

R. J. Corman Storm Team: Massive Operation in Gulf Gets Railroads Back on Track



August 29, 2005, 6:10 a.m. Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Central Gulf Coast near Buras-Triumph, Louisiana. The 145 mile-per-hour winds and heavy rains created a storm surge that soon breached the levee system that protected New Orleans — a soup-bowl shaped city of 1.2 million people surrounded by Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. In the end, Katrina would leave 90% of the once vibrant city of New Orleans submerged in water (see inset photo and page 4).

In the days and hours before Katrina hit, most people along the coast prepared to save what they could of their lives. Many fled the coastline on evacuation orders, carrying with them some hope that in a few days they would find their homes still standing. Some stayed and waited for the storm's destruction to unfold. Many who stayed behind perished in the storm.

The lifeblood to the region's and the nation's economy depended on the quick return of business and industry to breathe life back into New Orleans. Since railroads account for more intercity freight traffic in the U.S. than any other mode of transportation — over 40 percent — opening the tracks would be vital to maintaining economic stability (Source: Association of American Railroads). This would be especially critical to the Gulf Coast with its key resources that range from food products to oil.

The railroad industry was hit hard by Hurricane Katrina. The storm destroyed or caused major damage to railroad infrastructure, including bridges, from Florida to Louisiana. CSX Transportation alone had a 26-mile stretch of track that was almost completely destroyed within the 39 route-mile section east of New Orleans. Within those 26 miles, six major bridges that ranged in size from 950 to 10,000 feet were heavily damaged or destroyed.

In addition, Hurricane Katrina left behind remnants of houses and office buildings that criss-crossed rail lines and lay scattered for miles across Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Trees were stripped of leaves and blown onto the right-of-ways and across train tracks. Locomotives and railcars were submerged in water and sidelined until the brake valves and wheel sets could be changed out (as is required by the Federal Railroad Administration regulations).

The rail corridors that line the Gulf Coast and support the Port of New Orleans, as well as bring life-giving commodities and supplies to the country, had to be opened quickly. Railroad companies like CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern Corporation, and BNSF had planned ahead by calling on the R. J. Corman Storm Team to stage people and equipment for moving into action as soon as Katrina passed out of the area.

Ernie Simpson, Derailment Services' Operations Manager, called the shots from Derailment's Nicholasville offices. Regional Manager Greg Esthers and Huntington Division's Assistant Superintendent Jesse Adkins positioned the Storm Team in Montgomery, Alabama, and waited for the all-clear announcement so that the rebuilding operations could begin.

The Storm Team mobilized into several areas on August 30, including Mobile, Alabama, for the CSX engineering department and into Nicholson, Mississippi, for Norfolk Southern. What the Storm Team found was complete devastation described by many as "looking like a bomb had gone off." Team members began reconstruction and rebuilding efforts in the area from Mobile towards Gulf Port, Mississippi. Crews using grapple trucks from the Material Sales Company and Construction Company's rotary dump trucks and trackhoes, plus chain saws and other heavy equipment, began clearing debris from railroads and right-of-ways and replacing the washed-out rail beds.

On September 1, CSX called upon R. J. Corman's Storm Team to open a double main line in Mobile that was clogged with ocean-going barges. Ernie Simpson headed south to manage the barge project, freeing up Greg Esthers to follow through on the remaining storm response. Jacksonville, Memphis, and Shreveport Divisions, as well as part of the Atlanta Division for Derailment Services, were also called in for the crucial job in Mobile. Together with a local tugboat company, the team found they needed to move 17 barges — each weighing nearly 450 tons and valued at a half million dollars each.

Using Derailment's 977 Caterpillar front-end loaders and its 583 and 572 Caterpillar side booms, the team pulled and repositioned the massive steel containers. On the fourth day, Bill Kite, Regional Manager, joined the team. The enormity

of the barge job seemed a daunting task, but, in the end, the operation was successful and the tracks were cleared in 10 days. However, many barges had washed beyond the tracks and into the subdivisions and business districts. Some of those barges remain stranded beyond the tracks or on the edge of waterways to this day.

The scope of work for the Gulf project was made up of a total of eleven customers, including barge companies and industries. Although the primary customer was CSX, Storm Team crews from the Columbus and Nashville Derailment Divisions also performed engineering and mechanical work for Norfolk Southern Corporation that covered a route from Meridian, Mississippi, to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to Slidell, Louisiana, and to New Orleans. Additional engineering work was called for by the BNSF in Lafayette, Louisiana, and for the Union Pacific Railroad in Lake Charles, Louisiana, because of Hurricane Rita that hit the Gulf Coast in September. In Bay St. Louis, crews rerailed approximately 100 cars and repaired washouts for the Port Bienville Railroad.

The method by which the team approached the project, explained Derailment's Business and Finance Manager Todd Hammerstone, was a spoke and wheel effect. The extent of the damage was widespread and extreme. "We knew CSX's Gentilly Yard in New Orleans had suffered the worst blow, so we worked from the outside perimeters and moved inward."

"We had between 75-100 people working in areas," said Simpson, "that were uninhabitable, so we waited for the water to go down in other areas in order to do the air brake and wheel work and to clear debris." Within two weeks, the railroads outside of New Orleans were back running. "But in Gentilly Yard," Simpson continued, "700 cars were completely submerged."

The task appeared formidable as the crews arrived to begin the Gentilly project. A three-mile stretch of R. J. Corman equipment convoyed its way to New Orleans. Derailment President Noel Rush had surveyed the area in advance, looking for signs of food or shelter. The few hotels and motels that had survived the storm and were still available were reserved for the Storm Team. However, in New Orleans, there was no infrastructure left.

"We brought our own infrastructure in, starting with the Mobile job," explained Sam Terral, Derailment's Manager of Sales and Services. "Even today, there is no infrastructure in the hardest hit areas like those in and around New Orleans, so we supply our own. We have our own kitchen in a 53-foot box van that serves as our food trailer. We have food service from Sysco Foods. We're housing people in RVs, campers, trailers, and around 21 big tour buses like those used in the music industry because all the hotels were destroyed or else they are closed down because there are no utilities. We truck in our fresh water, both potable and nonpotable, and use it for drinking water and for showering. We have a shower, laundry, and bathroom unit. We brought in a new 9,000-gallon fuel tank-

er that came from our railroad company. We created our own city, and we provide everything we might need to live in it."

"With all of the different commodities that are inside our base camp of Gentilly Yard in New Orleans, there's a big security issue. Security is tight and weapons are not allowed except those in use by the CSX police and the National Guard. There's also a perimeter around the yard with portable light towers because there is no electricity. We have a curfew that we have to abide by and nobody can be out after dark."

It's also imperative, notes Safety Representative Tiffany Nease, to be alert for displaced wildlife. Estimates are that over 1,000 poisonous snakes, such as cottonmouths and water moccasins, as well as a large population of alligators, have breached the work areas.

Nine weeks after Katrina, the R. J. Corman Storm Team, which worked 12-hour days in two-weeks-on and one-week-off shift rotations, had completed the work for all railroads and all projects except for the Gentilly Yard. Two divisions continue the rebuilding there, working 16 company employees and employing another 65 subcontractors. Their job is to continue making the mechanical repairs that will get CSX's railroad going in and out of New Orleans moving freely again. Ernie Simpson says that he anticipates finishing the operation for CSX's Gentilly Yard by December 1.

Rush has been quick to enthusiastically acknowledge the crews' efforts. It has been a collaborative effort of immense size and detail, carefully executed to pinpoint preciseness by R. J. Corman's Material Sales, Construction, and Derailment Services' companies.

"Our R. J. Corman Storm Team has shown that," commented Rush, "we have the commitment of our leaders and employees to get this project done. The Storm Team has gotten the attention of the railroads time and time again. That's a testimony to the caliber of company and people we have."

Before



After

