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Firefighters saved Paulette Gori, an emergency room doctor; her daughter, Jade Parkinson, 5 months; and her husband, Chris Parkinson, an associate professor of geology. Looters forced the family to flee the University of New Orleans.

For seven days they will rest

New Orleans firefighters are able to regroup after working nonstop for two weeks battling unimaginable conditions

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
The Kansas City Star

BATON ROUGE — His eyes show no emotion. His voice is flat, almost a whisper. And his now-ragged New Orleans Fire Fighter T-shirt is mostly frayed edges.

Just like its owner, Pat Ball.

Ball, 53, a firefighter for 31 years, spent tortured days watching his beloved city roiled by winds, water, fire, looting and death — events spawned by Hurricane Katrina that he was helpless to prevent. But he and his fellow firefighters weren't helpless when it came to saving human beings. They stayed behind when the evacuation orders sounded. They knew this would be the time the city would need them the most.

Only now are their stories beginning to tumble out, as fresh firefighters arrive

from around the country to relieve them of their duty.

Even heroes need to rest.

Rescuers who stepped in putrid flood waters, breathed their vapors, or witnessed the destruction and dying for days and nights without end, are getting help now from an array of medical teams and critical-incident counselors.

"Last night we had our first beer," Ball said Friday while sitting stiff and sore inside a relief center set up inside the Zoar Baptist Church. "I've been lifting so many people into boats it has taken a toll on my back."

He learns a chiropractor is located down the hallway, a few doors down from the podiatrist. Across the way other medical teams are poking arms with syringes full of Hepatitis shots. Ball has been here for two days.

Here is an air-conditioned place to

sleep on mattresses covered in clean sheets, blankets, complete with at least one hand-made, crayon-colored "Thank You" card from a children's Sunday school class. A nearby room holds tables full of clean socks and underwear and other clothing. Another has friendly faces offering cold drinks and hot-cooked meals, all provided by volunteers from the International Association of Fire Fighters Union.

Friday began seven days of rest. Seven days off, after two weeks of surviving horrid conditions. Seven days to process everything they've witnessed. Seven days to reunite with their own families and to try to salvage something from their own homes. More than 90 percent of firefighters lost everything they owned.

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"Those firefighters are heroes.
They saved us ... They saved my family."

REST: Firefighters get a break after working two straight weeks

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And seven days before they return to work to help with the grisly work of removing the dead, going door to door, searching top to bottom inside any structure left standing.

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On Aug. 28, as every television in New Orleans displayed images of the approaching storm, the firefighters of Engine Company 18 took shelter at Marina Towers, a large building in the New Orleans Yacht Harbor. They planned for the worst they could imagine.

Soon they would realize how limited their imaginations were.

Ball was watching whitecaps from a huge plate-glass window. Suddenly, the window flexed inward. Before he could shout a warning, it shattered, raining shards of glass on those below. Winds as loud as jet engines formed such a strong vacuum that at one point the men locked arms in a human chain to keep from being sucked away. They lurched their way to an inside stairwell for better shelter.

Eventually the winds died away. Then the waters started rising, breaching levees and covering everything, destroying everything.

"It looked like the water was burning," Ball remembered. Natural gas lines were breaking and the fuel bubbled up to the surface. Houses exploded. Entire blocks caught fire.

Hours later when they were able to leave the marina building, they knew what they had to do — find boats, find people. That first day they rescued nearly 100 people.

"We watched three houses burn. We watched helplessly," Ball said, quietly, remembering. The rescues included chopping through roofs when they heard screams, or saw hands waving through vents. They found one home where there was a glimpse of movement inside the bathroom window of a house. A man was trapped in water up to his chin.

Although he was looking at the firefighters, he wasn't screaming. He seemed calm, as if he was resigned to die, Ball said.

Ball kicked the window in and pulled the man out. Even two weeks later, that scene is the one he remembers most.

About the same time near downtown at the University of New Orleans, a dozen other firefighters had also commandeered boats. They and Chris Parkinson, 41, an associate professor of geology at the university, tried to pick up anyone they saw.

Over the following days and nights the crowd of survivors soon grew exponentially, massing at the dry portions of the university. Everyone huddled together waiting for help.

But no help arrived.

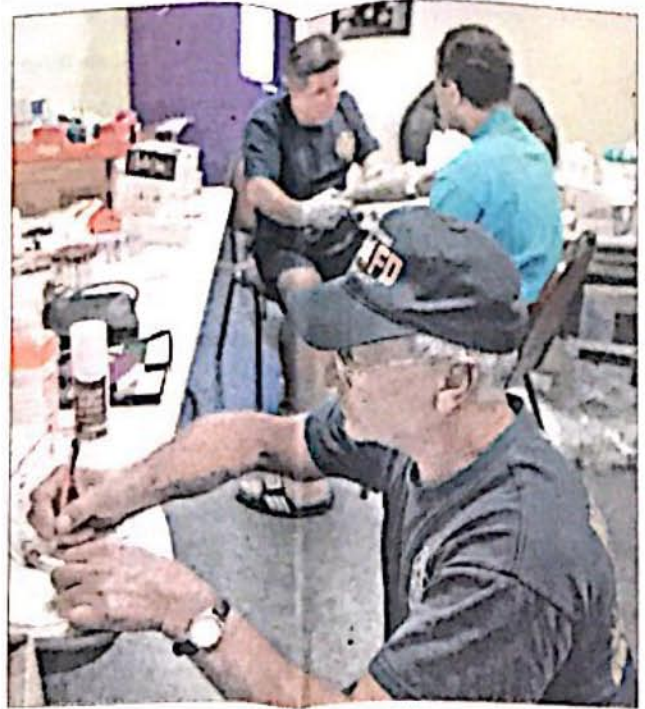
Instead, it was up to the team of firefighters to keep people alive. They collected generators, food and water as they trolled the waters looking for survivors. They were able to contact the Coast Guard, which flew rescue missions, boarding 15 persons at a time into two helicopters. The firefighters tried to keep the crowds calm and organized as people waited turns.

But with no food or water, tensions grew. The unsanitary conditions increased. The humidity and heat was sweltering. Frustrations changed to rage. Someone in the crowd had weapons. After shouting and a scuffle, shots were fired at the helicopters. Shots were fired into the crowd. Shots zinged past firefighters.

Four days later, Parkinson still shook as he retold the story.

"It didn't take long for it to get rough ... At least two rapes happened ... Rapes of two little girls ... After three days it was total chaos."

The firefighters tried to control the crowd, he said, but they had no weapons. When the mob mentality threatened their safety, the men barricaded themselves inside a building along with Parkinson and his family, until helicopter crews could finally rescue them.



Photos by ALJESON LONG/The Kansas City Star

Friday in Baton Rouge, La., New Orleans firefighter Pat Ball filled out paper work before going on a seven-day break. Firefighters from around the country have come to relieve Ball and his coworkers who had been working nonstop since Hurricane Katrina hit two weeks ago.

"We made a bad situation
as good as we could."

—Gordon Case, 39, captain of the
Engine 18 crew

his wife, Paulette Gori, 34, an emergency room physician. All were haggard and exhausted except the tiniest one: Jade, just 5 months old, cooed and gurgled, delighted with anyone's attention.

"This is nothing like 9/11," said Parkinson, shaking his head at the violence, and no immediate outside assistance.

"This is a catastrophe. It amazes me it took four days before we had food, water. There was nothing. No support."

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For seven days, the firefighters just tried to stay alive. They treated swimming pools with chlorine for a drinking water source. From stranded vehicles they siphoned fuel and oil to power their generators. They broke into grocery stores for food, but kept a list of everything they took to pay merchants back later.

"We made a bad situation as good as we could," said Gordon Case, 39, captain of the Engine 18 crew. "I picked up two women who were both raped. They told me they'd lost everything, then they were raped ...

"There was stuff here that needed to be done, so we did it. It's a natural instinct for us ... we take care of people. That's why we became firemen, to help."

A firefighter from Austin, Texas, volunteering at the relief center asked the group to gather for a picture.

"Say cheese. No! Say, Katrina," she said with a grin.

They all mugged and smiled for the moment.

The men shook hands and gave hugs all around. In hours, they would be reunited with their loved ones.

But firefighter Steve Condon, 40, said he had one more story to tell. When the groups of rescue teams first arrived, he said, the New Orleans firefighters became guides on their boats; no one knew the city as well as the locals did.

As Condon talked, his voice began to quiver. He took a deep breath.

Previously unaware of the search efforts under way by volunteers from across the country and still bitter about some of the horrible things he had seen, Condon experienced an immediate turn around in his view when his boat entered Lake Ponchartrain.

In one moment he learned how many people really cared.

"I could see boats as far as the eye could see ... man, it choked me up," he said. "So many people cared for us... about our city. It made us feel really good ...

"We saw humanity kicking in."



After Hurricane Katrina struck, New Orleans firefighter Pat Bay worked nonstop for two weeks before getting a break. Because he had been in puts water, he had his blood checked Friday by Susan Jensen, a Los Angeles firefighter and paramedic, at Zoar Baptist Church in Baton Rouge.

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