

Photos by ALLISON LONG/The Kansas City Star

Amlinta Arguello, 68, (far left) was concerned for her husband, Armando, 78, whose leg had been operated on a week earlier. Both were rescued Friday by Missouri Task Force 1 members Diann Straatmann and Garland Shern in New Orleans.

## Baghdad conditions in Big Easy

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH  
The Kansas City Star

NEW ORLEANS — As they drive along Interstate 10, the rescuers can see thousands of people whose world was blown away.

And they are the lucky ones.

There's no traffic on the highway, just lines of human beings two or three deep, huddling under umbrellas and blue tarps, holding onto grocery carts or sitting on broken lawn chairs. Beside them are dear possessions piled high, along with water jugs and trash, including unfurled streams of used toilet paper.

It's about 8 a.m. on Friday, Day Four after Hurricane Katrina. The 38 men and women of Missouri Task Force 1 — doctors, paramedics, computer specialists, dog handlers, firefighters and a veterinarian — have spent long days riding in boats, wading in putrid water and chopping holes in roofs to save people who couldn't get out of their homes.



Along the highway, an elderly woman tries to doze, her head bobbing to her chest. A mother holding a sleeping child

looks up at the caravan, her eyes weary. Another, fists clenched, pounds the air, tears rolling down her sweaty face, begging the rescue workers in the armed convoy to rescue *her*. To stop. To take her somewhere else, anywhere away from here.

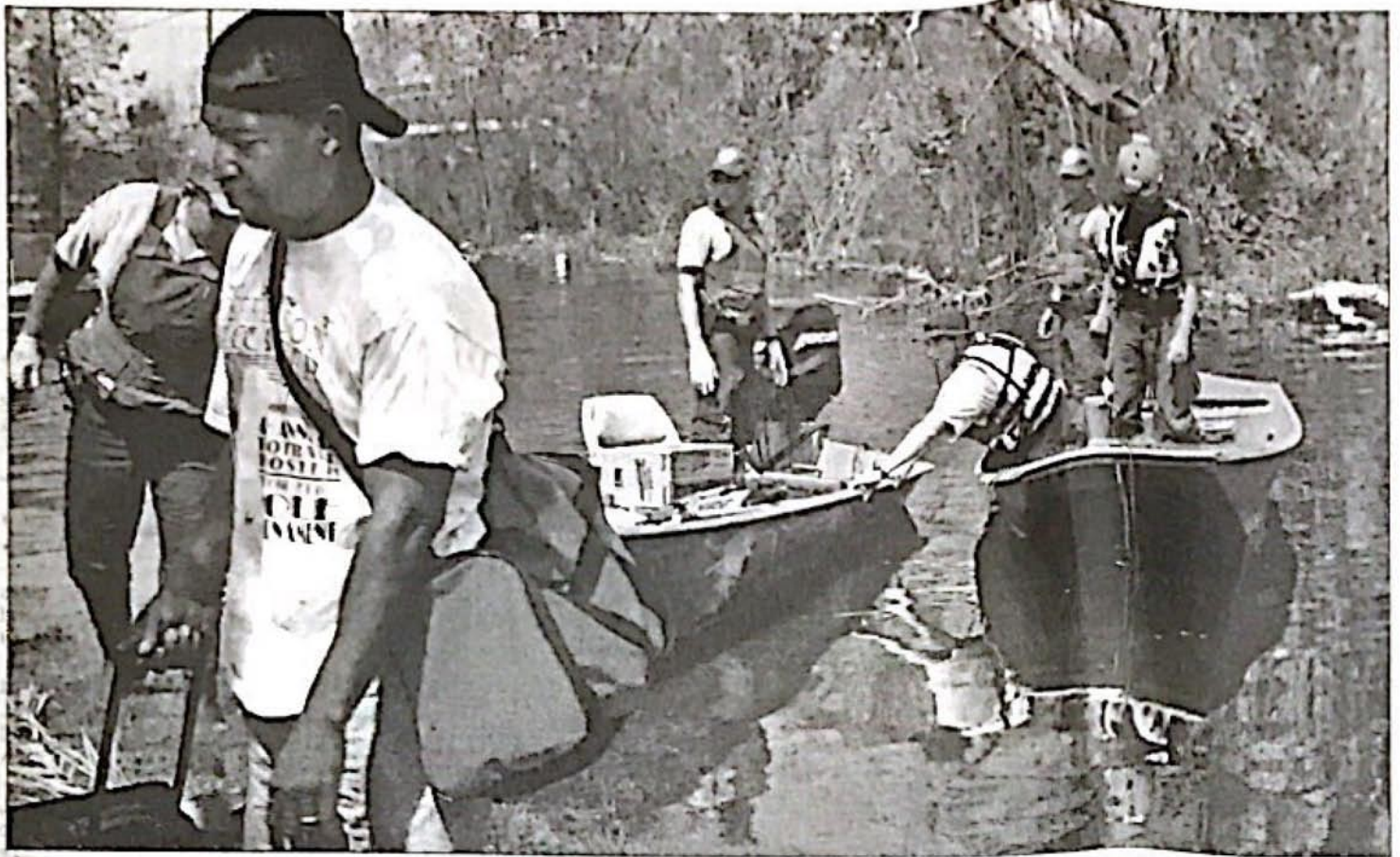
They cannot. They have another mission. They are heading to one of the most inaccessible parts of New Orleans.

In the distance, marring the skyline, a chemical plant burns. Black smoke blots out blue sky, drifting over a city already drowning in waters swirling with chemicals, parasites, bacteria, floating debris and corpses. Everything cooking in the heat.

Plunging into it all are the rescue workers, volunteers who have trained for this moment. But no amount of training can prepare a human heart for this.

The radio crackles with a Missouri drawl. "Put your AC on max and recycle





Photos by ALLISON LONG/The Kansas City Star

Willie Carey, 43 and a former Marine, stood on dry land for the first time since Katrina hit after being rescued by Missouri Task Force 1 on Friday from his home in New Orleans. "Tell people that all of us here appreciate the thoughts and prayers of everybody," Carey said.

## KATRINA: Team makes life and death decisions

Continued from A-1

it. That smoke's toxic," says Doug Westhoff, the team leader for Missouri Task Force 1. He doesn't have to tell anyone in the convoy to lock their doors. Some avert their eyes from the pain outside the vehicle's air-conditioned environment.

Westhoff, an assistant fire chief from the Boone County Fire Protection District, leads the task force. Their eyes have seen much. Frustrations even among the rescuers mount as chaotic moments disrupt planned missions in which hundreds of volunteers try to help tens of thousands. There is little infrastructure here. Even the hospitals are uninhabitable.

They are in a 4½-mile convoy with other urban task forces from Florida, Texas, Colorado, Tennessee, New Mexico and Arizona, among other states, organized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Other states' teams are helping in Mississippi and Alabama. The Environmental Protection Agency also is in New Orleans, including several employees from Region 7, Kansas City's district.

Overhead, the sky is thick with helicopters ferrying the worst off to medical teams at New Orleans International Airport.

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About 11:30 a.m., the convoy stops along Chef Menteur Highway. The 20-mile drive from their base in suburban Metairie took more than three hours because parts of I-10 are under water. But trucks and sport-utility vehicles can still get through in a single line.

FEMA organizes the area into a grid of 12- to 15-block sections. Missouri Task Force 1 is assigned to the intersection of Chef Menteur and Bullard Avenue in the northeast section of New Orleans. Its search will include a two-mile route that ends at Lake Pontchartrain.



The team members quickly unload their gear and set up a shelter stocked with coolers of water. Now they must wait. There are not enough johnboats. The heat index is already 105 degrees. Cell phones don't work. The team sits down and opens bags of Meals Ready to Eat, within view of two dead dogs in a parking lot across the street. A crooked sign advertises a company that UNBLOCKS MOST DRAINS. It's a sign that makes team members laugh.

A laugh much needed.

A man pedaling a bicycle approaches the Missouri rescuers. Mike Colberg, 59, says his house is under water, but he's staying. His wife is somewhere downtown, arrested days before the storm, and he's not leaving until he finds her.

There's a lot of us down the block that aren't leaving, he says. He has broken into a Winn-Dixie grocery and a Home Depot for supplies as he needs them. He doesn't want to join the pungent camp along I-10.

"But it's goin' from bad to worse to rotten .... really rotten. I've got to find her."

Before he pedals away, task force members warn him about riding a bike around the mob of people down the road.

Westhoff is on the radio, trying to connect his teams with boats. He wants four, and he wants his people to stay together with armed escorts. Chris Bosche, a physician from St. Louis, paces back and forth.

"Will we have guns with us, too?" Bosche asks. "That's fine with me."

In the first two days after the storm, the team rescued hundreds of people. But the number of victims has dwindled in this area. The people who are rescued now will be truly desperate. The teams will troll into a neighborhood, cut their motor and listen. They listen hard. The cries will be feeble.

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Three team members finally connect with a boat around 1 p.m. In minutes, they report over the radio that they found two men. They're OK.

"We kept thinking the water's gonna drain out," says Willie Carey, 43. He and his brother-in-law, Isaac Parker, 48, soon decided they couldn't wait. They'd heard it would be two months before the water would be gone. Conditions were too tough, even for Carey, a former Marine.

"Tell people that all of us here appreciate the thoughts and prayers of everybody," says Carey. "Tell my Aunt Tyne (pronounced 'Tiny') in Kansas City, Kansas, that I'm OK ... I'm fine. But we had to leave the cat behind."

He shook his head. "All the dogs along the street were hollering ... Tell my nephew I'm sorry we couldn't bring his cat ... Maybe it'll make it."

The men leave in a van driven by Bosche and paramedic Michael McCart.

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Bosche and McCart make their way to a Catholic church where more than 60 residents of an attached senior citizen center are trapped on the second floor. For five days, they had relied on one nun and two assistants who tried to keep them alive.

The two medical men enter the building, finding 15 bodies immediately. Wading through the muck to the second floor they find elderly people wall to wall. The nun says she was desperate as the waters rose but she and her assistants were not strong enough to move the bedridden patients. Then they discovered that the mattresses floated, so they rolled the patients one by one onto a mattress, floating them to the second-floor stairwell. Still, it took hours.

The little group of caregivers tried to make sure everyone drank water, giving them sips from a foam cup. But some, the nun said, were too far gone.

## About this story

Reporter Lee Hill Kavanaugh and photographer Allison Long are embedded with Missouri Task Force 1, a federal urban search and rescue team. They witnessed most of the events that occurred during the team's day; others were described by team members.

As other rescue teams arrived, Bosche and McCart helped triage the survivors, 63 of them. They were removed by teams from Missouri, Texas and Florida. The healthiest

were carried out first. Life and death decisions here. Save the ones most likely to survive.

Among the survivors were a double-amputee Korean War veteran and "a little old lady" who was afraid to get on the rescue helicopter that had been called in. She feared she might throw up, McCart said with a grin as he looked down at his flood-stained boots and pants.

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Back at the corner of Chef Menteur and Bullard, one Missouri boat team brings in another set of victims about 3 p.m. Aminta Arguello, 68, is helped out of the boat. She mumbles something and then falls to her knees to kiss the ground. The team lifts her husband, Armando, 78. One of his legs is in a splint. He is barefoot, pale and very frail.

"All of New Orleans is wet, isn't it? ... I kept him alive. I did it. I kept telling him, 'Don't you die on me!'" Aminta Arguello says in a rush of words. "We've been married 14 years. Both widowers. We made it out ... God smiled on us. He heard us."

The water had rushed into their one-story home and in minutes, the only dry place was the dining room table. She hoisted her husband, whose leg had been operated on a week earlier, onto the table. She tried to keep him dry, hydrated and fed. They were completely isolated; their radio didn't work.



After many prayers, she says, she heard the whine of a boat motor. "I hollered as loud as I could. 'We're here!'"

Armando opens his eyes and smiles. "My wife, she has a very commanding voice."

The rescuers laugh.

"We didn't leave before the storm because I was very ill, throwing up. You saved my life today," she says, reaching her arms out to the nearest rescuer. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

"Please, could someone call my son in Austin, Texas, and tell him we're OK."

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As the boats arrived, the teams rotated in and out, searching block after block of houses in water up to 8 feet deep. Even in places that had already been searched, the teams found more people. On this day, the final toll for Missouri Task Force 1 — not counting the senior citizens center — was 11 rescues, six bodies and several people who said they'd rather stay in their flooded homes than risk the crowded camps.

The sheer magnitude of devastation surprises the task force members. The waters have displaced everything.

Tim Corrado, 33, a firefighter from Kansas City, saw a dorsal fin at a shopping center, "cruising through the drive-through of the Shoney's ... I guess it came from the aquarium.

It flooded, too."

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The crew has orders to pull out each day by 6 p.m. The different state task forces have orders to line up together. The sun will be setting soon. After dark, in this city without electricity, New Orleans turns into a hostile environment resembling Baghdad. Without the mortars, but with the bullets, one rescuer says. Organized gangs roam the streets.

All around them are drier houses with broken windows. Vehicles, their batteries removed, litter the parking lots and road.

Two EPA-contracted airboats are unaccounted for, so trucks, trailers and boats must wait. No one wants to leave a rescuer in the approaching darkness.

After an hour, the boats are found. Lee Blackwell, a Jefferson Parish narcotics detective, had been searching for his grandfather.

Rescuers found him. **William Blackwell, 86, was wet but fine.**

The convoy makes its way back through New Orleans, passing again the throngs of people on the side of the road. The vehicles drive the wrong way on I-10. With fewer displaced people on that side of the highway, it's safer.

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By 9:30 p.m. most of the team arrives back at their base in suburban Metairie, the stadium of the New Orleans Zephyrs, a Triple A baseball team. But one group on a different mission is still out.

In situations as dire as this, not only are hurricane victims getting to the frustration flashpoint, so are some local authorities. Many of them also have lost their homes, and they are pulling double shifts trying to keep order.

One Missouri Task Force member recounts an incident that shows how stressed local authorities are growing.

Dustin Rackers, 25, of Jefferson City, was riding in a military truck with 15 rescued victims from a six-story apartment building. His job was to take them to the New Orleans airport. Most of these victims were in wheelchairs. FEMA told him to drop the victims there because medical workers were treating victims at the airport.

But when Rackers' team pulled into the airport, a local law officer pointed a gun at him and told him to go away. We're full, he told Rackers. Take them to the freeway.

"I could not drop those people along Interstate 10 ... I couldn't do it," he said.

So Rackers drives to the sprawling Saints facility, to temporarily leave the victims at the Missouri team's base camp. Again he is stopped. Several deputies and police officers point weapons at him. We don't care, one officer says, as Rackers tried to explain. Take them AWAY.

Rackers frantically calls FEMA, which again tells him to take the victims to the airport.

At the airport, another weapon is pointed in his face. Except this time, "a nurse was nearby and began yelling. 'We want them, we want them,'" Rackers said. All told, the victims had been in his truck for four hours as he drove back and forth.

"Everybody here seems to be losing it, you know?" He said. "There's a lot of people here who need help."

"I thank my lucky stars I don't have to deal with this at home."

Finally, at 11:29 p.m., after a 16-hour day, the last member of Missouri Task Force 1 takes a bite of dinner.

To reach Lee Hill Kavanaugh, call (816) 234-4420 or send e-mail to [lkavanaugh@kctstar.com](mailto:lkavanaugh@kctstar.com).