

Marin Doctor Tells of Chaos

By Tad Whitaker, *Marin Independent Journal*

Urine and spit landed on the caravan of trucks carrying Dr. Thomas Cromwell of Belvedere and other medical volunteers into the New Orleans Superdome complex, where they were about to relieve the only team of health care officials at the city's reeking evacuee center.

Three days had passed since Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans, conditions were growing worse by the hour and medical care was becoming more critical by the moment.

Cromwell's team took over the Superdome's ice rink, which was turned into the medical area, and started a nonstop, 18-hour night of delivering babies, hydrating the dehydrated and treating injuries suffered in fist fights. There was even a National Guard troop who'd been shot inside the Superdome.

Gunfire caused all helicopter evacuations to stop about halfway through the night, and a doctor working with Cromwell had his cell phone and Federal Emergency Management Agency badge stolen when he went inside the Superdome for a look. The next morning, National Guard troops pulled back from the Superdome because they could no longer keep order.

That's when FEMA officials ordered Cromwell and his team to drop everything, walk away from their patients and all personal belongings, and break into small groups when leaving the Superdome complex.

Everyone was worried a riot could break out if people knew the only medical officials were leaving the scene.

"I've never been as concerned, for me personally or the group I was with, as when we exited the Superdome," said Cromwell, who cared for the wounded during the Vietnam war, treated patients in Haiti and worked alongside Iraqi physicians in Baghdad last year.

Cromwell, 64, is one of 35 volunteer members of a FEMA regional disaster medical assistance team that is mobilized during natural disasters, wars and other problem situations. There are two physicians, about eight paramedics, four nurses and 15 others, many of whom are certified emergency medical technicians. Most are from the East Bay, but a few are from Marin.

As the hurricane approached the Gulf Coast, Cromwell's team flew from San Jose to a staging area in Houston, where it stayed with six other teams. The storm hit land August 29 and, at 5 a.m., August 30, Cromwell's team was sent to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where the largest evacuation center was set up at the Louisiana State University campus.

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Cromwell said the team established a medical area on the main court used by the university's basketball team, then learned they'd be heading to downtown New Orleans the next morning. A team from New Mexico needed to be relieved at the Superdome.

"They were overwhelmed," Cromwell said. "They'd treated literally hundreds of people."

Cromwell said that, while driving down to New Orleans the next morning, the carnage wasn't immediately noticeable. There were broken trees and some roofs torn off buildings, but not until reaching the downtown area did the weight of the situation truly become apparent.

He said it took two hours to drive the final mile to the Superdome. Masses of people were camped on the freeways and one desperate group of people was pushing a woman down the road on a hospital bed, but Cromwell said the team was told not to get involved.

"We were told it would create a 'Haiti' effect where it could be a difficult situation," he said. "We had people knocking on our windows and we couldn't respond."

That portion of the freeway is where Cromwell heard the first of what would be many gunshots, but the team continued on toward the Superdome complex. There, they entered a building that was completely dark. The temperature was about 100 degrees, the humidity was roughly 95 percent and an inch of water covered the floor.

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A sopping-wet New Orleans police officer was the first person they came upon. He told them he'd just tried to use a boat to rescue a family, but the boat flipped over and a child drowned right in front of him.

"It was about 30 minutes earlier and gave us an idea of what we were getting into," Cromwell said.

From there, the team headed into the main ice rink where the medical area had been set up. He said none of the toilets had worked for several days, everyone was sweaty and the atmosphere was surreal.

"The noise was just horrendous and the stench was overwhelming," he said.

Cromwell, an anesthesiologist who hasn't practiced emergency medicine in years, said the doctor leading the New Mexico team gave him a two-minute explanation of the most common types of ailments—and left. He said that thanks to an experienced emergency room nurse from San Francisco General Hospital, he and the other volunteers were able to get to work.

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Thomas H. Cromwell, M.D.

The most common problem was severe dehydration, but there were at least half a dozen pregnant women to take care of and a host of people with chest pains, asthma attacks, strokes and psychotic issues.

“You name it, we had it,” he said. “Every five minutes, the National Guard would bring in more patients. We did the best we could.”

Cromwell said the team used intravenous drips to hydrate people, handed out medication for chest pains and asthma, and tried to send people back to the Superdome as quickly as possible. Ground ambulances were useless, so people in dire condition were loaded into one of a half-dozen medical helicopters flying in and out of the Superdome complex.

“That was the only way we could get patients out,” he said.

The helicopters were canceled around 9 p.m., August 31, due to gunfire outside. Cromwell said the team continued working, but conditions were becoming unmanageable.

There was little light, no air conditioning, no running water and the oxygen tanks were empty. The floors were littered with used IV bags, gloves and other medical equipment because no one had the time to pick up, and no one thought about sleeping because it was too noisy even if someone had wanted to.

“This went on throughout the night,” he said.

Around 8 a.m., September 1, roughly 18 hours after arriving, the team began to notice injuries were starting to come in that were consistent with fights. Rumors began to swirl about rapes and open fires inside the Superdome. One of the team doctors went inside for a look and was robbed of his phone and badge.

“He said it was much worse than where we were,” Cromwell said. “I didn’t want to go in.”

Shortly thereafter, National Guard troops protecting relief workers pulled back from the Superdome. Cromwell said there was still no end to the medical help needed, but federal officials told them to get out quickly and quietly.

“We just disappeared,” he said.

As bad as the medical area was, Cromwell said the situation was scarier outside.

The crowds seemed angrier and more tense. None of the volunteers had a weapon. There was no protection from the National Guard or the New Orleans police.

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The large evacuation trucks had a difficult time getting through some tight areas around the Superdome complex and one truck even got stuck. Desperate people began looking inside the evacuation trucks, leading the volunteers to worry about being overtaken, but the stuck truck eventually got out and everyone made it to safety.

“Fortunately nothing happened,” he said.

The team returned to Baton Rouge for 10 hours of downtime and an opportunity to clean up. A few days later, Cromwell went to a neighboring town to set up a morgue for what was expected to be a large number of dead bodies once the recovery effort started. Then it was back home.

Cromwell said the team hasn't regrouped to discuss what went right, what went wrong and what could be improved. But he said the camaraderie among medical team members was strong despite the challenging conditions.

“We were very successful at survival medicine,” he said. “It was an environment none of us had ever been in.”

Cromwell said he has no idea whether the local, state or federal responses to the hurricane were good, bad or acceptable. He isn't even angry about the lack of security for the medical volunteers.

“Nobody anticipated things would get to that point,” he said. “I really don't know if there would have been less chaos under different leadership. This is the worst disaster FEMA has ever responded to.”

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