

Area Rescue Team Returns After Week In Storm Zone

By CANDACE J. SAMOLINSKI

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Winds were still gusting as Hillsborough County firefighters Kelly Hallman and Mike Guincho navigated debris-strewn streets in a boat in Biloxi, Miss., on Aug. 30.

They were among the first of the 63-member Tampa Bay Regional Florida Task Force-3 Urban Search and Rescue Team to arrive in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Four hours later, neighbors of a 75-year-old shut-in told Guincho, a paramedic, there was a chance the diabetic man remained inside his house near Keesler Air Force Base. Guincho and Hallman located the man inside a house damaged by a 22-foot storm surge.

"He was severely dehydrated, and he probably would have died if we hadn't found him that day," Hallman said.

It was the start of things to come. By the end of the team's trip Monday, it had saved eight lives, said Bill Bailey, the team's incident commander and a battalion chief with Hillsborough County Fire Rescue.

The Mississippi governor's office announced Tuesday that 161 bodies had been recovered.

"This group has poured their heart and soul into that community," Bailey said while standing at the Florida State Fairgrounds, where the team gathered Tuesday upon its return to the Tampa Bay area.

While in Biloxi, the team focused on the mission. Now, back home, firefighters must deal with the emotional toll of the devastation, said Bradenton Fire Chief Mark Souders, whose department sent its Swift Water Rescue Team.

"I told them, 'You will not be the same today as you were when you left,' " he said.

The regional team, made up of fire personnel from Tampa, St. Petersburg and Hillsborough County, also worked in conjunction with representatives from Bradenton, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Division of Forestry. They were assisted by volunteers from Bracken Engineering, who inspected the integrity of buildings before firefighters entered.

Entering heavily damaged buildings was risky, but it was a gamble that paid off for Tampa firefighters Patrick Murphy and Mark Bogush and their rescue dogs, Ranger and Marley. They had walked up five flights when Ranger indicated someone was alive in the apartment building.

"It was an elderly couple, in their 90s, who were so shell-shocked they didn't want to come out or let anyone in," Murphy said. "They were even trying to quiet their own little dog."

The couple eventually allowed the rescue team inside.

"We had to carry the man down along with his wheelchair," Bogush said.

It was stories such as those that convinced St. Petersburg firefighter Phil Whitman of the need to evacuate his family in the event of a storm threat.

"We live in a nonevacuation zone, and I used to think we could ride it out," he said. "I know I would be working, but I definitely would want to get my family somewhere safe. Even if you survive the storm, afterward you are dealing with harsh conditions."

It was the tremendous lack of necessities that hit home for Hillsborough firefighter Chip Shields.

"We had people asking us for food, water, anything when we first hit the ground there. We didn't have that since our mission was search and rescue," he said. "It was kind of overwhelming when you see that kind of devastation and these people have absolutely nothing."

