

When The Levee Breaks

Katrina's Hart of Darkness

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*If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break.
If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break.
And the water gonna come in and we'll have no place to stay.*
-Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie

New Orleans, LA, September 2005 -It was Friday, September 9th, 3:00AM. I stood on a balcony on Orleans Street trying to piece together a story I was six hours late calling in. I was hunkered down in the only occupied apartment on the entire block. To my left, through the apocalyptic darkness, Johnny White's Sports Bar was still serving drinks to a few of the scattered folks left in the Quarter. Besides the occasional military truck, the only sound came from a battery powered boom box in the bar. Cutting the silence was a rock and roll station; and they were playing *good rock and roll!* It is a travesty that it took a national disaster for the keepers of the airwaves to grant us decent music. I stood and blew smoke to the dark sky. The few lost and/or brave souls looking up tonight would see the beauty of the stars, perhaps for the first time. As I pitched my butt to the street, I heard Keith and Mick coming across the radio. The drums, strange mumbling, then like a knife, *"Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste!"* I thought about the time, years ago, when I lived in the French Quarter. I thought about what strange end of the world visions I had seen these last few days. I thought about what the future held for these battered streets and about all the pain and death this city had witnessed in the last week. I lit another cigarette, and stared into the night. *"Please to meet you. Hope you guessed my name!"*

Night Patrol With The Vermont National Guard

*Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan.
Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan.
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home* . *

I arrived in Jefferson Parish, Just across the Mississippi River from New Orleans, on the afternoon of Tuesday, September 6th. I drove down from Vermont in an old red pick-up. In the bed I kept a dozen cans of soup, fifteen gallons of extra gas, and ten gallons of water. From the rear view mirror hung a press pass of dubious value. In the glove box I kept a loaded pistol. Prior to arriving, I arranged to be "embedded" with the 130 Vermont National Guard troops operating in the area. Within minutes of pulling up to Head Quarters, an old middle school, I boarded a truck with ten solders from the 1st of the 86th Field Artillery. It was 6:00 PM, still light. This was to be their first night patrol.

As we left the gates the solders loaded their M-16s. They had no more idea of what to expect than I. All we knew were the images of chaos that flashed upon the network news several days before.

We rolled through the streets of Jefferson Parish. Katrina's devastating power was evident. Telephone poles were snapped like toothpicks. Roofs we ripped from their beams. Electricity, of course, was still out. One gas station was simply flattened. I had never seen anything like it. A soldier turned towards me and said, "Better than we seen in Baghdad."

We reached the sector assigned to the unit. Holms Avenue. The truck drove through the area to get a feel for it. One house had the entire second floor wall torn from its framing. I could see

into what was once a person's bedroom. It looked like a giant, postmodern dollhouse, made to appear in a war zone. A mall sat deserted. A large section of it was burnt down. Near the fire damage was an abandoned police station. Local cops allege that they were shot at when they evacuated.

We soon dismounted and began a foot patrol. As we walked Sergeant Cramdon, the squad leader, remarked how strange this felt. All the open windows, all the alleyways; this would be a very dangerous situation back in Baghdad. "Every one of us was over [for eleven months]," said Cramdon. Maybe subconsciously, maybe through intent, the group fell into military formation.

As night drew near the guardsmen converged around the truck. The streets were deserted. Most heeded the dusk till dawn curfew. Standing around with little to do, we talked to pass the time. I asked what they thought about this assignment. Sergeant Cramdon answered, "[Compared with the Regular Army] we're more public friendly." This was a telling statement as it was rumored that tens of thousands of Regular Army troops were heading for the New Orleans area. As it turned out the 82nd Air Borne was put in charge of maintaining order in the French Quarter.

Sergeant Scott, who in the civilian world works as a Burlington auto mechanic, stated, "These guys [some Regular Army] don't understand. You don't want to piss off the people who live in your backyard."

The conversation quickly and inevitably turned to their experiences in Iraq. Overseas they were assigned to protect military convoys passing through the Baghdad area. This is one of the most dangerous assignments in the occupied region.

"One guy [an Iraqi] got shot at the north gate there, and two days later we got mortared," said a soldier in his late thirties.

Sergeant Cramdon added, "You just want to keep the peace in the community. Let them know your there, but let them know you're not there... When we were over in Iraq we were never proactive, we were always reactive," said Cramdon. If our President operated according to this principle, we would not be in Iraq today.

Many Guardsmen recalled that in Iraq they were compelled to fire their weapons on a near daily basis. One soldier, helmet pushed forward, almost sleeping, said he only fired his gun once in eleven months. The others looked at him, some with disbelief. Still leaning back, hardly bothering to open his eyes he mused, "We threw rocks when other people were shooting bullets."

"Rocks don't do to good when they're shooting bullets at you," countered Sergeant Cramdon. I thought of the Palestinian youth who throw stones as the Israeli Army. Sergeant Cramdon was right; their fate is often death.

As the night wore on, there was little to do but maintain vigilance, smoke cigarettes, and talk. At one point two local cops from the sheriff's department pulled up. In the darkness they did not notice that a member of the press was present. I heard them tell the Guardsmen "no one on this street is innocent." They went on to encourage the Guard to shoot people, and informed them that they would cover up such events. As they pulled away, they aimed their PA system at area apartments, blaring the sounds of a woman screaming. The Vermont Guardsmen had no interest in following their lead.

The night eventually grew into morning. As the six o'clock hour again approached, we headed back towards the base. I asked when is the soonest the unit can be ordered back to Iraq? "February," came the reply. Someone questioned, "Does this deployment extend that?" Sergeant Cramdon answered, "No."

A soldier announced, "Fuck that. I'm not going back." Another rejoined, "You'll have to if they call you up." It was left at that. I inquired, "How long will the war last? How long do you think it will go on for?" Someone grumbled "Forever." No one disagreed.

As we pulled into the HQ, the officer gave the order to unload their weapons. "All Weapons are cleared." I asked how long they would be deployed in Louisiana? A soldier replied, "No Idea. Until they tell us to go home."

Food, Water, and Murder

* Now look here mama what am I to do?

Now look here mama what am I, I to do?

I ain't got nobody to tell my troubles to.* *

Two hours after we returned, I joined a different squad heading out to distribute food and water. The first destination was a housing project in Tarrytown. The apartment buildings were two story structures built in the 1970s. The neighborhood was typically populated by several hundred low income African-Americans. When the Guard arrived with provisions, it appeared that only a few dozen remained. The streets were littered with debris. Many buildings showed signs of Katrina's devastating winds. At the flood's height, waters flowed waist deep through this neighborhood.

As the Guard drove slowly through the streets passing out food and water, I followed, interviewing residents. I approached a group of four adults, three women and one man who all appeared to be in their late thirties-early forties. This group was standing around a car loaded with belongings. They immediately expressed their desire to leave for Texas, but confessed they had no gas.

A distraught woman, mother of three, told me "I'm just trying to look after my children... We got no gas, we got [some] water in jugs... We're trying to keep [our home] clean the best way we can, but it still has the whole filth and smell in it. The damage is real bad... I'm trying to get out of here. I'm trying to get to Texas. I don't care where I go as long as I get the fuck up out of here."

I asked how she assessed the local and federal government's response to the crisis. Her eyes became sharp. "They are not handling it right. They're not doing what they're supposed to do. If they were to do what they were supposed to do, we would be out of here right about now."

Addressing local officials she charged, "People came here and drew guns on us... The police... They were about to beat up my [twelve year old] son on his birthday because he told them not to search his bag... They came out from nowhere, just crept up on us... We didn't know what was going on. They draw guns on us, telling us to raise our hands up, you know -and everything. My little niece was right there, she had her baby and they still was drawing guns."

The woman claimed that police shot and killed local residents without just cause. "People that's dear to us done got shot. People we know got killed. They [the police] got the permission to shoot them on sight."

A strong looking man in his forties stepped forward and said, "They draw guns on all of us. Every last one of my kids, my wife, and my nephew, and everything."

The man discussed the plight of those who were forced to loot food when government aid failed to arrive, “We got a lot of people who go get food for their [family]. They [the police] killed them, since the storm, in this neighborhood, on Manhattan [Street] across the river and everything. All down here [The police] have been shooting on the kids. They aren’t saying freeze or nothing. They shooting you in the head and that’s bad.”

Another resident, a woman in her late 30s, attributed the alleged instances of police killings to racism. “We got a lot of racist [White] cops that are taking advantage of this fact that it’s supposed to be marshal law, and they’re really taking advantage of it.”

I kept pace moving behind the Guard. Throughout the day we went to many neighborhoods. Everywhere people expressed anger at the government. Still, this anger did not appear to apply to those Vermont Guard troops who gave them food and water. In many communities this was the first government assistance since the storm hit. Throughout the day, the twelve Guardsmen I traveled with distributed an estimated 900 meals to the people of Jefferson Parish.

Katrina’s Heart of Darkness: Into New Orleans

* I worked on the levee mama both night and day

I worked on the levee mama both night and day

I ain’t got nobody to keep the water away.* *

The next morning I headed out, leaving the Guard behind. Now armed with a “National Guard Media Affairs” press pass, I decided to make an attempt on New Orleans itself. The city had been blockaded for some days by the military. The entrance to the Mississippi Bridge was manned by the Army. Word had it that only military, emergency, and authorized utility vehicles were being allowed in. I approached. Pulling up to the checkpoint I flashed my “National Guard” pass. To my astonishment I was waved through.

By 9:00AM I found an open bar on the corner of Bourbon and Orleans -Johnny White’s. This tavern, one of two open in the French Quarter, was serving as a kind of oasis for many of the 200-300 residents remaining in the area. In addition to whiskey, scotch, and gin, they maintained stockpiles of free food and drinking water. I ordered a beer.

I asked the bartender, Joe Bellamy, 24, what the situation was. He answered, “We are the community center. It started out as just a bar and then people started bringing food here. People started bringing clothes and water. Suddenly, it became a soup kitchen and a homeless shelter.” Bellamy, a former para-rescuer in the Air Force and self-described socialist, continued, “It doesn’t matter if you’re gay, straight, no matter race, religion, no matter what your personal beliefs are, you come in and need some food- you’re getting it. You need some water- you’re getting it.”

After two beers and a shot of whiskey I prepared to push on. I wanted to take a look at the devastated Ninth Ward while it was still early. Before Katrina this was one of the poorest and most neglected sections of the city. When the levees ruptured, the area was submerged under many feet of water. The Ninth Ward was also the location of much alleged shootings. Thousands of Superdome refugees came from this neighborhood.

I asked a bar patron, James La Lon, a 62 year old artist, for directions to the Ward. He told me to head three miles past Esplanade –away from the Quarter. “You can’t miss it.” In addition

to directions I also was given a warning to be careful. He claimed to have been shot at a dozen times while driving through three days before.

I did not set out alone. Accompanying me was Ride Hamilton, 29, a local volunteer first aid provider of Cheyenne descent. I met him less than an hour before. He expressed interest in seeing the Ninth, and I had an interest in someone riding shotgun.

“Do you know how to handle one of these,” I asked, handing him a loaded pistol. He said “yes” and proceeded to put a round in the chamber -just in case. Ride, six feet tall with long black hair, wore a blue “Sioux City” fire department shirt he bought in a thrift store. He found that the uniform helped avoid hassles with the local police. We headed north.

As we drove away from Johnny White’s it became eerily apparent that we were the only vehicle on the streets. In this sea of destruction traffic laws no longer applied. We took a one-way street the wrong way for a mile past Esplanade.

As we drew closer to the ward, we began to see large “x”s spray painted on the sides of every house. In each quadrant of the X were written letters and numbers. In the top it read “9-6.” To the left, “TX-1.” To the right, “NE.” At the bottom, “1.” We correctly guessed [as was confirmed later] that these symbols were the record of a search conducted by the military or other government agency. The top obviously represented the date of the search. The left, the unit who conducted it. The right was a code for the type of contamination found within. The bottom number told the grim tale of how many bodies were found. Again, these were on every house.

A mile past Esplanade we saw the first other vehicles. Two military trucks rolled past. In the back we could see the sullen faces of haggard evacuees. Nobody bothered to wave. We continued.

The deeper into the neighborhood we got, the more debris littered the deserted streets. “Fuck Bush. Them Bitches Flood Us,” was written in black spray paint across a brick wall.

Heading up Rampart Street we passed a tire garage. A wiry Black man sat out front. The sign said “open.” This tire shop represented the last outpost of commerce in New Orleans.

Soon we approached a small bridge crossing a canal deep into the Ninth Ward. A gate sat across our path. Four National Guard troops stood watch with M-16s. We approached. I got out and presented my magic press pass. They opened the gate and let us in. Immediately the flooding began.

The road we drove on, North Rampart was sometimes dry, sometimes six inches underwater. The side streets to our left were under too much water to traverse. The water was black and smelled like rotting meat.

On the corner of St. Clair and Deslonde the water deepened. The wreckage from the flood and winds was immense. Walls and roofs were severed from houses. The tops of abandoned trucks were caked with mud.

We drove a half-mile further and still we saw no signs of the living. The tightly packed houses were left alone. Here, a number of homes were yet to have an ‘X’ to keep them company. The scene made me think of some kind of evil Venice that had been bombed and left for dead.

The flooding worsened. I saw a boat that had been heaved atop of a four-foot fence. Trees were up-rooted and strewn across the road.

Breaking the strange silence two empty military trucks passed heading deeper into the Ward. Did they expect to find survivors?

Down a side street, still underwater, I saw empty school busses. I assumed they never brought people out.

We turned right down Gordon Street. We had to drive carefully not to be ensnared by fallen power lines. The letters “DEA-OK” were painted on a cement wall. Arrows pointed in both directions. A few blocks away we made out five military personnel on a front porch. They were battering down a door. We drove through the black putrid waters in their direction.

When we reached them I asked, “have you been finding anyone?”

A soldier replied, “No. Just dead bodies.”

“Are you going to start clearing out the dead bodies?”

The soldier answered, “No.”

He gave me a cold look. The conversation was over.

In silence we headed back up to Rampart, then south out of the Ward. There was little doubt in either of our minds that thousands were dead.

The People Vs. Katrina

*Oh cryin’ won’t help you, prayin’ won’t do no good.

Oh cryin’ won’t help you, prayin’ won’t do no good.

Whenever the levee breaks mamma, you got to lose.* *

We got back to the Quarter and turned left down Esplanade. Taking a right on Decatur I saw a makeshift sign reading “Rebuild The French Quarter HQ.” I first heard of the organization earlier in the day. This group, as with a number of other like organizations, was composed of local residents who spontaneously came together after the hurricane.

HQ was previously a bar known as “Oswald’s.” After Katrina the entire 9000 square foot building was commandeered by local residents for use as a storage depot. Inside tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of food, water, and tools were evident. The facility was also equipped with a gas generator, and two fully stocked bars. I was told booze was used to bribe police into not messing with them. This depot, as well as others I visited, was stocked with donated and “looted” goods. More recently, their supplies were bolstered by military rations.

Standing in the inner courtyard were a half a dozen locals. One of them introduced himself as “Steve.” Steve, who worked in construction, explained that Rebuild the French Quarter (RFQ) numbered forty volunteers. Their exploits included clearing rubbish and downed trees. One of their first acts was to make Esplanade, a major street marking the border of the neighborhood, passable by vehicle. RFQ went the extra step of stenciling white “RFQ Volunteer” t-shirts, printing professional looking ID badges, and writing and producing a mission statement.

After the crisis began, their first priority was to help distribute guns and ammunition to area residents to use in self-defense. Steve told me of one local who shot a man breaking through his front door. The shot did not kill him. The shooter ran outside, and less than a block away found two New Orleans police officers. He told them what happened, and asked for their help. The officers told him to get lost. The man then returned home, dragged the bleeding intruder into the street, and shot him dead.

However, by the time I spoke with RFQ, the general situation had become relatively stable. As such, the organization was preparing to go forward with modest reconstruction projects. They were in the process of gathering resources to repair a number of area roofs when a rumor stopped them in their tracks. Earlier in the day word got around that either the local or federal government

was close to enforcing the mandatory evacuation. This rumor gained validity when a number of Louisiana State Troopers entered Johnny White's and initially demanded that all patrons leave with them to be evacuated immediately. After some heated words, the Troopers were convinced to call their superiors for confirmation. As things went, they left with no one in tow. Even so, the story and fear of a looming forced removal spread like wildfire across the community.

"All of us are... hiding in our residences. Is that stupid or what? There are hundreds, even thousands, of people right here that would be active volunteers [in rebuilding our city]. We know this city like the back of our hands. We are not driving around like Mississippi cops that don't know this place. We know what we're doing, where everything is, and how to get resources. We can get this place back up and running. They [the government] need to leave the French Quarter alone, and let us do this," said Steve.

Karen Watt, 61, a small bar owner and RFQ member added, "We are survivors who live here. We can take care of ourselves."

I wondered if RFQ was scared into non-action? The answer was no. I listened as RFQ members planned a massive cleanup starting near Jackson Square (the middle of the Quarter). The action was planned for the following day. It was hoped that this display would convince officials that residents should be allowed to stay, and directly partake in the recovery effort.

While at the RFQ compound, I was told that a similar organization was forming in the nearby Marigny neighborhood. I was also informed of another group in the French Quarter known informally as the 'Red Shirts.' The Red Shirts cleaned up Jackson Square, and had been providing first aid to those in need. Later I learned that across the river in Algiers the residents were also organizing. It was reported that former Black Panthers were active in those efforts. More recently a community center has been opened up in the Ninth Ward by an organization called Food Not Bombs.

It was clear that people were coming together across the city. However, instead of local officials and/or FEMA working with these groups, they were being pressured to evacuate against their will. While still at HQ I listened as a local sheriff warned RFQ members not to let FEMA know they had stockpiles of food and water. He claimed that if FEMA found out they would confiscate the supplies.

Eventually Ride and I departed for another 'community center,' Molly's At The Market. Molly's, located on Decatur Street, was the other pub opened in the Quarter. Unlike Johnny White's (which literally had not been closed in fourteen years), Molly's kept hours. Their doors were opened 11:00 AM to 6:00 PM. This tavern was two blocks from an apartment I kept years ago. I knew the jukebox by heart. Tom Waits: Small Change. The Clash: Combat Rock. Johnny Cash: Live From San Quinton. On this day it was the only place in the city where you could get a cold beer. Where they got the ice, I did not ask.

Sitting at the bar was Mike Howl, 46, a professional tarot card reader before the storm. I asked him how people were doing. Howl's depiction of events contradicted the media reports of general mayhem.

"I live right off of Rampart Street so I saw thousands of people leaving the Ninth Ward and heading, unfortunately, to the Superdome. I saw people share the only pair of shoes that they had. I didn't see any acts of violence. I saw people just trying to help one another... The people have been good. I haven't seen any problem with violence. "

Howl continued, “This whole image of the poor people coming from the Ninth Ward being this uncontrolled mob is absolute BS. Like I said, I was right where the people were coming from, and I didn’t have any problems with anyone.”

“The main thing [is] how humane the people were... Everybody said, ‘hello’, ‘how are you’, ‘good luck.’ They’d tell you where to go to get things. It was heartwarming, because even people that were in worse shape than I was in, much worse shape, would do things that were helpful, and I’m very thankful for that... I saw the best of people, and that includes people from the Ninth Ward,” recalled Howl.

Mike went on to tell me that many more people than one might think were coming together and organizing. He made reference to two “communes” that formed following the crisis. He explained that these communes were households of people who have pooled their belongings and labor in order to provide collective security and basic necessities.

Howl, like so many other people I spoke with in the past four days, expressed anger and frustration with the government. “The government offered us nothing, except misery and threats... Katrina terrorized us for one day. But the government has terrorized us, meaning the people of New Orleans, every day since,” he said.

Howl told me that food and water was slow coming into the city. “We had the first five days [after the storm] of waiting... Jackson Square was dry and they could have had emergency food distribution there from the day Katrina hit. They never did a thing,” he asserted.

Outside I talked with a few passersby. One was David Richardson. Richardson, 56, was a carriage driver in the French Quarter. I asked why he had not evacuated? He answered, “This is my home, I want to stay with it. This is my city. I love this city. I love the French Quarter. I want to be here to put it all back together.”

As dusk approached, he leaned up against a post and summed up New Orleans’ spirit of community and self-reliance; “This is what I call the ‘Committee of 75’. Nobody is giving orders. There are enough people that know what needs to be done and we talk it over.”

Conscious of the encroaching night, Ride and myself headed back to Johnny White’s. In our absence, Ride’s comrade, Yellow Stray Dog, a Native American woman in her forties, said she had been thrown up against a wall by the cops. She told me the police accused her of being a looter, put a gun to her neck, and threatened to shoot her. Since the crisis she had been administering first aid along with Ride to locals. She had also helped stockpile and distribute food, water, and supplies to the neighborhood. When I talked to her she was visibly shaken.

Stray Dog recalled, “[The cops] told me ‘you’re nothing but a cheap looter,’ and I say ‘no I’m a respectable person. I’m here helping out my people.’ They told me they were gonna arrest me, and they pushed me against the wall, and put a gun... around my neck... They were screaming at me.”

Fighting back tears, Stray Dog went on, “Right now I’m more afraid of the New Orleans police than any disease that is around or anything else. They really are over powering and intimidating... There is no need to be treated like that.”

After The Flood

*Oh mean old levee taught me to weep and moan.

Yeah the mean old levee taught me to weep and moan.

Told me leave my baby and my happy home.* *

The next morning I stopped in White's, met up with two guys I agreed to take north, said my goodbyes, and headed for the causeway across the lake. One last time I had to wave my press pass at men with machine guns, and one last time I looked over my shoulder to see the sky-scrapers with all those shattered windows. Again I was the only person on the road. I lit a bowl, took a drag.

I wondered if such misery was avoidable. Could the Louisiana National Guard have reacted better and faster to the crisis if 4000 of their troops were not stationed in Iraq? Would the levees have held if they received better maintenance? After all, \$350 million in federal assistance earmarked for the levees was instead diverted to pay for the war and tax cuts for the wealthy. And again, class played a huge role in bolstering the body count. In a city whose poverty level is akin to the third world, tens of thousands of residents were stranded without the economic means of escape. It is clear that the state and federal governments failed to adequately deal with the situation as it unfolded.

As I drove north, I was also troubled about the political game which would soon be afoot. I suspect the feds will use New Orleans as a vehicle to award disaster-profiteers like Halliburton billions in reconstruction contracts. They will also use the related federal expenditures as an excuse to further cut social services for poor and working people. Still, while this process plays itself out, the drama of daily survival remains for the hundreds of thousands of people adversely affected by the disaster. This should not be forgotten. It will be many years before New Orleans can count the ghosts that walk her wrecked streets. It will be generations before they can be exorcised from the collective memory of the living. After all, we have seen the face of the Devil, and her name is Katrina.

**When The Levee Breaks, -Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie*

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