?

CAPT Jones: Yes, the Commandant came here on about the fourth or fifth day. The Commandant came twice. Admiral Crea; the Area Commander, came twice. Admiral Duncan came many times. There was a congressional delegation visit. They didn't come to the air station, they came to the airport, and we gave them tours. Essentially these senators, you know it was all the big names; Kennedy, Liebermann, going down to Senator Warner, and we put Coast Guard officers on each of their helicopters and the Coast Guard officers provided them – and I thought it was kind of funny – provided them the aerial overflight narration. So it was good that . . . they were flown in Army H-60s which are troop carriers that hold more people than ours do. But there were Coast Guard officers that provided the actual narration and talked about what the Coast Guard did. We also had Congressman LoBiando and Filner who came here to the unit; had a tour of the unit, and we had Senator Olympia Snowe came here to the unit. She spent two hours here, ate with the troops in the dining facility, and (unintelligible) gave a nice talk and we explained to her in great detail what our folks have done and she spoke to one of our rescue swimmers and one of our pilots. And about two days later she went on the floor of the U.S. Senate and gave a wonderful speech, which you should enter that in your historical record as well. She gave a speech and had a senate resolution subsequent to which the Coast Guard appropriation was passed for substantially more money than had originally been planned. So we like to think that Air Station New Orleans had a role in helping the Coast Guard get the money it deserves.

Q: Alright. Well thank you very much.

CAPT Jones: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW