



*U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

*Hurricanes Katrina & Rita (KART)*

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**Interview of: Rear Admiral Robert Duncan, USCG  
District Eight Commander**

**Conducted by: PACS Peter J. Capelotti, USCGR**

**Date of Interview: 28 November 2005  
Location of Interview: Not Listed**



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**Q:** Admiral Sir, if you could give me your name and spell your last name for me please.



**RADM Duncan:** Sure, I'm Rear Admiral Bob Duncan; D-U-N-C-A-N.

**Q:** And could you give me sort of a paragraph on your career to this point; I mean are you Academy, OCS [Officer Candidate School], how did you get to this point in the service?

**RADM Duncan:** Sure. I'm a Coast Guard Academy graduate, 1972. I went to a buoy tender in Kodiak, Alaska as a first tour and a follow-on tour to Governor's Island. I stayed in buoy tenders; I managed fleets of buoy tenders for a while. I got a master's degree at night in New York in Marine Transportation Management from SUNY [State

University of New York] Maritime [College]. My next educational experience was going to Boston College Law School. I graduated *magna cum laude* and spent the next 20 years moving between operational and legal assignments. My previous assignment to this; immediately previous to this, was the Chief Counsel of the Coast Guard and the Judge Advocate General of the Coast Guard; the first military Judge Advocate General.

**Q:** Was that your first flag billet as head of Legal?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes it was.

**Q:** And that's a one-star billet?

**RADM Duncan:** It's a one-star and potentially a two-star. So I was a one-star during that time and made my second star the first week in the job here.

**Q:** Yes. When did you come onboard here in New Orleans?

**RADM Duncan:** The 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2003.

**Q:** Two thousand three, okay. So you relieved [Rear] Admiral [Roy J.] Casto?

**RADM Duncan:** I relieved Admiral Casto.

**Q:** And one of the things that . . . when I came here after 9/11 I was interviewing Admiral Casto and Captain [Joel] Whitehead at the time and they were talking about when they came onboard they were given the, “What happens if the levees breach” briefing. Did you get that same sort of, “Here’s New Orleans. Here’s what happens if it really gets bad”?

**RADM Duncan:** No, I don’t think so. You know we had briefings on turnover. He was retiring and moved on. The staff briefed me on a number of issues. I don’t recall specifically a discussion about, “Well hey, welcome to New Orleans. We’re real concerned about the levees breaking”, but I know that we very much took hurricanes seriously. They did, as a cultural thing here in the Eighth District I think, but in my case I had been the group commander in Charleston, South Carolina when Hurricane Hugo hit and I led the Coast Guard response for Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

**Q:** And what rank were you there?

**RADM Duncan:** I was a commander and that was a formative experience for me. I take hurricanes very seriously. It’s one of the three things I talk about when I meet with elements in the command. We take hurricanes seriously at the beginning of the season and through the season so I don’t think I needed to be convinced that hurricanes were a bad thing.

**Q:** So you have sort of in your mind that there's a quantitative difference between Category One, Category Three, Category Five; that these are going to do vastly different levels of destruction?

**RADM Duncan:** Absolutely. And for many years after Hurricane Hugo I didn't sleep when the wind got over 30 knots. We'd spoken previously that I lived in a lighthouse on Cape Cod as a group commander there. The wind was over 30 knots regularly and I was pretty much up all night walking around looking for leaks and things falling off the house because it just imprints on you that this is a significant event; a hurricane. And this is the second time that the Duncan family had been "displaced persons". We were out of our house because of Hurricane Hugo in Charleston and now we've got back into our house here but we were out for a significant amount of time, so we take it seriously. The District takes it seriously. The Duncans as a family and me professionally, take it seriously and I think when we did these exercises there was very much a belief that this is something that can really happen and you should take it seriously.

**Q:** Having my home destroyed by a flood ten years ago I can sympathize that you never look at things the same.

**RADM Duncan:** You don't, and we thought we were fairly lucky after Hugo. We weren't sure if the house flooded. We couldn't get into it for several days. We knew the roof needed to be replaced and we knew there were some other things, and as it

turned out the house had flooded and we ended up replacing the floors and the walls and everything else, and it imprints on you. You remember hurricanes.

**Q:** So you have a hurricane plan that you pull off the shelf and train to.

**RADM Duncan:** Right.

**Q:** And last year, for example, was a bad year and you had plenty of practice, if you want to call it that, last year.

**RADM Duncan:** We did. The first summer I was here we had a hurricane head for the Texas coast and we had a change of command at the air station in Houston as it turns out the day the hurricane was supposed to come through that area. It was going to come through the day before and the staff said, "Are you going to go do the change of command", and I said, "Well yes, I don't think it's a bad idea that the admiral goes to the part of the district that's about to get hit by a hurricane. We'll find someplace to do it." And we did and it gave me the remarks I needed for the change of command ceremony. I didn't use any of the prepared remarks. I just talked about them saving five people off a Vietnamese fishing boat in the jetties in hurricane force winds the night before, which they had done.

So we had hurricanes the first year I was here. They were significant enough for the district commander to get involved. Last year we had Ivan, which caused substantial damage to the Florida Panhandle. This year we had Dennis and Emily,

which also did damage to the Florida Panhandle which is part of the Eighth District. I spent one day with Governor Bush from Florida traveling around with him in the aftermath. So I've had regular conversations with sector commanders saying, "What's your plan", you know, "Here's the Concept of Operations. Let's get a meeting of the minds on what we're doing. You're in tactical command. I'm in overall command through the theater. I'm going to support you. What do you need? Here are the assets that I'm pre-positioning. Here's what I'm asking for Area to provide. Are there other things that you need", and, "Here's the concept of operations we're going to run through. We're going to survive the impact. So we'll move things out of the way so they won't be damaged and we can come back in behind and we're going to come in right behind the storm and provide lifesaving and channel restoration and hazardous material containment, and then we'll evaluate what else is needed." And in this case, with Katrina and then Rita a month later, we added some other things to it, life sustainment for instance; people who are moved from positions of imminent peril and put in the New Orleans' community on places that are out of the water. When they were not being moved on by others to places of ultimate refuge we said, "We're going to go back and visit them. We're going to bring them water and food and whatever information we have about plans to move them off."

**Q:** Your chief of staff takes the D-8 staff up to St. Louis the Saturday before the hurricane hits and establishes a watch that Sunday morning.

**RADM Duncan:** Right. Several years ago, the Second Coast Guard District was combined into the Eighth District. We maintain an office in St Louis, the site of the old Second District headquarters. As part of our COOP [Continuity of Operations Plan] we maintain an operations center and office spaces that can accommodate a shift of the Eighth District staff to St Louis. We physically man and operate that capability during the annual district-wide hurricane exercise.

**Q:** And you're onboard that day. Could you take me through that weekend? That must have been an interesting weekend in your life let's say [chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, in many ways it's continuing.

**Q:** [Chuckle] The weekend that never ended [laughter].

**RADM Duncan:** Pretty much. It didn't feel much like a weekend.

Let me start you the week before because I was on leave. I'd planned on taking two weeks of leave in August and it hadn't worked the year before and I was kind of hoping to do it this year. I guess the hurricane became a hurricane; was named somewhere around Monday or Tuesday of that week - we can check the dates on that - but I was burning up leave in the house in New Orleans. My aide, who takes leave when I take leave, also took leave and she went to New England. As I'm watching this I called and said, "Look, I don't want you to feel slighted or anything Kevin [my Chief of Staff, Captain Kevin L. Marshal] but - and this is no mark of no confidence in you - but



this is a big hurricane I'm watching out here and don't be too surprised if I come in off of leave. Let's talk about what plans we've made; distribution of forces and that sort of thing." So I came in off leave on Friday and we stood up the COOP; the Continuity of Operations Plan, which we exercise regularly. I mean we do send people up to St. Louis and make sure that the wires are connected.

**Q:** You physically send them up to St. Louis?

**RADM Duncan:** We send them up there at the beginning of the season.

**Q:** So they know where the streets are and where the Burger King is and all that.

**RADM Duncan:** Well what they know is that the phones and computers are working. And, during the pre-season exercise, they would have called all our contacts to make sure the numbers we had were current, and would update any changes in names (e.g. Corps of Engineers command changes, and all other potentially important contacts).

**Q:** Right.

**RADM Duncan:** That they've got a T-1 line [a very fast digital voice and data line] that we can move in there and just take people that are standing watch here one day and move them up to pick up the same work up there, and that's what we put into process.

**Q:** Is there any sense, or was there before then, that you might have a situation where hotels, restaurants, all of these are destroyed and you've got this sort of mass exodus and that they're also going to be competing for resources in the same place that you're trying to re-establish your headquarters?

**RADM Duncan:** Not so much, and the reason is that St. Louis is 800 miles or better away from here. So I mean at that point you could be talking about Seattle or Wichita or Boston. It's out of the immediate impact area. In fact we were concerned about Pittsburgh because the hurricane, as it was taking its final approach to us, looked like it was going to be a major rainmaker inland after it passed through the coastal impact zone. So we had actually made preparations to provide flood relief to the Ohio River, which didn't turn out to be needed and, once we knew that they would not be needed there, after impact, we moved those resources to areas of need along the coast . . . .

**Q:** Before Katrina.

**RADM Duncan:** Before Katrina.

**Q:** Yes.

**RADM Duncan:** You don't read about that. But the district covers 26 states and we were also concerned about the inland piece that the Ohio River might flood and that was going to be a significant concern to a lot of communities along the river. So we

had DARTs [Disaster Assistance Response Teams; equipped with several shallow water fast response boats each; specifically designed for flooding rivers response rescues] and other things stationed to provide relief to that area if it was needed.

**Q:** And you have a good sense as district commander where those low-lying areas are?

**RADM Duncan:** Historically we have a good understanding of that, yes.

**Q:** Right.

**RADM Duncan:** I mean you'll see pictures around this room here that are soon going to be updated of some of those kinds of flood operations in the western rivers.

**Q:** Yes.

**RADM Duncan:** But recognizing this was going to be a big event and that this was likely to impact a city; a city that's below sea level - I heard it was seven feet below sea level but now it looks like the flooding got much deeper in some areas - I modified the plan a little bit. I sent the staff up to stand up the COOP plan in St. Louis and they did that. The chief of staff was leading that. The COOP plan would officially recommend that I go to St. Louis as well. With the kind of event that looked like it was

shaping up to it appeared to me that I needed to consider some option of remaining forward deployed and backing up just a little bit of the operations.

**Q:** In the overall plan I know the chief of staff is supposed to move but what about you yourself?

**RADM Duncan:** It's open but the standard understanding was I would go to St. Louis as well.

**Q:** Okay, so under all things being equal you would have been in St. Louis?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, if we'd gone with what was expected I think I probably would have gone to St. Louis.

I had a conference call, as is my practice, with the Sector commanders who were in the impact area and I remember talking to Jim Bjostad [Captain James Bjostad] who is Captain [John W.] Yost's Sector commander in Mobile and Captain Frank Paskewich, and I said, "Frank, this is a new conversation for you but Jim's had this several times now with Ivan and Dennis and Emily. You know I call in advance of things just to see if you're comfortable with where you are, do you have the resources you need, the sorts of the things we talked about a little bit, and make sure that we have a common understanding of what we're going to put our resources against and how I can help you as tactical commanders and how I can provide operational control

across the whole theater to surge resources or to provide policy or to interact with other players that appear on-scene.” That was done.

On Sunday I called both the governors that were likely to be involved. I spoke to Governor [Haley] Barbour. I spoke to Governor [Kathleen] Blanco. Barbour is Mississippi and Blanco’s Louisiana. I actually got a hold of a guy name S/A [Special Agent] Davis who’s a special security detail to Governor Blanco and he said, “Well she’s busy but let me give you to Coach”, and I said, “Coach?” And he said, “That’s her husband and they call him Coach”, and I said, “Okay.” So I spoke to the Governor’s husband and said, “Perhaps you recall me. We’ve done some things together in the past. Here’s who I am. Here’s what we have done. We’ve moved resources to survive the impact and our plan is to come in immediately behind the storm, following the 60-knot ring, and provide lifesaving operations, channel restoration, spill containment, and I want to make sure it lines up with the state’s priorities, which would seem to be a pretty easy answer that we want to do the same thing.” He was very pleased. He said, “That’s wonderful Admiral. Thank you very much for that.” And I said, “When the winds die down and people feel safe enough to come out, if they need help I want them to see a big orange helicopter waiting above them when they come out. That’s our plan.”

**Q:** Can I ask you at that point - at the senior level of the Coast Guard - how much of the National Response Plan had filtered down to you all by the time of Katrina?

**RADM Duncan:** A lot, and at the senior level a lot, at the E-4 level probably not as much. The National Response Plan, as you know, was signed in December of last year so we're not a year into this yet. We're about eight months actually into the National Response Plan being effectively signed into authority.

**Q:** Right.

**RADM Duncan:** So in the spring I participated in, and some others on the staff here did, in rollouts directed by the Department of Homeland Security. Secretary [Michael] Chertoff set up a number of rollouts for the National Response Plan around the country and I was a panelist in Houston - actually Mr. [Mike] Brown from FEMA was one of the other panelists - and I'd done some seminars around town here with Parrish first responders and others saying, "Don't be afraid of this thing. Here is what the National Response Plan is. Here is how it works. You should get into this 600-page document now so you'll know some of the language involved but don't be afraid of it. It's going to look familiar. It's going to look like the sorts of things that we do together regularly." So I had a pretty good understanding of the National Response Plan and where it was supposed to go. The Coast Guard has, over the last couple of years, sent flag officers to a PFO certification course. I went to the second one of those courses.

**Q:** Where is that held or is it held in one place?

**RADM Duncan:** Emmitsburg in Maryland. You know there's a FEMA training facility there that trains first responders. They had the capacity there and it was close to Washington so they brought people in to certify them as PFOs [Principal Federal Officials]. I've been certified as a principal federal official through that program and had served as a federal coordinator, and pre-designated as the PFO should a 'significant national security event' occur, for the Iraq overseas voting and registration last winter for the southern region of the United States. And that was all Iraqi expatriots living in this country that were going to Memphis to register. So I had some pretty good understanding of the overall National Response Plan, not of a state's particular plan for say evacuating a city. [I was also designated as the first PFO for Hurricane Rita]

**Q:** Was there any sense that the weekend previous when you've got this Category 5 storm sitting a couple of hundred miles away that the National Response Plan was going to be activated?

**RADM Duncan:** Well I don't know that I gave much thought to that. I was looking at positioning our resources; making sure they survived, evacuating dependents, getting them out early.

**Q:** So that would be something that would be above your level?

**RADM Duncan:** No, not necessarily above my level, it just wasn't on the horizon. I knew it existed. I knew that we'd probably operate under it. That's how the government is supposed to operate now.

**Q:** So to term it operational reality, its well, "You know if they activate it, great", but it's  
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**RADM Duncan:** Well I think it is active. I mean it's active now. That's how the government is supposed to operate.

**Q:** Right.

**RADM Duncan:** So it was my understanding that that's how this big event would probably come together. I would expect, for instance, there'd be a PFO designated. I would expect that the place that information would be shared between agencies would be at the Emergency Operations Center for the state and that the federal government would be in support of the state's plan for whatever the event required. And by and large that's where I thought this was going to end up going and some elements were more effective than others as this turns out. This was a big tragedy, frankly, and some of it was a man-made tragedy that wasn't agile enough to deal with this kind of a problem.



**Q:** Well I think having sat at home last week and read the National Response Plan finally [chuckle], there were elements of it that you can see that came into play at sort of different levels at different times.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, I think different players had more or less a mature understanding of the National Response Plan and operated more or less as outlined in the plan.

**Q:** I think that, at least in this situation from somebody that's looking at it from the outside, that it wasn't clear when the whole idea of, "Okay, local capabilities have been overwhelmed. Okay, state capabilities have been overwhelmed and now the federal government's got to come in", and "Who makes that call and what does that trigger", you know, and "Who's got the checklist of what that's supposed to do and all those sorts of things?"

**RADM Duncan:** The National Response Plan preserves what in this country has been a principle article of faith and federalism, that the Governor; the executive of the state, has primary responsibility for events within the state. You know she uses the National Guard under state authority. She uses her emergency operators for any number of responses; all first responders. The state has ultimate primary responsibility for events that occur within the state. What the National Response Plan provides for is a national response at the request of the chief executive of a state; the Governor, and she has to ask for assistance that the federal government should provide. I don't believe it is in

the National Response Plan. It's certainly not clearly articulated in the National Response Plan. It's an inference if you get there without it that there's a role for the federal government to come in and say, "Irrespective of the state's wishes the federal government will move in and take care of this." There is a fundamental presumption that the state can handle this. That's not in the National Response Plan. I don't see that.

**Q:** And the other part of it too is, from my reading of it, is that a mayor can't request federal aid.

**RADM Duncan:** No.

**Q:** That would have to be requested through the government.

**RADM Duncan:** Exactly. Otherwise I think you end up with mayors from different places trying to get tanks or artillery or whatever they need. Maybe I'm just co-opted by this but I do think the National Response Plan provides a good template for organizing resources and providing response and that's kind of how we approached it. And I thought other players were doing the same thing or would do the same thing.

**Q:** Well the designation of something as an incident of national significance, I guess that's the chapter that I get bogged down on, and there are four triggering mechanisms there if a state or local tribal area is overwhelmed.

**RADM Duncan:** Right. Now how do [we] determine [what is] “overwhelming”?

**Q:** Well that’s . . . and I think in this situation . . . .

**RADM Duncan:** So that’s the inference I’m talking about.

**Q:** Right, okay, and I think that’s where it seems, in this situation, things got stuck because people were reluctant to say, “I’m overwhelmed.” It’s not a natural human response.

**RADM Duncan:** I really do think that that needs to be looked at.

**Q:** “I’m overwhelmed, come save me.”

**RADM Duncan:** I know.

**Q:** And when do you say that? Well never. You know it’s not in people’s general nature, even when they are overwhelmed, to say they’re overwhelmed.

**RADM Duncan:** There’s a book that covers the 1927 flood in here. It’s called the Rising Tide. It’s an excellent book. I started reading it in July of this year and I had it for a year or two before that and I said, “While I’m between books I’m going to read

this”, and I heard it was very good. It’s excellent. I should have read it long before that. And then the hurricane hit and I stopped reading for a while. I got back to it last weekend and I got to the point where Governor [John M.] Parker of Louisiana had some pride in Louisiana and refused to ask for federal help during a 1920 flood - I think it was 1920 - that displaced 40,000 Louisiana citizens. The federal government said, “Do you want help?” He said, “No, we don’t need any help.” And from what the book says, state legislators and state’s representatives in Washington were all pressing Governor Parker to ask for federal assistance and he said, “No, we can handle this.” You know it kind of brings me back to early September of this year.

**Q:** That Sunday [chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, and saying . . . you know I think we do need to rethink; we as a nation, need to rethink how we put executives in positions that perhaps we might more skillfully address ahead of time and I have some specific thoughts about how we would do that. I think there does need to be an advance recognition that there are some things that are just so big that no state should be expected to keep the resources necessary to deal with them in waiting, not just Louisiana, not New York, California, you know wealthy states that people think highly of, or you know, the [Rudolph] “Giuliani” kind of factor. I think they would be pressed to deal with a Katrina.

**Q:** Well I think for me there was a very revealing graphic in the Boston Globe about a week after Katrina where they laid down the scope of the flood over Boston and it

went something like from the north end all the way to Worcester and the number of people that would have had to have been evacuated from Boston to deal with that same situation, and clearly it would have overwhelmed any city.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, it's a huge tragedy but I think you really have to sort of think this through in logical steps. The quote that I liked - I didn't hear it personally but it was reported to me - the President said was, "The area of destruction here is as big as England", and I can believe that because I did the flight Monday afternoon because it struck Monday. I did the flight that afternoon; actually, the first flight over New Orleans, and the entire impact area, after the hurricane.

**Q:** I want to get to that flight.

**RADM Duncan:** And it was just devastation. It's not just New Orleans. It's the whole Gulf South here. I distinctly recall over-flying Waveland, Mississippi, at our low level, and seeing nothing but destroyed lots. Houses, etc. washed away. At that point in the flight, the storm surge was rolling back across the flooded area and rushing back into the Gulf; carrying massive debris with it. For as far as I could see, the Gulf was roiling with returning brown water.

**Q:** And of course having competent executives in place presupposes that you've got a citizenry that when given advanced warning and, you know, "Where are my secondary and tertiary dialysis centers and all of these things that . . . well I've got so many

elderly people here. They've got to immediately be unplugged and then re-plugged somewhere else." And it seems like even if you've got a plan in place, if you don't have this infrastructure to train up to that plan then the plan is kind of meaningless at some level. It's abstract. It's nice to have.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes. Well the Mayor was saying, going into the weekend, that, "Is it a mandatory evacuation", and he said, "Well you know, my lawyer said I can't make it a mandatory evacuation because we can't provide transportation for everybody. So my recommendation to anyone listening is get out of town." Well he's just admitted that there are a lot of people who can't get out of town on their own and the Superdome is not going to be open. Well everybody knows that he's opened the Superdome in the past at the last minute so there's an expectation that when it gets really bad he'll open up the Superdome and you can come in.

**Q:** Spend a night or two and go home.

**RADM Duncan:** Well everybody expected to do that. Now consider this. Suppose the thing had wobbled a little more and gone to the east like Ivan did. Ivan came very close to hitting here last September a year ago. Suppose the Mayor had said, "Hey look, we've had this Katrina thing. Let's get everybody out of town. I mean no kidding, everybody out of town. We're going to do this right. We're going to get everybody out of here", and everybody does leave; gets on buses, they bring in trains, they do whatever they need too to get everybody out of here. They do this tertiary treatment

center. They've got gas trucks stationed on the road so you don't have people running out of gas. They do all this stuff and the thing turns out to be a Category One or it goes off to someplace else. You know what do they say about the Mayor at that point? He just wasted how many millions of dollars, scared people, and six people died en route because you get people where they are, health-wise, in their life. And we pulled some people out of roofs in houses that were in very bad shape.

One of the early ones is about a 400-pound lady who was back home after surgery and either hadn't done a good job of postoperative wound care or had a problem and she was gangrenous, and that entire helicopter crew was heaving on the way back taking this woman who was now in very bad shape because her whole limb was gangrenous. It just filled the helicopter up with that kind of thing. So you catch people at the stage of life that they're in and some of those won't be transported well.

Now we lost nobody and [no one got injured]; ours or people we helped, which I think is the most significant statistic in this whole thing to me. But you know that evacuation from Galveston and Houston; well they had how many people on that bus that caught fire? So the act of transporting runs risks as well. And if you're going to transport hospitals, if you're going to transport nursing homes, if you're going to transport elderly people that are bedridden, you know you run the risk that it's not going to make their life better in their personal circumstances, and now does it turn out to be for not if the hurricane fizzles out or goes the other way? So I don't want to trivialize the problem that a mayor has in dealing with an event like this. I think it is significant and it's hard to see the right answer ahead of time.

**Q:** How you make that call, yes.

**RADM Duncan:** Right, but I think probably now depending on this, wanting to be much more cautious, because, frankly, if you hope that things are going to be well, that's not good.

**Q:** But if you lose 6 or 20 or 30 people on the road rather than 1,300 people in the city  
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**RADM Duncan:** Well yes, we can say that now.

**Q:** Yes, but you couldn't say that on August 29<sup>th</sup>.

**RADM Duncan:** That's right. So I don't know. I mean I think the right answer might have been a different tack than the one that was taken but I don't want to make it sound like it was obvious.

**Q:** Sure. So as that Sunday turns into Monday, from what I gather, you had got yourself on a Falcon at some point that day. How did that all happen?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, Sunday we were running operations from here and we transferred the load (i.e. active cases, etc.) up to St. Louis. They were ready to pick it up and we said, "Okay St. Louis, you're up. We're going to shut everything down here



Sunday.” So I sent the off-going watch to St. Louis and I took the oncoming watch and sent them to Alexandria, Louisiana. That’s different than our COOP. That was a modification. And the idea there was to support a forward command element and Alexandria was a new location this year picked by Sector New Orleans. Sector New Orleans had only been in existence two or three weeks before Hurricane Katrina came. It was created by merging the Marine Safety Office and the Group commands in NOLA. So now they have a larger element and Captain Paskewich in part of his hurricane pre-planning looked for a COOP site. His teams came back and said, “We think Alexandria is the place”, and he said, “Well gee, I don’t know, that’s a long ways away.” And they said, “No, we think it’s a good place.” It turns out, I think, it was a very good idea. We took advantage of a former Air Force base with runways that weren’t being used. We turned it into a temporary Coast Guard air station and we moved lots and lots of stuff through Alexandria and we put a forward command element there.

I went to Houston and positioned myself to come in on a Falcon jet from Houston on Sunday night

I called the Commandant directly and briefed him on all the preparations, what my plan was, etc., and asked him if he could think of anything I may have missed. Was there something I should consider or change? I also advised him that I had created a forward command element, given what I expected that we would be dealing with. My assessment was that if I had gone to St Louis, I would be another operational commander a long way away from the impact area, at the end of a communications line that would undoubtedly suffer vulnerabilities and potential failures. Staying forward, would assure that he had Flag-level leadership, actively leading, boots in the

water, on scene, responding to changing conditions as they occur, whether he could talk to me or not. He agreed with my preparations and plans. Honestly, looking back, I think it was a crucial decision to operate forward, and a key to our success.

**Q:** So you had already planned that that was how you were going to get back after the hurricane.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, and that's why I went to Houston. There were Falcon jets there. I could hop a Falcon jet.

Monday morning the storm came ashore and following the speed of the storm and the path of the storm it looked, frankly' like we caught a break. I called Governor Blanco and I got her on the phone and I said, "Governor, this is Admiral Duncan. I think we caught a break on timing. What I mean is, the storm has been going four or five miles an hour. It moved up to 14 or 15 miles an hour. And while I had initially thought that our first real opportunity for any daylight situational awareness flight and rescues, if any are needed, would be Tuesday morning at first light, because of the increased speed of the storm it looks to me like if we get on this right now we'd have three or four hours of daylight that we could do those things on Monday afternoon. We could get in and do a situational awareness, see what the impact is, where we need to put resources, what kind of resources need to be there and start whatever relief is necessary Monday afternoon rather than what I'd thought probably Saturday would be a Tuesday morning first light event." So I made that phone call, got on a flight, went to Alexandria and got a briefing from both sector commanders on what they were seeing.

I took Captain Castillo, my Chief of “O”, and a petty officer from Public Affairs with a video camera. We got on a Falcon jet and we flew in. We left about 1700. Yes, I think it was 1700. I called the Area commander and the Commandant also before I left and said, “Here’s what I’m getting from my sectors. I’m going to get on a flight and go take a look at this. I’m going to chase a hurricane.”

So we got on the plane and we flew down. We went over Grand Isle; saw the damage that was done at Grand Isle. That’s out on the outer part of the Mississippi Delta in Louisiana. We flew off to LOOP; Louisiana Offshore Oil Platform, which is a substantial energy producer or supplier of exported oil and then flew up the Mississippi River and followed our way up.

**Q:** What was your impression of the coastline that soon after the storm? Could you see so much stuff laid to waste?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, we had very good visibility. We flew at about 500 to 800 feet and we were flying at 180 knots and we tried to stay with a 60-knot ring so not to close with the storm much more than 60 knots, and we were bouncing around a lot. And Petty Officer Reed; the guy with the camera, was airsick most of the time and we have proof of that because at one point he put the camera down, it bounced around a little bit and ended up coming to rest focusing up on him. And the rest is, as they say, is history.

**Q:** We’re not in the public affairs rate for nothing Admiral [chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** It was a Nantucket sleigh ride as they say in my neighborhood and it was a very sobering flight.

So we had good visibility.

As we came up into the city I think we were all kinds of stunned by what we saw. The Grand Isle looked like it had been thoroughly ravaged. The LOOP looked okay. Coming up the Mississippi we didn't see any community that was above water until the point where I called up to the pilot and said, "Say your position. Where are you now", and he said he was ten miles south on a radial from Bell Chase Air Station. So from ten miles south of Bell Chase to the entrance of the Mississippi River, which would probably be about 80-river miles, maybe a little more of that, nothing was above water. You know we'd see steeples. We'd see roofs. And if you look closely you could see where the telephone poles were and that would give you some indication of where the road was but there was nothing else that you saw. It was all the Gulf of Mexico now.

**Q:** Do you have a capability from that reconnaissance of communicating . . . well what is your capability of communicating say with Headquarters to let them know what's going on and if this may turn into something bigger than say people might have thought earlier?

**RADM Duncan:** Sure. That was part of the purpose of the flight. My intention was to complete the flight and then call and brief rather than say, "I'm presently over Burris, Louisiana, it's underwater", which was true.

We flew over the city. The city looked to me to be thoroughly flooded, perhaps a hundred percent flooded. On my flight I thought that the French Quarter was underwater too. And probably what I was seeing was inches of water in the French Quarter that was a continuous surface and from where I was flying over the city it was up to the eaves of the houses and probably, you know I could just see the continuous glare of water as far as I could see in the city and it looked to me like the French Quarter was underwater too. As it turns out it was probably rainwater on the street that was a couple inches deep and not the flooding that I was seeing directly below me.

Lakefront Airport was underwater. You could not see the runways. You would not know it was an airport except to recognize the tower and some hangar roofs that were coming out of Lake Pontchartrain.

From there we went east. We went over the Mississippi coast. We went as far as Bayou La Batre, Alabama. I tried to find two cutters that we had in dry-docks in Bayou La Batre and then turned inland and came back, and it was getting dark at that point. It was dark. We flew back but we could not land in Mobile, which was my initial intention; to land at Mobile and call in what I'd seen and meet with the sector commander there to get an update on what he'd seen in the last couple of hours.

We could not land at Mobile because of the wind. It was still pretty close to hurricane force and we had a crosswind component that prevented us from landing

anyplace east of Baton Rouge. So we continued on. We went to Alexandria and that's where we landed.

At one point in the flight I called up to the pilot and said, "How far are we from the coast right now" because we came straight across. He said, "Sixty-two miles." And I looked out the port side of the aircraft and it was dark, absolutely dark. There was no light to be seen for as far as I could see and it continued that way for the rest of the flight until we got very close to Alexandria. The entire Gulf Coast; from Mobile, Alabama to some point west of New Orleans was blacked out. Every now and then you'd see a single car with its headlights on so you knew you still had visibility. By the way, there are some pretty big towers there too and they were all dark so we were concerned about those. Remember, we're flying very low and the wind velocity goes up very quickly if we climb. It was a pretty overwhelming flight. You say, "Where do you begin? How do you provide relief to this size community with five helicopters, thirty helicopters, you know, cutters?" I mean where do you begin?

**Q:** Was it in your mind at that point because, as you say, there's this issue of if you get people or do you not, and at that point the paradigm was, "Well, if you can, fine. If you can't, we'll deal with that later." Is it starting to enter your thinking that if a lot of people haven't left by now we're going to have a helluva lot of work to do?

**RADM Duncan:** Oh yes, no doubt about that. Because there's always people who stay and if you attribute that to a percentage of the population - you have a large population here - and if some small percentage stayed, that's a lot of people. So by

the time that we landed in Alexandria, which wasn't all that long because we got up to altitude and speed, what occurred to me is that you chunk it out into manageable sections. You do what you can. You take your resources and skills and competencies and you apply them to the need that exists, and because of that flight we had a pretty good understanding of what need might exist. And I should tell you that when I got over New Orleans there were Coast Guard helicopters below me picking people up from roofs of houses.

**Q:** Already?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes. There were four helicopters I watched launch from Houston before I got out of there in a Falcon jet and I swung by Alexandria first. And consistent with our previous plan they were pre-staged to be in a position to come in behind the storm as soon as they could and they probed; they came as close to the storm as they felt comfortable, and they landed. They went a little longer and then went a little further and landed. And the first planes in were going to see if they could get fuel service at New Orleans, whether that was still available or whether we had to go from Acadiana or Lafayette or someplace else. So it was pretty well planned ahead of time with some latitude available to the first people responding to direct assets where they were needed.

About 1500, the 1<sup>st</sup> on Monday, we got word that the first rescue had taken place. It was like an electric shock through the community. It turns out it was three generations of women in Plaquemines Parish. They were either on a levee or in a

johnboat, I forget which, and a helicopter raised them; a mother, her daughter, and her grandbaby. And I'm telling you it was hard to keep helicopter pilots from running out to their aircraft and all converging on New Orleans at the same time. But that rescue wasn't in New Orleans. That was on one of the river parishes and I kind of point that out to say that there was a large area that we were concerned about. It wasn't all just New Orleans although that was the place where the water stayed and that's where we ended up with levee breaches that caused a different level of horror.

**Q:** Yes.

I've been told this by about six different people and I want to ask it to you directly because they all attribute it to you. When you saw what was going to be involved you said that you wanted to, "Darken the skies with Coast Guard helicopters; orange and white helicopters?" What did you say, just for history sake Admiral Sir [chuckle]?

**RADM Duncan:** I wanted to replicate Apocalypse Now with Coast Guard helicopters. Remember that movie with all those Hueys coming in all at once. I wanted to darken the sky with orange helicopters and I told Governor Blanco that on Sunday evening. I said that, "If there are rescues to be made after this thing hits, when the winds calms down enough for people to feel safe coming out of their house and if they feel that they need help, I want them to see an orange helicopter somewhere overhead that they can wave at and we'll come get them", and, frankly, we did that. But we also had to exercise professional forbearance. You do not want all our helicopters to "time out"



eight hours into a week-long rescue event. Managing a continuous, 24-hour-a-day operation required skilled professional approaches. The aviators, of course, did that magnificently. By the way, here's another place where I can make the point that a key element of our successes was our early preparations. The week before, when the hurricane was first forming and appeared to threaten our coast, I directed that and maintenance that might becoming due (e.g. 100 hour engine checks, etc.) in the next two weeks be done now (before the storm might hit) to avoid routine, but essential, maintenance interruptions.

**Q:** Of course Apocalypse Now is . . . .?

**RADM Duncan:** A movie which features a dramatic scene involving a massive flight of Army helicopters in Viet Nam flying over the coast (a fictional event).

We did the same thing by the way with Rita a month later.

**Q:** Yes, it's interesting because a lot of the helicopter pilots who had . . . unlike the Army the Coast Guard doesn't train to fly in formation and do sort of expeditionary maneuvers and so forth but they were essentially doing that because there were so many of them and operating in such a confined space.

**RADM Duncan:** That's right.

**Q:** And some of the most extraordinary verbal images, if you want to say that, from these rescues swimmers going down the hoists and seeing four or five or six other Coastie rescue swimmers within a couple of blocks doing the same thing.

**RADM Duncan:** Right. Someone called me to do an interview for a history piece they're doing and said, "Could you use more helicopters?" I said, "Well you know one of the things that we had to be careful about is putting too many helicopters in the sky. If you've got an H-60 hovering over a roof here and two houses down you've got another one hovering over a roof and four houses over there is another one, you know at some point you reach a point where you want to be very careful about adding more aircraft into that mix."

**Q:** Well they have these - what do they call them - Collisions Avoidance ICAS; Collision Avoidance . . .

**RADM Duncan:** TCAS, right.

**Q:** TCAS, and they said they finally shut them off because [chuckle], I guess it was a high collision place; six miles.

**RADM Duncan:** Every time I flew in there you'd hear traffic and I was looking out the window the entire time. Anytime I was heading into the Superdome for instance,

because I went to meetings there regularly down at the helo pad, I was looking out the window and calling traffic.

**Q:** More than one of them was saying that it was a miracle that there wasn't an accident, there was just so much traffic.

**RADM Duncan:** I believe in miracles but I also believe in preparation and I think what we had were conditions that allowed for VFR flight crews to see and flight crews were sensitive to it being a congested airway. We had two aircraft up that were doing traffic management, being a Custom's P-3 and a Coast Guard C-130. They did an absolutely amazing job. It was just an amazing job what they did, very professional, fully populated air space with lots of different aircraft. They did a great, great job in there. And individual pilots were calling out and watching. I learned from them that the best way to spot a helicopter in New Orleans at the time was to look for the ripples on the water underneath them. The rotor wash was creating concentric circles coming out from where they were and that was frequently more visible than the helicopter itself from certain angles of approach.

**Q:** So you get in, you see this coastal devastation; the blackout and so forth, but then very quickly you were confronted with this sort of disaster laid down on top of a catastrophe. Can you describe when and where and how you found out that you might have a problem with the levees?

**RADM Duncan:** When I had that meeting on Monday afternoon with the sector commanders before getting into the plane we were aware of reports of a levee breach. I couldn't tell you if it was 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal or Industrial Canal. I couldn't tell you that. There were reports of a levee breach. When I got over the city I couldn't tell you whether it was a levee breach or overtopping or whatever. I knew that there was deep water in parts of the city and to my view the whole city had some water event.

**Q:** And that presumably would have been the result of not just the rainfall but some kind of storm surge coming up across those levees and pushing up the river.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, exactly. It could have been overtopping, you know coming over the top of the levees because the storm surge reached up high. That would have been consistent with my observations about the Lakefront Airport being underwater. When I got over the Mississippi Coast the water was coming off the land so I was there early enough that I'd see, not the storm surge come in but the storm surge draining back off the land. So that was pretty early in the event. At that point it made less difference to me what the cause of the flooding was than to deal with the fact of flooding.

I knew that we were providing air transportation to FEMA representatives. We had planned ahead of time to provide them assistance in spotting locations that would be useful for their USAR Teams; Urban Search and Rescue Teams, who are very professional. We've worked with them in the past. I remember working with them in Ivan.

Over-flying one of the sections of the Florida coast we had three helicopters on the deck in this football field or soccer field where they were picking up people and moving them into one of the islands as part of, I guess, Pensacola, for flooding. So we worked with them in the past and I knew they were going to do that again.

**Q:** And they go do both – [conduct rescues in] inundated area as well and not just collapsed buildings.

**RADM Duncan:** It's hard to say. My understanding was that they'd be helpful in going in and they had done that, frankly, in Ivan.

**Q:** Because going back to the National Response Plan, does that ESF, what is it, seven or nine that deals with Urban Search and Rescue, but there's one line in there about the Coast Guard will take care of inundated places but the rest of it's all devoted to collapsed buildings.

**RADM Duncan:** Right.

**Q:** And there's just this unusual, if you want to call it that, contingency that everybody says, "Well everybody was aware that if this happens this was going to happen", doesn't seem to have gotten its way into their consciousness of . . . .

**RADM Duncan:** Yes.

**Q:** For example, the difference between what is inland SAR, normally Air Force responsibility, and coastal SAR, Coast Guard responsibility.

**RADM Duncan:** Right.

**Q:** Do you have a belly button into the Air Force as far as when you call to do what job?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, I think there's opportunity for interpretation on that. You could determine that what we did here was Air Force responsibility, a lot of it. I think on the levee system there's no question, we would do that. That's the sort of thing we do for fishing boats that are sinking, that sort of thing. But it made sense that we would help out here and as it turns out we were the responders that rolled into action. That was the right answer for us I think.

When Rita threatened, DOD did something different. They established a joint task force early. They had notionally established a JTF or were thinking about it for Katrina. It didn't get on the ground until some days after Katrina. In Rita they stood up their joint task force early and General Clarke and I spoke - he's 5<sup>th</sup> Army and was Commanding General of Joint Task Force Rita - about distribution of labor for helicopters doing rescues. And I ended up speaking with Major General Johnny White who's Air Force - I think he's a Guard officer who was detailed to General Clarke's joint task force - to put together an air SAR plan, and in the event the division of labor

that we agreed upon was that the Coast Guard would take from Corpus Christi to Louisiana, wherever this thing hit from the coast to 15-miles inland. So we agreed to that in advance. We did not have that discussion ahead because there was no one to discuss that with for Katrina.

**Q:** So could you say that that was the result of Katrina?

**RADM Duncan:** You know I'm inferring motivation into others and I don't want to do that.

**Q:** Yes.

**RADM Duncan:** But what I can say as a fact is that DOD moved more quickly, at least from the JTF standpoint, for Rita than they did for Katrina.

**Q:** Yes.

At some point did you have to make a decision that, "I'm going to base out of Alexandria for this"? Where did you decide to eventually camp out and stay?

**RADM Duncan:** Alexandria worked for me. I had a staff there that I could use. The chief of staff is a highly talented officer. He was running day-to-day operations and could take tasking and turn it into action and I could do that with the communications

that we had. I left him in St. Louis to run that. St. Louis had good communications with senior commands and everything else.

**Q:** And did you have decent communications between Alexandria and St. Louis?

**RADM Duncan:** I'd say it wasn't . . . decent is probably overstating. There were challenges.

**Q:** What were you using?

**RADM Duncan:** Well we used our standard communications and then our 504 area code died on us so we weren't able to use our telephones. We ended up getting new cell phones. I had three cell phones during this thing. The last one was coded to Northwest Louisiana because that turned out to be an exchange that continued to work.

Our computer service died when the single point failure, which is the ISC server here, either ran out of fuel, the generator died or went underwater. I'm still not sure which one happened. Ultimately both of those things happened. But early on that server wasn't serving anymore so our Good Links didn't work; the Blackberry kind of device that we have, and I said, "Get me another one, now", and they did from St. Louis and they were able to get the ISC there to create an account for the ISC server in St. Louis for each of the senior players in the Coast Guard down range. They brought down Good Links that they handed around to us and then later on they



brought down TRIOS, which is the next generation of those things that they handed to us later in the event. So it didn't take awful long to bring up computer services. So text messaging was available and that was a very helpful thing to have. We also had taken the precaution of pre-staging the TMAC and TMEC, which are both communications capabilities. One is deployable on the C-130. We moved that to Alexandria. The other one is a trailer-able piece and we moved that to Mobile. And I brought in a 270 to provide command and control capabilities tied up in New Orleans. I asked for that from the Area commander and she provided it pre-storm. Before the storm came it was tagged and it was on its way. But the communications were not always good. I had two satellite phones that I'd picked up, one in Houston and one in another place, and I was never comfortable that either one of them gave me the kind of service that I needed.

**Q:** Were you able to . . . I guess you would have to get information from Captain Paskewich, at least for the New Orleans area, and then would it be you that was passing that up to LANT and the Commandant?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes.

**Q:** How did those daily briefs go?

**RADM Duncan:** They were more than daily.

**Q:** Were they good briefs?

**RADM Duncan:** They were good briefs. When I got on the ground I called the Area commander and the Commandant Monday night and shared what I knew. I said, “Double the number of helicopters that we have. Send more because we’re going to be operating for a while here and we’re going to want to replace these in two or three days and bring more in, keep constant supply going”, and that was done.

Some more ships; more aids to navigation mission platforms. We’d moved others that we’d staged over in Texas to come back in behind the storm so they were either going to hit 10 or 15-foot seas. It was going to take them a little while to get there.

Good briefing with the Commandant and Area commander and we switched to a twice a day briefing for the duration from then on. I had twice a day briefings; 0800 and 2000 for Sector commanders. The Commandant wanted a briefing; I think it was at 1600. The Area commander instituted a pre-brief to the Commandant an hour before that and we were able to meet all of those. And I focused on interacting at places that were nodes of power. I alternated my time. I spent nights in Alexandria but spent days either in Alexandria and I did make it to Mobile to meet with the sector commander there. And based on what I saw there it looked to me like that was well under control with less influence that that would keep running. But New Orleans looked like it was going to be a significant event.

So I went to Baton Rouge. That’s the OEP, which is the version of the Emergency Operation Center for Louisiana. That’s where all the players had their

liaisons and command elements. I went to New Orleans regularly for meetings at the Superdome when the JTF came to town. I met with them; General Honoré [LTGEN Russel L. Honoré, U.S. Army]. I also went to all of his commanders' briefs or connected in by telephone. Many of them were held on the *Iwo Jima* when they finally got to town, so I flew to the *Iwo Jima* regularly. [USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD-7)]

**Q:** Before the heavy DOD presence arrived there was about a four or five day period there where, to a lot of us on the outside other than the Coast Guard, it looked like governmental response at all levels was failing badly. You were right in the center of all this and presumably a fulcrum between the Coast Guard and these other players. How was it from your point of view?

**RADM Duncan:** I wouldn't say that your assessment was widely off the mark. I will tell you that individual players did a very good job. We got a boat presence in Tuesday morning and not long after that were working with the state fish and game people. They had boats as well. They folded into our response. They were very active in working. Individual Guard elements were active. Guard aircraft were up working principally under Captain Jones' direction and we had others that came from other places. Arkansas National Guard sent two UH-1 Medivac aircraft because I kept in mind where they were. When we did evacuation from the Convention Center and hospitals I made sure those were in the mix.

But there was some inertia, it seemed to me, and, frankly, I was very concerned about us taking people off roofs of houses where they were in immediate danger and

putting them in places of relative safety and finding out they were staying there for longer than I anticipated that they would.

So we did two things. We ended up purchasing water in bulk. The first day we purchased 60 pallets of water and that's about 70 thousand of those little bottles of water, and we moved them from St. Louis and Houston through Alexandria down to New Orleans. And every Coast Guard helicopter that lifted off had a full load of bottles of water. And I said, "If we touch you we own you." And Senator Snow, I think, picked that up and she made a very nice address on the Senate floor using that. But the idea there wasn't that we were going to be overpowering but we're going to retain responsibility. If we know we put you someplace we're going to come back and check on you. We're going to bring food. We're going to bring water. And if we have information to share we'll do that too, and we did that for several days.

**Q:** But there was no . . . ?

**RADM Duncan:** After the first day we went to 90 pallets of water and we maintained that throughout. By the way, this offers a good insight into one aspect of our operations. There was a problem. I identified it, or heard about it from Coasties operating on the ground, I established a requirement to address it (purchase/provide water), and transport it in sufficient quantities to relieve the problem; the requirement was sent to my Chief of Staff in St Louis, action taken, further assessment, and modification made. As an interesting aside, the first purchases were made by a petty officer in St Louis using her government credit card (ordinarily used for TAD duty

travel!). I brought that receipt with me to the Senate hearing that commended the Coast Guard (and me).

**Q:** Yes, and I guess it's such an unusual situation that there wasn't . . . you know thinking back to the Second World War and port security men on the docks and so forth, there wasn't a sense that you needed to station somebody there with a rifle to provide just sort of a constant presence in between helicopter flights.

**RADM Duncan:** No, and I don't think we had the authority or necessarily the skill-set to offer to that. There were individuals at these places that were offering notional control authority. There were the police. There were occasional Guardsmen in some of these places. And as the event unfolded some of them would say, "Hey, we're full here, no more." And, frankly, the answer was not, "We're full here", because the people we're bringing are coming from places of immediate peril. As bad as it is here, its worse where we got these people from. So, "We'll bring more food, we'll bring more water, and I will put pressure on the next element to move them on to other places." So I did that. I met with Mr. Brown, I guess, Thursday evening. I went to Baton Rouge. I tried to contact him all Wednesday. He was not available for me. In fact when I pressed my aide, she told me that Mr. Brown's chief of staff told her that Mr. Brown was meeting with people based on their importance, not their title (presumably, "Admiral"). I said, "Get me a helicopter. We're going to Baton Rouge." I went up and found him, we talked, and I gave him a frankest estimate of what I saw on the ground and that things needed to be changed immediately. I also met with Governor Blanco

on that visit and I gave her an assessment of what I saw on the ground and what I thought needed to be done.

**Q:** What was Mr. Brown's response?

**RADM Duncan:** Mr. Brown indicated it was great, clear information for him and that he wanted to do something about it. "Let's get together at eight." He was getting makeup applied. He was going to do a press conference. I said, "Okay, where should we meet?" He told me. I said, "I'll go get something to eat", because, frankly, we hadn't been eating regularly and there was a cafeteria there so we went over there. On the way across I met Mary Landrieu, the senior Senator of Louisiana. We conversed and I shared what the Coast Guard was doing and what I had experienced in New Orleans that day. She said, "You need to see the Governor and tell her what you told me", and she brought me over to see the Governor. Actually she came and picked me up at the cafeteria and brought me over to see the Governor. I spent time with her. I brought Captain Castillo with me. I got to Mr. Brown about ten minutes after eight. The meeting was over. He didn't have time to meet with me and we never met again. And I came back and gave a frank assessment to the Commandant that night.

**Q:** Was any of the kind of tactical difficulties coming up to you through Sector? I mean I read with fascination the After Action Report of *Pamlico*, which seems extraordinary. I mean we've interviewed the CO. It's an amazing story.

**RADM Duncan:** Isn't it, those little black cutters.

**Q:** It's extraordinary in what these guys did for five days on their own. And I mean they even called it sort of a miniature armada.

**RADM Duncan:** What that comes from is, I was looking at, "What more could we do? What relief could we provide to this community? And I said, "I want to develop a Dunkirk Option", and that's what I called it. I said, "Can we get OSVs; these Offshore Supply Vessels, to load people up and take them to places of safety away from flooded areas? Can we get other kinds of floating barges and platforms? Can we do things with that? And *Pamlico* was a big part of that as you know and so was the 270 that came into port later. So we did that. We moved a lot of people. At peak we were moving 750 people an hour by boat and 100 by air. At the individual unit level, you may not appreciate fully the extent of a major operation, and the role you are playing in the bigger picture. From my level, it was a large, tightly coordinated, well supported operation.

**Q:** And I wanted to ask you specifically because these guys are doing this heroic, as you said, very Dunkirk-ish operation, small boats were never designed to do any of this stuff.

**RADM Duncan:** That's right.

**Q:** And yet they were running into problems with the NSA facility and even mooring at the NSA or in offloading ferries at the NSA.

**RADM Duncan:** What kind of problems are you referring to?

**Q:** In not being allowed to moor [chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** Okay.

**Q:** And not being allowed to offload folks. Did any of that get to your level?

**RADM Duncan:** Well yes, some of it did. If you recall we set up two principle bases of operation for waterborne operations. One was at our station up in Lakefront, which became a massive armed camp, frankly, and the other was at Zephyr Field. And aside from safety concerns, people who were a bad element in town, this is the first operation I've been involved with where we had to provide security for lifesavers. That's new and I put out a Special Use of Force Policy.

**Q:** Just for force protection for people doing lifesaving operations.

**RADM Duncan:** That's right, and I'm bringing that with me to the Flag Conference tomorrow. That's not been done before. We've never had to do that before. And as a corollary to that we found that there were some law enforcement agencies that were



not helpful, in fact frustrated efforts to provide relief. “Don’t bring them here. We’ve had enough of these. The next Coastie that comes in we’re going to shoot.” That got me to call the state authorities and say, “Get this sheriff back in line.” And I understand that the state police called this particular sheriff and said, “You don’t mean that. Don’t say that again and don’t let it get around.” So that’s sort of an intersection between boat operators, the sector commander, the district commander, the Governor’s office, and elected officials, and down to state law enforcement officers. And these are people we’ve worked with for a number of years now. We do Mardi Gras’ here and one of the reasons that we provide support to Mardi Gras’ is because it’s a huge concentration of people if you’re looking at a Homeland Security event. That’s a likely scenario that you want to have plans in place for. So working with the law enforcement first responders and having helicopters up already that have a police officer with a radio onboard and they can talk to the police, looks like a very good thing to me from a Homeland Security standpoint. And it paid off in this event because if we told a local helicopter crew, “Go to Lee Circle”, they didn’t need a latitude and longitude. If we said, “Check out the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward”, they knew where that was. They also knew something about the character of those communities and that was a very valuable area of familiarization that the Navy didn’t have when they came into town. It was a good thing to know.

**Q:** Presumably at some level, especially dealing with the Navy, we’re supposed to be on the same team, and to have those kinds of things thrown on the backs of Warrant

Officers and Senior Chiefs who are just out there trying to do the best they can with what they have . . . I wonder . . . . The other issue that came up . . . .

**RADM Duncan:** Well, frankly, that was one of the things that validated my decision to stay forward. I mean I could engage with General Honoré and say, “Listen, I need access to the NSA at the West Bank now. I want quarters. I want office space and I want to use their RV park because I’m going to bring in a bunch of trailers with my forward command element that’s going to operate out of there”, and that happened. Now I did not get that approval. The Navy O-6 who’s the commanding officer of the base said, “Well we’ve got the 82nd Airborne here. We don’t have any room for anything. We’re not giving anything to anybody.” As it turns out somebody else came in to take over for him and I know Admiral Bob Passmore, who was the guy that took over, and I talked to him and I talked to General Honoré. I talked to several other people and it was made to happen. But it would not have happened had we left it up to an O-6 in the community here to say, “Well whose the right guy over at the Navy base to talk to” because you couldn’t get past that.

**Q:** Yes, and that’s kind of what I was getting at. At some point, even though it’s part of the Coast Guard’s ethos to do things at the lowest conceivable level, and you know, if a third class can do it let him do it.

**RADM Duncan:** You’re absolutely right, and they don’t let me down either. They do a great job. But there’s a role for an admiral too.

**Q:** Right, exactly, and at some point you've got to put your fist down on the table and say, "This has got to get done."

**RADM Duncan:** I did. I did probably once a day or better during this event.

**Q:** Were you aware of this - and this came up, you know speaking of the Persian Gulf, this is kind of extraordinary and I know that there's probably nothing that they can do about it in the design of these MSSTs - because one of the issues that came up in Bahrain was that one of our port security boats got lost out in the middle of the Persian Gulf and ran out of fuel and was eventually rescued, I think, by either a buoy tender or by one of the boats out there. And they asked them for fuel and they said, "Well we'd love to help you but we're all running on diesel." And I just read in one of the After Action Reports that the MSSTs are also running on gasoline and not on diesel. So when they come up to the *Pamlico* or something like that they can't refuel there either. Is this something that's even remotely on the radar screen of folks?

**RADM Duncan:** I think it is. We've got a series of groups looking at lessons learned and it goes to people, equipment, communications policy, a whole series of things, and I'm sure that I will get a full brief on this when it gets staffed and they can tell me about it. I can tell you that's not necessarily a new problem. In Hurricane Hugo, which I mentioned previously, as a group commander I delayed the *Cowslip* from sailing from North Carolina by a day. I said, "Get bladders and fill them with gasoline and put them

up on deck. I don't care what the policy is. Fill them up and put them on your fantail because I can't get gasoline in Charleston. The pumps aren't working. The electricity is down and I need gasoline to run my small boats."

**Q:** So this is not a new issue?

**RADM Duncan:** That's not a new issue. Now have we learned our lesson? I'm going to find out [laughter].

**Q:** [Laughter] I thought I'd bring it to your attention Sir.

**RADM Duncan:** I appreciate it, yes.

**Q:** At some level did you - and I don't know quite the way to phrase this - the Coast Guard was not the issue and yet you had this sort of perception, especially that first week or so, that the government was falling down, or at least several parts of it were. Did that lead at some level in your sphere of, I don't want to say resentment, but other agencies saying, "Well we're just sick and tired of hearing about you guys. We know what you're doing and so forth but we're doing the best we can with what we have and all that."?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes. Okay, my focus was delivering relief to a community that really needed it and we put our absolute best effort into that. That meant staging resources.

That meant moving people. That meant getting the right force package in the right place, sustaining it and making the right partnerships and making those work. I wasn't watching TV. I wasn't hearing anything on the radio. I did become aware at some point that the rest of the country, and as it turns out the rest of the world, was looking at this thing and saying, "Wow, the Coast Guard, the little service that could." I've got a friend who's an entrepreneur from Ireland. I've known him for about a year and a half. He showed up at Baton Rouge with a contract from NORTHCOM and he looked at me like a kid would look at a rock star and said, "Bob, you're a hero." I said, "No, but actually I flew with a few of them." And he said, "No, you don't understand. In Europe; the story in Europe . . ." this is about the end of the first week, beginning of the second week ". . . is, 'The little service that could; the U.S. Coast Guard'." He said, "Everybody else, they're talking about criminal negligence, but the Coast Guard . . .", he said, ". . . you have no idea. The whole world is talking about, or at least Europe, is talking about what the Coast Guard is doing. You, personally, are a hero in Ireland!" As a grandson of Irish immigrants, it was especially nice to hear.

**Q:** I know in Philadelphia we have the BBC World News and it was 20-minutes of Coast Guard rescues.

**RADM Duncan:** Really. See, I've asked my public affairs guys to capture some of that but we haven't been able to.

**Q:** Well the reports you want to look at on the other side of the ledger are the ones that Matt Frye; F-R-Y-E, did for BBC because those are devastating and he was sneaking into places where they were trying to keep him out of because finally they said, “You guys from the BBC stay the hell out.” [Chuckle]

**RADM Duncan:** Well I think that’s the wrong answer. They ought to clean up their act and figure out why he’s finding problems.

**Q:** Right, and there was one reporter where there was a dead body on a ramp and a National Guard soldier ten feet away, and [the reporter] kept going up to this [National Guard] kid - and it was a kid - saying, “What are you going to do about this?” And like three days later he was asking the same kid and the kid said, “Well that’s not my job”. And it’s like the worst possible response to the worst possible person because you’ve just broadcast that to 500 television outlets certainly all through Europe and so forth.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes. I guess the way I characterize the answer to your question is that I met people who were working hard and trying hard. Some of them were more successful than others. Did some of them resent that we were getting good coverage? You know if they saw that we were they might have. It didn’t manifest itself in too many ways in my survey post. I heard of one guy who was pretty senior say, “I don’t want any more Goddamn good Coast Guard ideas.” I’m not going to tell you who said that but the next time I see him I’m going to remind him what good ideas worked. He should have known better.

**Q:** Can you speak a little bit . . . I just want to follow-up on this whole idea because it's an issue that we don't have a lot of first hand material on, but this whole issue of force protection. *Pamlico* had to deal with it. The *Spencer* guys had to deal with it.

**RADM Duncan:** The small boat guys did. They had to deal with it too.

**Q:** Yes, exactly.

**RADM Duncan:** We had rescue swimmers who called to be picked up again because the crowd turned surly and it looked like it was bad karma going on here.

**Q:** At what level did the Coast Guard have to be . . . you've got this multi-mission service but a multi-mission makes a helluva bad bumper sticker because if you bring in Marine a Marine is bringing his rifle, but if you bring in the Coast Guard . . . ?

**RADM Duncan:** Did you know he's not bringing bullets?

**Q:** If he has bullets in it [chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** We do. That's the difference by the way.

**Q:** If they have the gun then they have bullets in it.

**RADM Duncan:** Our guys.

**Q:** Yes.

**RADM Duncan:** Right.

**Q:** But is there some common standard that the Coast Guard is going to have to train to where everybody has an 9-millimeter on their hip at the same time that they've got the rescue sling in their other hand?

**RADM Duncan:** I think we've been struggling with that in sort of a schizophrenic way for a long time now. When I joined - this is a lifesaver outfit - that's what we did. Somewhere along the way we picked up sort of a black hat that we were now also cops on the beat, we're going to stop drugs, we're going to enforce fisheries, we're going to do all these things. We're going to probably interfere with your business if you're pouring oil into the water to represent a higher good. But you're probably not going to welcome us and say, "Oh hey, Coast Guard, you guys pulled me out of the water a number of times." We may have also written you a fine for polluting and that's fine. That's good use of our presence from a national standpoint but for those of us who have lived through that transition it required a bit of modification of our personal image of who we were. We not only save people but we also are concerned about the environment. We're concerned about drugs. We're concerned about other things. And



we've always had, as part of our portfolio, national defense. When I came in there was a big war going on in Vietnam and had it not ended I suspect I probably would have gone to a patrol boat from my ship in Alaska, which was my first ship I would have gone over there in, and that was fine with me. I said, "Boy, I thought that was the right answer." And when Desert Shield cooked off and then Desert Storm I volunteered and went. I think that's the right answer. I think we should be involved in national defense but there's that schizophrenia about Homeland Security, "Is everybody going to be law enforcement? Is everybody going to be armed?" I think more people than in the past will have to be. I think it's going to be a required skill set that you will have to have a minimal threshold competency in. And depending on your assignment you may have a more in-depth utilization that requires you to do that and I don't think that's a bad thing given the world's circumstances. What we have not done is, ever had to run relief operations with a weather eye out to security for those providing that relief. That's foreign to my experience until Katrina. What we used the MSSTs for was protection of our lifesavers, which is a different thing. Now do we have to do that all the time? I'll give you one example. I got a call from the commanding general of the joint task force asking if we could airlift out the Convention Center. First off, could we tell him how many people were in the Convention Center, so we did that, and we did a reconnaissance of the waterside of that and sent him digital pictures to his JOC so that he'd know what he was dealing with when he came in by land. I personally, at 0200, with the watch captain and the duty aviator, put together a ten-aircraft lift to start the next morning to take people out; injured people or medically in need people out of the Convention Center and take them up to the airport. There were three things

I required. One: that it be a secure LZ. That we didn't have like a last helicopter out of Saigon event where a Coast Guard helicopter lands or any helicopter that we put in there, because we put two National Guard helicopters into it. We put in those two Arkansas National Guard Medivac helicopters. We put some very heavy lift helicopters into it. But I wanted the landing zone to be secure. Otherwise people rush it and now we have a catastrophe that we didn't have to have. So in that case I wasn't looking for providing organic force protection. I wanted somebody else; National Guard presumably, to provide that law enforcement or presence around that lift area and they did that. They also had to make sure that they could cycle them through and that there'd be reception at the other end. Because the night before we put three helicopters up and when they got up to the airport and the airport said, "We're closed and we're not taking anybody else", those three aircraft took those people up to Baton Rouge and took them out of the play for the rest of the night. I said, "We're not going to do that again. That's a bad use of helicopters." I don't think that we're going to have to have a very large standing force protection presence for most operations. If we are providing this kind of relief in a natural catastrophe again or a terrorist event I think we need to be sensitive to the fact that we might need to provide some kind of force protection. I've got some thoughts on that and I'm going to deliver that to the flag conference tomorrow.

**Q:** The other side of that coin seems to be that in this situation or a response to a terrorist event, especially in a situation where, as in Katrina, you've got a whole area

that power's gone, civil society is gone and all the rest of it, that the Coast Guard responding units need to be almost entirely self-sufficient and expeditionary.

**RADM Duncan:** Where'd you pick up that word?

**Q:** From almost every flag officer I've talked too [chuckle], starting with Admiral Crea [Vice Admiral Vivien S. Crea] who said, "We need more expeditionary forces."

**RADM Duncan:** Well she read my brief then.

**Q:** But it seems that the way things are going is that the port security unit may be the model that, you know if you don't bring it with you you're not going to have it when you get there.

**RADM Duncan:** A couple of thoughts on that. One thing that I think came out of Katrina that we applied in Rita is that we would be expeditionary. I wrote that in a message and sent it out. It's part of the briefing I gave to the "All Flags Conference" a couple weeks ago. I said, "Don't assume that anything organic survived. Assume this is Afghanistan. You're not going to get any help from anybody. In fact they maybe hindering in some way. Radio antennas wouldn't be up. Gas stations won't be open. The commissaries won't be available to you. Bring everything you need. Plan on sustaining three to five days with a logistics train that supports your continued

operations past that.” That’s what we did for Rita and that’s what we will do from now on.

One recommendation I’m offering is that we need a standing response force that can come in with that kind of thing and force protection will be a module depending on what we’re responding to, that you can plug into that.

**Q:** As part of that unit’s capabilities.

**RADM Duncan:** That’s right. And I put out a special Use of Force Policy that didn’t exist prior to that that I’m also going to show at the flag conference.

**Q:** What did you draw from that? I mean you’re a lawyer; you’re an operational person, so you seem to be in an ideal position to write that policy.

**RADM Duncan:** Well I also have lawyers who do that work and I had tasked them and my operators to come together and put that together, and they did, and they worked through the chief counsel’s office actually to make sure that we were right. We put something together. We sent it up to them. They looked at it. There was some give and take that went back and forth and we put something out that we think is good. But we have not had a robust decision about the D-8 Use of Force Policy in Katrina. I’m bringing that with me to the flag conference to say, “Let’s get a discussion on this. Does this sound right to you folks? Would you tweak it one way or the other and let’s have a discussion about this before you really need it.”

**Q:** As you're looking at reconstituting places like ISC New Orleans and so forth, is there any thought being given to say the things that went on with NSA with regard to the river; getting some kind of dual-bank facility so that if the Coast Guard has to do something like this in the future it can go from a Coast Guard facility to a Coast Guard facility and just eliminate the middle man [chuckle]?

**RADM Duncan:** We haven't done that. Maybe that's something that we ought to think about.

**Q:** Just in terms of, you know . . . I'm looking at these people being plucked off roofs and I'm like, "Well you know they could have had a neighborhood platform [chuckle] where everybody went to and made it nice and easy for us." But obviously we're not going to get that, but you know, sort of some dedicated dock space or at least dock space where you know that you can establish a parameter because it's your workspace anyway.

**RADM Duncan:** Right. I haven't seen a lesson learned on it yet but we'll look at that. And it may be appropriate to do here because this is capable of repetition. I mean this is still a city that's protected by levees, levees that are in a stressed state.

**Q:** It seems like this is the place where if you've got a plan like that and it's going to be exercised at some point, whether you believe in global warming or not, it's going to happen.

**RADM Duncan:** Right.

**Q:** This expeditionary idea seems to fit in well with the way the Coast Guard is currently put together with reserve units. Is that how you would look at this?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, I think there's a lot of variance that we can explore and I hope we do. The reason I was late coming in to see you, that was what Admiral Johnson called me about. He was there. He heard my presentation. He wanted to talk about expeditionary forces. He has his own ideas on that and I think we're getting a discussion going. We didn't have the full discussion at the flag conference. I'm hoping we do sometime in the near future because otherwise we're going to have to learn it again on the fly and that's the wrong way to do that.

**Q:** Well I think the thing that's surprising to us in the reserves, looking at the MSSTs having been stood up since 9/11, is their lack of "expeditionary-ness" and they're going to have to fix that problem if they want to put people into other than their own harbor.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, I think you're right.

**Q:** Or even in their own harbor assuming that their harbor is . . . .

**RADM Duncan:** I've tried to use them in other ways. I said, "Look, I want to get one of these MSSTs". They don't work for districts. You can get them to work for you if the Area commander deems it appropriate and lets you use some part of it, and we've benefited from using them from time to time. But I wanted to use them up on the rivers. I said, "Get them in Vicksburg. Let's see what Vicksburg looks like. Know something about a fast river before you end up doing a mission there. Have them spend some time on the offshore oil platforms because that's a community that's not been addressed, and I think MSSTs offer something there." There's been a lot of reluctance, frankly, to do those things, maybe because they're a new asset, Areas control them. I frankly don't think they should be controlled by Areas. I think the district ought to use them.

**Q:** Can you give me a sense of how this tactically evolved for you over those first couple of weeks leading up to Rita?

**RADM Duncan:** How do you mean?

**Q:** I don't want to go into day-by-day but just in terms of the challenges you had to deal with as the rescue starts to taper off and you've got more recovery, that type stuff going on.

**RADM Duncan:** Again, you're looking at multi-mission and that's the sort of thing that we'd sort of set up in the concept of operations at the beginning of the year. You know, "If something big happens here's how we're going to approach it. 1-We're going to do saving lives. 2-We're going to contain and mitigate hazardous waste spilling. 3-We're going to open waterways and we're going to do those simultaneously." Beside from *Pamlico*, buoy tenders are more effective in doing harbor restoration than moving lots and lots of people. So ordinarily once you've got the rescue piece in hand, and this is not unusual, you can turn those assets to do what they do best. Now I personally am a big believer in 225s. I wanted *Cypress* back as quickly as possible from Texas because it is a good versatile asset. It is a good platform for staging small boats, for providing a harbor for small boats, for providing hot meals and hotel services for small boats crews. I mean I can make a station out of a 225. It's a good command and control platform. It can control aircraft to a limited extent. They don't have a very large staff so I have to supplement them with watch-standers and I've done that with JFK Jr.; with Egypt Air 990; with several other events. I've brought *Willow* and other 225s in to do those things. I put the Massachusetts State Police Dive Team on the *Willow* in Long Island Sound. So I know that they are a very capable platform and I wanted to use them for more than just restoring channels. But when it comes to the Mississippi River, opening it, I needed them for that sort of thing.

Early on one of the things I really wanted - an intersection there - was I wanted a situational awareness flight to . . . you're aware of all of the refineries and chemical plants that we have around here. I wanted those assessed early on. What I wanted to



make sure, apart from oil spills, I wanted to make sure that those spherical tanks, you know they look like golf balls on sticks, I wanted to make sure that they weren't ruptured, knocked over, leaking. They contain the bad stuff; that's the Benzene, that's the Methyl/Ethyl death. It's all the stuff you don't want in that rapidly becoming toxic soup that's coming up to the eaves of people's houses. You know what's under your sink at home. You can probably guess there's something you don't want in the water at the dry cleaning shop down at the end of the street. I have no idea what's in the funeral home. All that stuff is mixing into the water and our rescue swimmers are going into that soup, or it's aerosolizing from the spray, and I want to be careful that people aren't affected.

Early on I made sure and was put in a position of comfort that none of those tanks had ruptured. That was a primary concern of mine because they're doing rescues in this water and if it's connected to a stream of really bad stuff coming in . . .

**Q:** And you're putting the people directly at risk.

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, and that's a different problem. And then we kept finding another level of hell as this thing progressed. I wanted to make sure we covered that one. So that was done. Health was a big concern; what precautions are appropriate for operating for an extended period of time in this environment? So we enlisted MLC and Headquarters to give us a health profile; what precautions are appropriate, what things should we do, what protective equipment is appropriate?

**Q:** Do you ever call on the National Strike Force and say, “You guys deal with this stuff all the time. You tell me what I need to do”?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, and they were folded into our community. So what we came up with was a health monitoring program that we’re all in now and a hepatitis panel; three shots, and a tetanus shot. And although tetanus is supposedly good for ten years they recommended it five years for people involved with this operation, which we did. So I got a series of shots at some point when I came down here and everybody that came down got that too, and we’re on a health follow-up program.

But it led to other things too. For instance, rescue swimmers, they said, “Gee, maybe we shouldn’t shave because cuts and nicks that we ordinarily get [would get infected] and you know and I’m a terrible shaver.”

**Q:** You don’t want those opened up.

**RADM Duncan:** Right. So we said, “That makes sense. You’re right, don’t shave.” That’s not in any book anywhere. I’d like to write that into our action plan, I mean people that are going to be coming in contact with hazardous waste, bio-hazard in the water, bodies.

**Q:** Of course now if we see a photograph in the archives of that we’ll understand why.

**RADM Duncan:** You'll understand why. And about three days into it you'll see that we stopped using air boats.

**Q:** We heard about the air boats because they were spraying . . . .

**RADM Duncan:** Because they'll aerosolize whatever is in that water and now you're going to breathe it.

**Q:** Yes.

**RADM Duncan:** So we stopped using air boats for that reason. And those are the things that are probably useful . . . I mean we're . . . I guess this tries to answer the question, "Where did my thinking go" once you've got some kind of an effort going that's addressing the immediate needs for lifesaving, you know what's the next stage of that? Well of course the environment and restoring the channels were the next things but there were permutations of that.

**Q:** The other thing I want to ask you is, you have this other role as head of the district, public person, reassuring personality, two-star admiral. How much of that role did you consciously play, how much were you asked to play, as far as being a public spokesman for reassuring that the whole situation wasn't getting completely out of hand and so forth and so on?

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, that was left to me with no guidance, frankly, and I wasn't looking for guidance. I think you have to sort of look at this as a dynamic environment and use your judgment as to what makes sense. I guess on balance there are two audiences that I needed to serve principally. I needed to serve the internal Coast Guard audience, you know make sure our people knew that they were doing the right thing, they were doing well, and everybody understood that there was help available to them personally, that their families were going to be taken care, that Mutual Assistance was going to look after them and meet their needs. And then the external piece, you know a reassuring face without someone who ends up like – oh gosh, what's that guy's name? He was the general who was the Chief of Staff of the White House who said . . . .?

**Q:** General Haig [Douglas M. Haig, Jr.]

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, Haig, "I'm in charge here." You don't want that. That's not what you want to be remembered for. You're not in charge of everything. You're the district commander. So remember that role.

The other piece of that though is that you're right, things are working right. You have a pretty good situational awareness of what's happening and how do you provide assurance to an external audience to, for instance, you know CNN and others were saying, "What about the grain harvest? The Midwest grain harvest is a seasonal event. It's happening while Katrina is hitting New Orleans. How's that going to get to international markets? Will you be able to restore the channel to 43-feet, which is what

the grain ships need to get in and out? Where are the grain elevators?" Well only one was in the impact area. So that's just one element of that. So there's in my mind at least a role to provide professional assessment, assurance and that sort of thing. While not wanting to be an Al Haig, you can't be a Giuliani either. My sense is that Giuliani has to be a local official. If it's not local it's just not capable of being replaced by a federal employee. I mean even if the guy lives here, me, I'm not the elected mayor. I'm not running for governor. I'm not somebody that the population has selected to be their leader. You know I've been put here as a federal official and I've done well in that system but I'm not pretending to be in charge by the will of the people. You can't come in and do that I don't think. And in its absence, and I think there was an absence here, is that you can't substitute it.

From my standpoint it seemed appropriate to take one in five or so opportunities for myself personally to be on media events and push the rest to the sector commander, the air crews, the *Pamlico*, you know the guys that were doing the job, and none of those guys ever let me down. They were all professional. They were all empathetic. You know they came across as not the Guardsman who says, "It not my job. It's starting to stink here, I wish someone would come take care of it." I never saw that. That was not a problem. So pushing it to a boat crew or pushing it to a rescue swimmer was always going to provide me the kind of positive, professional, reassuring presence that I wanted on TV. They also need to see the guy who was in charge once in a while but as a balance you don't want to take too many of those things because now it looks like you're grandstanding.

**Q:** Right.

**RADM Duncan:** So as it turns out I was on CNN and Geraldo and Time Magazine, LA Times, BBC, RTE', and a whole series of national and international media, and I didn't see many of these things when they ran. I just did the interview and moved on to other things. And sometimes it was a job to be present. Nobody was in Alexandria although we did have an editor from Good Morning America that we just embedded into our public affairs cell the first few days and that worked out very well. She got us positions on Good Morning America and other places and I think there's going to be some focused coverage of the Coast Guard on some series that are coming out in January because some people shadowed me and others around for several days. So I think we're going to see some of that come back when they put it into a regular broadcasting thing. It was a balance and sometimes I'd say, "Well it's time that I go to Baton Rouge and stand in front of the media and talk to them for a while", even though I'd rather go home and sleep.

And here's another aspect of that. The media set up in New Orleans, at one point in this after the Superdome and the Convention Center, were cleared out. New Orleans is a dead city. There are no lights. There's nothing. There's no sewage, no running water. But they liked the backdrop. So for instance, to do Geraldo, I'd go from where I was at the time operating over at the NSA on the West Bank into the city and meet his crew on a corner by the Superdome. Standard precautions would lead you to take a security detachment with you if you were going into the city at night at that time and when I did I would come with that kind of preparation. Before going in to do a

standup in front of Geraldo's crew I met with the MSST guys, who by the way look very impressive in their outfits. I said, "I'm not going to arrive like a warlord. You're not going to get out of the car, secure the neighborhood and let me get out and walk up humbly to the spotlight and all that because everything you've just done has been broadcast before I arrived." I'll look like I'm a warlord in Cali or someplace coming up to meet . . . .

**Q:** Or equating New Orleans with Cali.

**RADM Duncan:** Right. So I said, "If you can provide protective security without doing that; without getting out of the van; the chase van, you can come. If not, I'm going to wing it and I'll just drive down there with my captain and aide", who by the way was pressed into service. She offered. She said, "By the way, I see that your aide is stuck in New England. She can only get as far as St. Louis. Can you use help? Can I serve as your aide?"

**Q:** And who was that?

**RADM Duncan:** Lieutenant Melissa Harper. You probably should talk to her at some point because she kept a lot of records of things that were happening. By the way, she was a fantastic choice. She is also a Coast Guard lawyer, and selected for Lieutenant Commander. She was a great help.

Let me share a story that makes, I hope, a different point. About 48 hours after we began our active, around-the-clock, rescue operations, another element of the response showed up. The general had an aide who was a major and looked like he stepped out of a recruiting poster. Very impressive officer. As the operation progressed, I made sure that I attended as many “Commanders meetings”, usually on the USS IWO JIMA, as I possibly could. As you can imagine, all of us were painfully aware that we were engaged in deadly serious work. Many lives depended on our effectiveness. At all of these meetings, the major was addressed, by his general, as “Tiger”. And he was called on frequently; Tiger get this; Tiger, do that. Leaving the *Iwo Jima* after one of these sessions, I said “Mellissa, I think we need to step up our game a little and follow DOD’s lead. How would you feel about being “Cheetah” from now on?” It was an opportunity to interject a bit of levity into an environment that could use some. She became Cheetah; and still is today. She was smaller, but quick, and had a good bite!

**Q:** During the next event hopefully you’ll sneak that into your annex, you know “item 14d: Mobilize Historian” [chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** Yes, that would be a good idea. We’ve really only had time to cover a part of this operation today. At some point, it would be worthwhile to go a bit deeper. For instance, I’ve been involved in many disaster responses through my career. I believe in the value of “critical incident response” assessment and actions. I made sure that those professionals were present and active throughout. And I personally



met with those teams for extensive out briefings and I intervened when an individual was carrying too heavy a load for himself.

The “People Cell” that I setup, under a captain, in St Louis was an incredibly successful innovation that worked out everything that affected our folks from dependent evacuations, preventative medical inoculations, exemptions from the JFTR (the JFTR provided for one paid trip back to your duty station following an evacuation. In this event, after more than six weeks, the civilian authorities allowed phased returns to check on your house and remove small essentials; and leave. We needed two paid returns; and succeeded in getting an exception to the JFTR). Documenting service in the impact zone, so if a “Katrina cancer” is discovered later on, your presence and exposure is readily documented (avoiding the Agent Orange problems). And many other actions seriously effecting our people.

And just a word about LNOs. I assigned liaison officers to every important emergency operations center that we would need to deal with. I approved the placement of very good officers to these posts. As a result, we probably had the most complete situational awareness of any actor throughout the response. We knew what the City thought, and did, or didn’t do. When I called Governor Barbour on Sunday night, following my discussion with “Coach”, he took my call personally, immediately, and had met with my liaison officer in Jackson, and recalled his name correctly. I felt then that Mississippi had engaged leadership from the top.

One LNO, LCDR Cheri Beniesau, was embedded at NOLA City Hall. As I began to hear very concerning reports about serious lawlessness surrounding that area, I called her from the Super Dome and asked her if she felt safe. She said the police were

looking out for her and she felt she could continue to provide valuable service from there. I agreed, but put her on a “comm-schedule”. She was to call in, on a schedule of so many hours to confirm she was all right. If she missed a check-in I was sending a SWAT team in to get her, and she could not turn it off. We did not have to take that action, but safety was a concern, for the first time in my career.

By the way, when phone service was restored, if you called 911 in NOLA your call was answered by a Coast Guard petty officer or a New York fireman (both sitting side-by-side in City Hall).

Also, the response we got from the community was unbelievable. Especially at our COOP site in Alexandria. We had a small Coast Guard city there with active duty, dependents, dogs, etc. People would drop off food, offer to give haircuts, drive up with a pig roaster and create a barbeque, and anything else they could offer. On quite a few days, I’d grab a couple of Pop Tarts from a table full of such donations and pack them in my flight suit or ODUs as likely the only food I’d get until returning late at night. On Labor Day, local high school performers put on a mini concert (and water balloon fight) using the stage next to our center.

We have not touched on the reopening of essential waterways. We used a flying wedge of survey boats (our own ATON [Aids to Navigation] resources, NOAA, USA CofE [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers], and private boats) to mark and clear obstructions, restore navigation aids, and assign pilots, to reopen the Mississippi; over 100 miles from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico. Also, I got monies for salvage released to me and put the word out that I had money, come to Alexandria. My concern was that the highest and best national use for the very limited number of well-

equipped marine salvers was to open the Mississippi River; not restore someone's private dock. Taking aggressive charge of that process allowed me to accurately brief the Vice President that navigation had been restored, and that the 2005 national grain harvest is going to world markets. I'm told world grain prices stabilized an hour or so after that briefing. For background, the US is a major exporter of soy beans and corn. Roughly 65-70% of that harvest comes down the US internal river system to grain elevators near Baton Rouge, and are subsequently loaded onto ocean going cargo ships ( with deep draft hulls). Katrina struck as that harvest was coming down river.

The other big element is the massive pollution response.

Finally, there were a lot of very powerful personalities that needed to be worked with throughout this event. Having the district commander engaged and on scene was the right call; and, in my view essential.

**Q:** You had a little bit of time to look back on this. Where do you place this now in your career and what do you take from it as you move forward and as you start pushing these recommendations up? Do you think your audience is eager as in the operational Coast Guard or are they already onto the next operation?

**RADM Duncan:** I've had a great career. I've really, really enjoyed what I've done and there are some real highlights. We've mentioned a couple of them. This probably is the pinnacle. It's hard to see, in my line of work, anything that would be more satisfying than this. About a year ago the Commandant asked me to consider being the Superintendent at the Coast Guard Academy. I told him I'd be very happy to do

that - my wife and I enjoyed being there when I was Assistant Superintendent. The interaction with cadets was great and I really did enjoy that - or I said, "You can leave me here another year and I could complete some very big initiatives that I had begun." Two weeks later he called and asked me to stay for another year. I thought about that about a month into this thing and I said, "I could have been watching this from Quarters 1 in New London, Connecticut, the whole thing, just on my TV, just get up and get another Coke when I was ready or turned it off when I got tired. I would have killed myself. If this is what you do for your professional life, I think this is where you want to be when it really happens. This was a once in a lifetime, once in any career event I think and I hope. I think it was historic. I don't use that word lightly. I think it really was a historic event. I think the Coast Guard really shone at every possible level.

We had over 7,000 Coast Guard people serve here. At peak we had 3,400 on one day. That's over ten percent of the U.S. Coast Guard that served in Katrina. Forty percent of the Coast Guard helicopters were here. Every Coast Guard air station from Barbers Point to Kodiak to Cape Cod provided relief air crews, and on and on. This is a defining moment, from my view, for the United States Coast Guard. I've said for a number of years now that the Marines are making combat veterans in Fallujah and Ramadi and Anbar Providence, and it's painful, it's awful, it's a national treasure that we're losing, but they're a better fighting force, they're a better Marine Corps for having combat veterans in the 21st century that will be with them for a long time. That's what I think this did for the Coast Guard. Ten years from now second class petty officers, lieutenants, you know they're going to be the chiefs and the

commanders that are in positions of significant responsibility around our service. They'll be Katrina veterans. They know how it was done. They know the kind of centralized command, decentralized execution that worked very well here that gave us international acclaim and we'll be a better Coast Guard for that.

**Q:** Do we know how to translate that into more public and Congressional support for the Coast Guard?

**RADM Duncan:** Well I think history's going to tell you that.

**Q:** [Chuckle].

**RADM Duncan:** That's in that crystal ball department. I can't tell you. I will tell you that the Commandant said that he couldn't be more proud of us. My flag officer buddies said, "We've all been walking around Headquarters with puffed up chests saying, 'Yes, man we're hot. We're doing great'". They said, "Thanks for making that happen."

As true as it was that ten percent of the Coast Guard served here, I mean the Commandant made a couple of phone calls at his level of government that broke the logjam on a couple of things. So you know in my mind he's a hero of Katrina. The Area commanders both provided resources in abundance and took some real risks in doing that. We closed OPBAT [Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos – a combined DEA, USCG, CBP, Government of Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, and United Kingdom partnership to combat drug smuggling] to provide H-60s for us here because H-60s

were very effective platforms. They're heroes. They get a lot of credit, frankly, from me for providing the assets, no questions asked, and it was incumbent on me to give them back as soon as we could. The whole Coast Guard came up to the task on this one and it was an awesome thing to be part of.

**Q:** If you could get one or two or three things squared away in this district before next June 1<sup>st</sup> what would they be?

**RADM Duncan:** Well I'm focusing on the quality of life of our people. I've got 222 hotel rooms in this city right now occupied with Coast Guard families. I am told that I'm the biggest RV owner in the government (recall, I insisted on teams coming in be self-sufficient; expeditionary. My staff in St Louis rented R/Vs. When they couldn't find any more to rent, they outright bought them!). We're trying to get them back by the way. We're trying to sell them or move out of R/Vs, which turned out to be very handy and I'm not going to give them all back because I think they belong in that standing task force along with many pallets of water and MREs and generators and things like that we have stashed away. I want to improve quality of life. I've told our staff that I will tolerate some degradation in performance. If it took us three days to get a letter out, I'll go to four or five notionally. Until recently my secretary was in Houston and I would send her work to do in Houston. She got a space at CGIS; Coast Guard Intelligence Service in Houston because her family relocated there. Her son's high school closed. They weren't giving him his tuition back. There was an affiliate high school in Houston. She got him in there. Her husband's job went away here. They had an affiliate in

Houston. He got a job there. I said, "Angel, you work in Houston. We'll commute by telepathy or internet and if I get to an airport and need tickets and they're there, that's okay. We can work it out."

My Director of Auxiliary lives on the North Shore. The access way into the city was quite limited, which meant that the only routes in were going to be jammed beyond belief. We got him space over at Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. So he has a 20-minute drive to Mississippi instead of a three hour drive down to New Orleans with everybody on the North Shore and we're running the director's office from borrowed spaces in Stennis, Mississippi.

We've got distributed work, centralized management but distributed work, and frankly it's working. We've made a tailored custom fit solution to everybody on the staff and I can do that because I don't have wrench turners. They don't have to bring a wrench and be where I have a boat. They are office staff and they can do work from home or rented space in other places and we'll tolerate that.

Schools are closed in this town. I don't know if they're going to open up again in January. Houses need a lot of work. Some of my staff lost their houses completely. When I was on Geraldo I said, "I think 70 percent of my senior staff has lost their houses." My acting forward chief of staff lost his house. My acting aide lost her house. The people I was traveling with were houseless. Across the whole district it's something probably around 30 percent. But that's a lot of people and we're going to work on getting them all the relief and help we can.

Longer range I want to make sure the district transfers smoothly, that the initiatives that were started a couple years ago that are very important are maintained

and continued. This DEW Line that we've established offshore for distant early warning of things coming to our coast, I want that institutionalized and spread. And there are other issues I hope will be institutionalized and make us better.

And since we're going to have a pretty good turnover here I want to make sure that people that come in know what's been done and know how to move forward. That's what I'm focusing on. I've got five or six months to do that.

**Q:** Any idea where you're going to go from here?

**RADM Duncan:** I don't know. As they say in the Middle East, "Insha'Allah, you know, "God willing." I mean go wherever.

**Q:** Admiral Sir, thank you very much.

**RADM Duncan:** Senior Chief, thank you, Doctor.

**END OF INTERVIEW**





## ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS



A picture of the Dunkirk Course of Action (COA) in action that I had my staff develop to utilize CG vessels and a flotilla of commercial barges, tugs, ferries, OSVs ( offshore supply vessels ) moving rescued people under the supervision of CG personnel to safety.



RADM Duncan surveys New Orleans from a Coast Guard helicopter. The following two images show what he saw.



Above & Below: View from RADM Duncan's helicopter of major flooding over-topping all of New Orleans.





RADM Duncan and CAPT Joe Castillo surveying stranded masses at the Superdome on Wednesday, 31 August 2005



RADM Duncan briefing media on events and plans for ongoing rescue and recovery operations, Hurricane Katrina.



RADM Duncan testifying, at the Committee's request, before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee at a hearing to commend the U.S. Coast Guard, on 7 November 2005, for their heroic actions during and following Hurricane Katrina.

## ADDENDUM

It has not been widely reported, or much remembered, but the U.S. Government received many offers of assistance, as we would offer to others in distress, from foreign governments. We don't generally think of ourselves as recipient of such offers. Nonetheless, I believe they were truly appreciated. One such offer of assistance, I believe monetary assistance, came from the King of Jordan. I'll bet you didn't know that. Nor that a Coast Guard Admiral had been requested, by name, to provide a briefing to His Majesty on the Hurricane Katrina rescue and relief operations that he, the Admiral, ran.



I met with the King, his uncle and security, at Louis Armstrong A/P, on the secure side of the airport, conducted a short briefing for him, boarded a National Guard H-60, and narrated an in depth briefing from a low flight, doors open, across the entire New Orleans area. Particular attention was paid to the Lower 9th Ward (which, as you will recall, had been devastated (recall the huge barge sitting on top of residences). We dis-embarked there, boarded a vehicle and one of the LA NG generals (BG Hunt Downer) narrated a short ground tour. We ended with a press conference at the 9th Ward Fire Station. The King was extremely gracious and visibly moved.

Above: RADM Duncan, Mayor Ray Nagin, H. M. Abdullah of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

PS:

Sometime later, I received a very nice bottle of Jordanian olive oil, with the king's thanks.

RADM Robert Duncan, USCG (Ret.)



Another view of King Abdullah on his visit. I think this one captures the somber reflection that we felt touring/re-visiting a major disaster area, with very visible evidence of destruction and personal upheaval still very apparent. It was a personal pleasure for me to meet the King, and spend time with him. I had always been a major fan of his father, King Hussein. I spent some time in the Mid-East (for Desert Storm), and believe he is a very important ally of the US.

RADM Robert Duncan, USCG (Ret.)