

WATER RISING

Overtime pay was never enough. The bosses running the city's transit agency needed to offer more than money to convince the bus drivers, streetcar operators, mechanics, and others they needed to stay in town through a big storm. So in August 2005, with a hurricane named Katrina bearing down on New Orleans, they did as they had in the past ahead of previous scares: they opened up the agency's headquarters, a three-story brick fortress on Canal Street on the edge of the city's central business district. "To get the volunteers we needed, we'd allow them to bring their spouses, their children, grandmothers, grandfathers, girlfriends, nieces, nephews, whoever," said Bill Deville, then the general manager of the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority.

The A. Philip Randolph Building—what RTA employees called the "Canal Street barn" or simply "the barn"—was hardly the Hilton. People slept on air mattresses and needed to bring their own food. But the barn was also a veritable fort, stocked with military food rations and water and with its own backup generator. Most important, it was in a part of town that everyone knew never flooded. "People really want to be together in a protected facility," Deville said.

Around the region, the traffic on the highways out of town ahead of Katrina was heaviest on Sunday. The storm wouldn't hit New Orleans until early on Monday morning. Yet the city's bus drivers and others needed to work on Sunday, picking up people at evacuation centers around the city and dropping them off at the Superdome. Thus, on Saturday the RTA employees, their families, and their friends started showing up at the barn, dragging with them their suitcases and carrying coolers, and the occasional large silver pot heavy with gumbo. By Sunday night, somewhere around three hundred people were taking refuge there. The group, around 90 percent black, included grandparents and a couple of babies. Only around one-third worked for the RTA. People plugged in hot plates to heat up their food and shared the flasks and bottles they had brought with them. By 10:00 p.m., the winds sounded like a jet engine roaring. By midnight, the pounding rain echoed through the building. Why not a party when there was nothing to do except wait?

MONDAY

Gerald Robichaux, the RTA's deputy general manager for operations, was up early Monday morning. He saw water in the streets and immediately regretted his decision to leave the agency's three big dump trucks parked at the Uptown facility a few miles away, along with the big rigs they used to tow disabled buses. These trucks with tires as tall as the average-size man, Robichaux realized, might prove to be their chariots of escape if the water in the streets kept rising. Robichaux ordered a small crew to take the single high-wheeled vehicle they had at the Canal Street barn and pick up the other rigs on Napoleon Avenue. Robichaux also asked Wilfred Eddington to join them. Eddington was a member of the New Orleans Police Department, and part of the RTA's transit police unit.

The wind was still blowing at around fifty miles per hour when they pulled out of the barn at around 10:00 a.m. Eddington remembered a blue Chevy parked at the Chevron station a block away. The water, maybe curb high, reached the bottom of the Chevy's hubcaps. The water was halfway up the car's windows when they returned ninety minutes later.

Back at the barn, the men told Robichaux what they had seen. They

had headed west and south of downtown expecting to see at least some flooding in Uptown, which often gets an inch or two of water after a hard rain. But Uptown was dry. Only closer to their building had they hit any real flooding. Needing to see for himself, Robichaux called out the names of a few of his top people and jumped into one of the big trucks. Bill Deville decided to join his number two and almost immediately regretted his decision. The fifty-eight-year-old general manager was taking medicine for a bad heart. He took another pill to manage his high blood pressure. Just getting to the rig meant walking through foul, brackish water up past his knees. Only once it was too late did Deville remember a cut on his leg.

Robichaux was anxious to see the large facility the RTA operated in the eastern part of the city, in New Orleans East. With water starting to leak into the ground floor of the Canal Street barn, that might need to serve as their temporary base for running the city's transit agency. Once on the interstate, Robichaux realized he had bigger problems than figuring out what day they might restart bus and streetcar service. Water was in every direction, sometimes up to the eaves of one-story homes. The I-10 became impassable after a couple of miles of driving, forcing them to turn back.

At some point on Monday the toilets stopped working—no small concern in a building housing around three hundred people. Landlines weren't working and cell phone coverage was spotty. They weren't completely cut off, however. The police scanner was still working, which is how they learned about the levee breaches. Bill Deville called everyone together late Monday afternoon to relay the bad news. He reminded them of the dozens of pumping stations the city operated around town and how effectively these miracle machines soaked up excess water. "It will probably take another day or so for the water to subside," he said.

TUESDAY

Gerald Robichaux and several supervisors were up early on Tuesday making rounds. So much water had gotten inside the building overnight that the emergency generator was submerged, rendering it useless. They were low on food and almost out of water. Walking around the building,

they could feel the rising panic. Older people were running low on medicines. Mothers needed clean diapers. Robichaux went looking for his boss.

Deville had gone straight to his office after delivering the bad news about the city's broken levees. He had lain down on the couch, but who could sleep in the stupefying heat and with his cut leg feeling as if it were on fire? In the middle of the night, Deville grabbed a flashlight and headed to his car, parked in the employee parking lot. He turned on the engine, set the air conditioner to high, and fell asleep.

Robichaux rapped on the roof of Deville's car. Deville's first feeling was confusion, then shame. It had been dark when he'd closed his eyes, but he was squinting against the brightness. How long had he been asleep? he asked himself groggily. Three hours? Four? "We need to leave," Robichaux told him. He gave Deville a grim update and then laid out the plan Robichaux and a few others had hatched. We'll give people a choice, Robichaux said. They were maybe a dozen blocks from an entrance ramp to an elevated portion of the I-10. They could wade or swim to that ramp. They knew from listening to the radio and police scanners that the streets were dry on the other side of the Mississippi River. Those who felt up to it could walk a few miles on the elevated I-10 to the Crescent City Connection, the bridge that took traffic over the Mississippi River to the West Bank. With some luck, they could contact the drivers of the big coaches they had parked in LaPlace, a town halfway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and arrange to be picked up at the park 'n' ride commuter lot the RTA operated on the West Bank. Those who did not feel up to the long walk could remain in the barn while a small scouting party searched for boats to ferry them to safety.

A meeting was held on the roof parking lot later that morning. Deville asked Robichaux to explain his idea, but this no-nonsense manager who was so adept at making the buses run more or less on time wasn't necessarily the best messenger in the midst of a crisis. Robichaux admitted they had no idea how deep the water was to the ramp. He then told the group to split into two. He asked those who could swim to gather on one side of the roof and those who couldn't on the other. "They're leaving us to drown," some of the nonswimmers called out.

Deville stepped up on the back of a pickup truck. "No one is leaving

anyone behind,” he assured them. They had air mattresses, he said. They would float people who couldn’t swim. He also made a promise: “I’ll stay with anyone who doesn’t feel up to the walk.” Afterward, people patted him on the back for his bravery, but he felt like a fraud. “I was scared to death,” Deville confessed. “People thought I was a hero for volunteering to stay behind, but I can’t swim. Plus there was no way I was stepping another foot in that water.” While still standing on the flatbed, Deville told the crowd of a conversation he had had that morning with someone in the governor’s office. He’d promised to send helicopters as soon as any were available. Maybe those who remained at the barn would be the first ones rescued.

A LITTLE PAST NOON on Tuesday, August 30, 2005, the first RTA employees dropped themselves into the dark, murky waters that were chest high on a six-foot man. Around two-thirds of their group—two hundred people—chose to walk rather than remain. Children were hoisted on air mattresses, along with most everyone standing under maybe five feet five inches tall. Those tall enough to walk sloshed through the smelly, oily water, guiding the others on the makeshift rafts. Sharon Paul, a fifty-year-old RTA dispatcher, was a diabetic who had already gone more than twenty-four hours without her insulin. But Paul was a strong swimmer. She helped a pregnant woman heft herself onto an air mattress along with a pair of toddlers. Paul then tied a rope around her waist and towed the three of them. “I’m done,” she said, collapsing once they reached the elevated highway. She’d need to walk another six miles to make the park ’n’ ride on the West Bank.

Some had thought they were strong enough to make it the half mile to the interstate but were not. Others froze in place. Ruben Stephens, an NOPD lieutenant who headed up the RTA’s police unit, helped with the stragglers. “People were petrified of the water,” Stephens said. Wilfred Eddington was already sitting on top of the interstate with his boots off when Robichaux asked him and another officer to help coax people to the interstate. He laced up his boots and headed down the ramp and into the muck. “Our job was to make sure that we got everybody to that bridge,” Eddington said.

Staying together was a challenge. They had imagined walking as a single group toward the twin cantilevered bridges looming a couple of miles away. Ruben Stephens, the police lieutenant, ordered Ed-dington to the front of the line. Stephens and several other officers retreated to the back of the group to wrangle any strays. People passed the Superdome, standing like a giant spaceship next to the highway, and stared. Some in their contingent had been at the dome as recently as Sunday, where orderly lines of people were waiting to be patted down (people were being checked for weapons) before they were admitted to this “shelter of last resort.” Now thick crowds of people milled everywhere while nearby the National Guardsmen stood holding weapons. Pieces of the Superdome’s roof had peeled off. The giant Hyatt Regency next door—where the mayor and his top people were—looked worse. Almost every window on the northern face of the hotel was shattered.

They passed clots of five or ten people, but no other contingent was nearly as large as theirs, and none seemed to be walking with the same purpose. The temperature was in the nineties and the humidity high. From the interstate they had an expansive view of watery New Orleans—a perfect vantage point for contemplating a drowned-out home. A torpor took over all but the strongest among them, but they kept walking. The bridge ahead led to Algiers, the New Orleans neighborhood on the other side of the Mississippi. Only later did they appreciate that it was also the route to white-flight suburbs such as Gretna, the first town they would reach once they had crossed the Crescent City Connection. At least one of them was in a wheelchair, and their ranks included grandmothers, toddlers, and several police officers. None seemed to be thinking about what it meant that theirs was an almost all-black group heading into a predominantly white community.

A bus driver named Malcolm Butler and his wife, Dorothy, were among the first to notice the blockade. Initially, Malcolm Butler thought his eyes were playing tricks on him in the hot, midday sun. Butler was set to retire, after thirty-three years on the job, on August 31—the next day. Their home in New Orleans East had most certainly flooded, and then there were the fresh horrors of their walk from the Canal Street barn to the interstate. Butler, who is not tall, had walked through greasy water

up to his neck, his nose and chin pointed upward, guiding Dorothy, who clung to an air mattress. They had probably been on the interstate for less than an hour—enough so that their clothes had dried out even if the stink of the water remained—when Butler stopped and asked Dorothy if she was seeing what he was: a pair of police officers brandishing weapons, blocking their passage. “They was standing up there with their automobiles blocking the bridge with shotguns and M16s and told us we couldn’t go no further,” Butler recalled.

Wilfred Eddington, the police officer assigned to walk point as they headed toward the West Bank, figured he was around one thousand yards from the foot of the bridge when he saw the two police cars parked nose to nose, forming a wedge to block their passage. Eventually, he heard them yelling, “Go back! Go back! Get off the bridge!” He noticed their black uniforms—they were members of the small force responsible for policing the bridge.

Eddington was dressed in jeans but wearing a dark T-shirt stamped with the word POLICE in large letters. He wore a holstered gun on his belt. He asked the others to slow down while he approached his counterparts. The smaller of the two bridge cops, a young black woman, didn’t seem to care what it said on Eddington’s shirt. The closer he got, the louder she seemed to scream. “She was out of control,” Eddington said. “She was irate.”

“You gotta bring it down a few notches,” Eddington said, looking at the female officer. “You’re now at around ten. We need you to bring it down to three.” He was a cop with two decades on the job, counseling a less experienced officer. “But she remained belligerent,” Eddington said.

Ruben Stephens, the police lieutenant, jogged up from the back of their ranks. He introduced himself and explained that a group of city workers on duty at the time of the storm had gotten trapped by the flooding. They were only trying to reach their facility in Algiers, where some buses would be picking them up.

“You’re not crossing my damn bridge,” the female officer responded.

“You better get your rank,” Stephens snapped.

“Pedestrians are not permitted on the bridge at any time!” she countered, as if this was any other Tuesday.

“She was hollering, ‘I lost my house, I lost everything,’” Wilfred Edgington said. But she was also adamant. “You all ain’t going nowhere,” she repeated.

At the back of the line, Sharon Paul, the diabetic dispatcher, looked uncomprehendingly at the police cruisers parked to block their way until someone told her, “Police say we can’t cross.”

“Don’t they know we’ve got water where we came from?”

A SUPERVISOR FOR THE bridge police arrived at the scene. So did Gerald Robichaux, who had been preoccupied tending to those at the back of the line needing help. A stalemate lasting between thirty and sixty minutes ended when several suburban-line commuter buses arrived to pick them up at the foot of the bridge. For the moment, everything seemed a crazy misunderstanding, and the RTA people boarded the buses. Sitting at the front of the bus, Lieutenant Stephens assumed they were heading to the RTA’s park ’n’ ride in Algiers. The coaches had instead brought them to the bus depot in suburban Gretna.

Stephens heard the Gretna police officers before he saw them. “Don’t get off that bus,” they barked. “Don’t get off the damn bus.” Stephens stepped down the stairs, thinking he could talk to them, cop to cop. “I’m a police lieutenant,” he tried to say. But they were yelling too loud to hear him. Each pointed a weapon at him.

“Where the fuck y’all think you’re going with all these people?”

“Who the fuck told y’all to bring these people here?”

“Y’all need to get the hell out of here.”

Stephens had grown up in the Desire housing project in New Orleans’s Upper Ninth Ward. He had served in the army and worn a police uniform for more than two decades. For the last five years, that uniform had been dressed with a lieutenant’s star. He had probably five or six feet of water sitting in the modest place he owned in New Orleans East—a single-story ranch home—which guaranteed that most everything he owned had been ruined. “I ain’t going nowhere,” Lieutenant Stephens said. He had a gun strapped to his belt and told himself he was ready to use it, if necessary. “I feared one of them might start shooting,” Stephens said, “and then you’d have a massacre.”

People walked off the bus, despite the threats. Gail Davis, a fifty-three-year-old grandmother whose husband, Woodrow, worked for the RTA, was on that first bus with her daughter and three grandchildren. Davis found herself staring at guns as she got off the bus. "They was putting them in our faces and saying, 'If you move, if you breathe, we're going to shoot you,'" Davis said. "I'm trying to hold on to my grandchildren because they was nine, ten, eleven years old." Mary Ann Ruth, a forty-nine-year-old cashier at the Boomtown Casino just outside New Orleans (her fiancé was a driver for the RTA), was also on that first bus. She, too, was a grandmother, there with her fiancé's nine-year-old son and a two-year-old granddaughter. "We were hungry, we was wet after walking in that nasty water," Ruth said. "We wasn't trying to harm nobody. They had their guns cocked. They say, 'If they move, shoot them.'"

The second and third buses pulled up, and they, too, disgorged their passengers there at the Gretna bus terminal. There, on this large patch of sidewalk under a highway overpass, the police pointed shotguns and other long guns, yelling "motherfucker this" and "motherfucker that." On her bus, said Sharon Paul, the diabetic, people felt a sense of relief when out the window they saw all the police. "We really thought they was coming to assist us," Paul said. And why not? Gretna, a town of eighteen thousand whose official motto is "Small City, Big Heart," had lost electricity but still had plenty of food and water on stock. Its roads were passable, providing people a path to safety. Paul said she heard one cop yell, "Get on the curb *now* or we're gonna shoot," but she couldn't take the command seriously. "They cocked their guns," Paul said, "and then everybody paid attention.

"They was being ugly and all rough and rude with us," Paul said. "And it ain't like we was throwed-away people. We was working-class people trying to get where we had to go."

GRETNA POLICE OFFICER DWIGHT Dorsey was on patrol when he heard a staticky message over the single emergency channel available to all first responders in the area. "It was a call for assistance over the radio saying that they had a large group of subjects loitering," Dorsey said.

Dorsey says six to eight police cars were at the Gretna bus terminal that afternoon. Louis Alvarez, another cop on the scene, said there were five patrol cars, but allowed that the number might have been higher. Mary Ann Ruth, the casino cashier, said at least ten cops were watching over their klatch of grandmothers, children, and civil-service lifers. Wilfred Eddington, the longtime NOPD cop, put the number of officers who “semicircled around us” at between eleven and fifteen.

Chris Roberts also responded to the call for reinforcements. Roberts was a member of the Gretna City Council, not a sworn peace officer, but he later described himself as eager to help protect his town from looters and other bad elements from New Orleans. “He was this little, short white guy getting into people’s faces,” Brandon Mason, an RTA supervisor, said. “He’s yelling at people, ‘This is my city,’ telling us how it’s martial law and we have no business being in his city.”

Wilfred Eddington was the first person Roberts encountered at the scene. The police officer had removed himself from the group and was sitting on the curb, smoking a cigar he had secreted away.

“Who in the hell ordered this?” Eddington heard the man’s high-pitched, loud voice before he saw him. “Who said these people could get off here?” Eddington turned and saw a short white man walking his way, jabbing his finger at him.

“I’m like, ‘Dude, what are you talking about? I’m just sitting smoking a cigar.’”

“I want to know right now who ordered this.”

“Who ordered what?” Eddington stood up. He towered over Roberts.

“Who told you to bring these people over here under this bridge?”

Eddington asked who was asking, and Roberts identified himself. “Okay, Chris Roberts of the Gretna City Council, you have a few seconds to back off and just get out of my face.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Get the hell out of my face,” Eddington yelled, then heard the unmistakable crack of someone racking a shotgun. A Gretna officer, apparently, did not like the manner in which this black cop from New Orleans was talking to an elected official. Roberts kept jabbering at him (“He was this little gnat,” Eddington said of the councilman, “a pain in the ass”), but Eddington was no longer listening. “I mean, I was tunnel vision,

looking at this one particular police officer.” He stomped over to confront the cop holding the shotgun. “As I’m walking to him, I’m breaking leather,” Eddington said. “I’m coming out.” He had a police revolver on his right hip. And he was unholstering his weapon.

Ronnie Harris, the longtime Gretna mayor, arrived and demanded to know who was in charge. All eyes turned to Harris and also to Gerald Robichaux, who was talking on a cell phone, seeing if he could find any buses and drivers to get them out of there. Robichaux had run the transit agency on this side of the bridge before taking the number two job at the RTA. He and Harris knew one another. If Harris had not shown up when he did, Lieutenant Stephens said, “God only knows where it would have went.” The mayor promised a few Porta Potties and ordered someone to get some water for their “guests.” Stephens ordered Eddington to the other side of their group to put distance between him and the shotgun-wielding Gretna cop.

The Gretna police still didn’t holster their guns. “We had weapons pointed at us the entire time,” Lieutenant Stephens said. The violation of the blue-brotherhood code seemed to aggravate Stephens more than anything else. “I would never have treated a fellow police officer the way they treated us,” he said. “We felt like hostages.”

Some part of the RTA contingent refused water when it was offered, including Brandon Mason, the RTA supervisor, and Cindy Crayton, Gerald Robichaux’s executive assistant. For Crayton, the declined water was her small protest over how they were treated. “Mr. Robichaux was trying to explain that we were there doing a job and helping the city of New Orleans, not folks coming over to loot,” she said. Yet they were treated as nothing but a mostly black group invading a predominantly white enclave. A pair of older black women, each in a wheelchair, arrived not long after the others. The women had been rescued by boat from the Canal Street barn and transported across the bridge on the back of a flatbed liberated from the agency’s Napoleon Avenue facility. With no way to secure the wheelchairs on the flatbed, a pair of RTA employees gripped the legs of the chair with all their might, including Charlie Veal, the sixty-five-year-old assistant director for rail operations. “Nobody off!” the police yelled at them when they arrived in Gretna. “Nobody gets off this truck.”

Rather than risk another confrontation, the driver was told to drop everybody off at the RTA's park 'n' ride in Algiers, which had been their original destination.

After a couple of hours of forced detention for the RTA contingent, several RTA coaches—between three and five, depending on who is telling the story—pulled up at the Gretna bus depot. They stopped by the park 'n' ride to pick up anyone who had ended up there. Their caravan then headed to Baton Rouge. A few, including Sharon Paul, would be dropped off at a hospital, but most were brought to an evacuation center. There they were reunited with many of those rescued from the Canal Street barn by the boats Bill Deville and his people had scavenged up. The group of them slept on canvas cots that week in a huge auditorium crowded with hundreds of other evacuees. But they also had access to a bathroom when they needed it. Their shelter had electricity and plenty of food and water. They were among the lucky ones.

WEDNESDAY

The Gretna police brass split their force into two. Those on the early shift began work at 7:00 a.m. Those on the late shift took over at 7:00 p.m. An ex-marine named Scott Vinson, a sergeant on the late shift, was responsible for patrolling that first exit ramp people would reach on the West Bank side of the bridge. For anyone in the vicinity of the New Orleans central business district, the Crescent City Connection—a pair of steel bridges stretching across the Mississippi, the fifth-longest bridges of their type in the world—pointed the way toward freedom. Vinson's job was to see that people didn't walk aimlessly through Gretna in search of an escape route.

Tuesday night had been quiet at the bottom of the exit. But all Wednesday evening and into the night, a steady procession of people in clusters of twos and threes and fives walked down the ramp. Vinson stationed two patrolmen at the bottom of the highway. They lined people up and kept order while he used his radio to scrounge up buses—anything to transport people to an evacuation point. He did the same shortly after daybreak on Thursday, when a “second wave” of evacuees, Vinson said, came trudging over the bridge.

Vinson worked past the end of his shift and into the early afternoon, “till that last person was loaded on a bus.” A tired Vinson arrived at the Gretna police station, where he bunked that week, exhausted but feeling good about what he and his people had accomplished. “The three of us were able to help in excess of a thousand people. Closer to fifteen hundred,” Vinson said.

THURSDAY

It was past 1:00 a.m. when Raymond Blanco—the husband of Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco—showed in Gretna. He arrived with a state legislator and a Louisiana trooper. “We was just killing time, really,” Blanco said. They were in the area to deliver medical supplies and waiting for a boat that would bring them to a flooded area south of the city. With nothing else to do, Blanco, who liked to call himself the First Guy, paid a courtesy call on Gretna’s mayor, Ronnie Harris, whom Blanco had known since Harris was a teenager.

It was easy to find Harris. The police station was about the only building in town with lights. “By all appearances, they were in control of their situation,” Blanco said. He remembered their giving him something to eat and recalled talk of all the people walking across the bridge. He told them FEMA was promising buses and that his wife, the governor, was trying to secure others from around the state. None of them, Blanco said—not the mayor, the police chief, or anyone else in the Gretna police station that night—brought up the idea of a bridge blockade.

The boat that was supposed to give Blanco and his entourage a ride never materialized. A frustrated First Guy slumped in the backseat of the car that took him home to Baton Rouge that morning. On either side of the interstate were parked dozens of buses, all of them idle. The drivers, he would learn when he got back to the state capital, had been scared off by reports of gunfire and looting out of New Orleans. “With all the drama in the media, the bus drivers said, ‘Here are the keys, you can use the bus, but I’m not going in there,’” Kathleen Blanco said. Between the Superdome, Convention Center, and people stuck up on the highway, tens of thousands of people needed to be rescued. Raymond Blanco didn’t give his visit to Gretna another thought until he heard

that this small town of eighteen thousand had shut down a state-run bridge—the main escape route out of New Orleans.

CHARLES WHITMER, GRETNA'S DEPUTY police chief, expected to see mobs when he drove up on the bridge at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday. Instead he saw smaller groups of “one, two, three, here and there, with two or three behind them. Sporadic.” But he also told his boss, Chief Arthur Lawson, that he could see people “just continuously as far as I can see into New Orleans.” That was enough for Lawson. He ordered his number two to track down the chief of the bridge police. “Tell him we need to talk about the pedestrian situation on the bridge,” Chief Lawson instructed.

Chief Lawson and several of his people were at the meeting on Thursday morning where they decided to shut down the Crescent City Connection. The head of the bridge police was there; the meeting was in his office, inside the small administrative building located on the West Bank side of the bridge. That was technically Orleans Parish, yet no one on their side of the bridge even tried to contact their counterparts in New Orleans. “The radios were out,” Whitmer explained. “The phones were out.” Yet somehow their group included a deputy representing the Jefferson Parish sheriff’s office. NOPD had set up an impromptu headquarters at the foot of Canal Street, just on the other side of the bridge, under the entrance to the Harrah’s casino—as anyone listening to a police scanner or even CNN would know. Including New Orleans in their multijurisdictional decision would have required just a ten-minute drive across the river to extend an invitation.

The chief of the bridge police, Michael Helmstetter, when asked to explain his rationale for voting to shut down the Crescent City Connection, said, “I guess to protect the pedestrians that were crossing.” Chief Lawson cited any number of explanations for his decision. He needed to think about his men, he said, who were on their fourth or fifth day working twelve-hour shifts. The city had ample food and drink, but not if they had to share it with every person who crossed its city limits. “We aided as long as we could,” Lawson said.

No notes were taken during the meeting, but by all accounts there

wasn't much dissension. Mainly the talk was about the logistics of shutting down the bridge. The bridge police would block anyone already on the interstate from walking toward Gretna. Jefferson Parish posted several deputies at a ramp near the Superdome, while Gretna took responsibility for blocking the entrance ramp at Tchoupitoulas (pronounced "chop-a-two-liss") Street, also on the New Orleans side of the bridge and a short walk from the Convention Center. At around 10:30 a.m. on Thursday, September 1, 2005, with the thermometer near ninety degrees on a day that promised to be as hot and humid as the one before, the first three Gretna patrol officers took their post at the top of the Tchoupitoulas ramp. The Crescent City Connection was now closed to any pedestrian seeking a way out of New Orleans.

KATHLEEN BLANCO WAS AT the state's emergency operations center in Baton Rouge when she learned about the bridge closing. The governor was furious. "They had no authority to do what they did," Blanco said. The Crescent City Connection fell under the jurisdiction of Louisiana's Department of Transportation. Blocking pedestrian traffic from crossing the bridge would have been her call and a decision she would not have made.

"Nothing needed to be shut down," Blanco said. "It was totally unnecessary and a horrible reaction based on fear."

Ray Nagin might have been even angrier than Blanco—if he knew what was happening. On Thursday morning, Nagin was angry at Blanco, not anyone in Gretna. The governor had been promising buses for at least two days, yet now he was hearing reports of buses picking up people on the roadways *before* they even reached the city. Reports came as well of buses skipping past the city to pick up people in the suburbs. In protest, Nagin called for a "freedom march" across the Crescent City Connection. Tap out a press statement on your BlackBerry, he instructed Sally Forman, his communications director. "We said, 'If you want to walk across the Crescent City Connection, there's buses coming, you may be able to find some relief,'" the mayor wrote in a self-published memoir based on those few weeks when he was the most famous mayor in America. He also instructed his police chief to spread word among

officers working near the Convention Center: the buses are just on the opposite side of the bridge.

KEVIN FERNANDEZ, GORDON MCCRAW, and Lawrence Vaughn were the first Gretna officers assigned to the Tchoupitoulas entrance ramp. Their orders had been minimal. "You're to stop people," their sergeant, James Price, had told them, "and tell them they weren't going to be allowed to cross." On their own, the three decided not to allow through even pedestrians carrying an ID showing they lived on the West Bank. Each carried a department-issued Glock .45 and a pump-action shotgun. Sergeant Price had not instructed his men to use the shotguns, but then, he had not forbidden them from using them, either.

The police felt for the people they couldn't let pass. "I would have tried to get out, too," Kevin Fernandez said. Instead they repeated the same few things. There was no food or water for them on the other side of the bridge. There was also no way out. "We kept explaining," Officer Fernandez said, "that there were buses going into Orleans Parish to evacuate them, that if they would wait, they'd shortly be evacuated." Lawrence Vaughn, who was black, suggested that people find a ride across the bridge. People were not permitted to walk to the West Bank, Vaughn said, "but I told them that they were welcome to use any other means of conveyance, a vehicle."

The three Gretna cops had been stopping people for around two hours when the mood, Officer Vaughn said, turned "a little more hostile." Somewhere around eight hundred to a thousand people were gathered by the Tchoupitoulas on-ramp on a hideously hot day that again saw temperatures in the nineties. It fell on him, Vaughn decided, as the only African American, to calm people down.

Instead, Vaughn's race gave people a focus for their frustrations. People in the crowd called Vaughn an Uncle Tom. He was a traitor. A black man holding a child around two years old was particularly cruel. Why was he doing the white man's business, he asked Vaughn, when so many of his own were in need? "Where are we supposed to go?" the man with the small child pleaded. Sit tight, Officer McCraw advised people. The

buses were on their way. Others in the crowd yelled that they'd heard the opposite from NOPD.

The heckler handed off his child. As Vaughn told it, "The one doing all the talking says, 'We'll bum-rush them two white boys and jump this nigger here—we can get across this bridge.'" At that point, Vaughn had worn a badge for more than twenty years, including a stint in the military police in the US Army. "There was too many of them against the three of us," he said. Scared, he pointed his shotgun over the water "and fired off a round to get their attention."

"You Uncle Tom," the man who had been doing most of the talking said.

"Yessir."

"You stupid fucking nigger."

"Yessir."

"I'm going to whup your fool ass."

"Yessir. But you're still not crossing the bridge."

"**THE THING THAT DISAPPOINTED** us a great deal were the canceled flights," Kathleen Blanco told CNN a few days after Katrina. Continental Airlines had heroically continued to fly people out of New Orleans through 3:30 p.m. on Sunday, but Delta discontinued its passenger air service out of New Orleans at just after midnight on Saturday. "A lot of people got stranded like that," Blanco said. It fell to the city's hotels to care for those who couldn't get out of New Orleans ahead of the storm.

Plenty of lodgings booted lingering guests on Monday or Tuesday, pointing the way to the Superdome or the Convention Center before shuttering their doors. The staff of the Hotel Monteleone, in contrast, acted valiantly in those first days after the storm. This stately building in the heart of the French Quarter housed and fed around five hundred people—a group that included a mix of tourists and locals seeking refuge. By Thursday, though, the hotel was running out of water and food and also the fuel needed to operate its generator. Here are some maps, management told people. Go to the Convention Center. There'll be buses for you there.

Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky of San Francisco were

among those who had gotten stuck at the Monteleone. They were in New Orleans for a conference of EMS (emergency medical services) workers, of all things, and were among those unable to catch a flight out of town ahead of Katrina. Now they were part of a group of around two hundred, the majority tourists, on the streets of New Orleans, left to fend for themselves.

The group ran into National Guardsmen a few streets from the Monteleone. They were no longer letting people inside the Convention Center, the soldiers told them, but didn't have an answer when people asked where they should go. "The guards told us that this was our problem—and, no, they didn't have extra water to give us," Bradshaw and Slonsky wrote in an article about their experience published in the *Socialist Worker* eleven days after Katrina. A few blocks later, they came across the impromptu command center the New Orleans police had set up in front of Harrah's. No one there could tell them where they were supposed to go, so as a group, they decided they would camp out across the street from Harrah's. By that time, their group numbered around three hundred. Maybe their size would make them impossible to ignore.

Their gambit worked—after a fashion. A police commander crossed the street to talk with them. Walk across the bridge, he advised. "I swear to you that the buses are there," he supposedly told them.

With "great excitement and hope," Bradshaw and Slonsky wrote, they headed toward the bridge. They passed by the Convention Center, where their determination to find a way out of New Orleans must have been infectious. "Quickly our numbers doubled and doubled again," the couple wrote. "Babies in strollers now joined us, as did people using crutches, elderly clasping walkers, and other people in wheelchairs." A torrential downpour drenched the lot of them, but the group, now a majority black, kept walking.

Their group made it onto the highway but were stopped before they reached the bridge by a barricade of police cruisers and "armed sheriffs," according to Bradshaw and Slonsky. The deputies "began firing their weapons over our heads." Most of their group ran, but Bradshaw and Slonsky, among others, tried talking to the deputies. "They responded that the West Bank was not going to become New Orleans, and there would be no Superdomes in their city," the couple wrote.

Bradshaw, Slonsky, and a small band of others set up camp on the roadway, not far from where they had been turned away. An elevated highway seemed safer than the streets. From their perch they watched others attempt to cross the bridge. Sometimes the police deterred would-be crossers with shouts. Other times they used gunfire to turn people around. Either way, no one was walking across that bridge.

OLIVER THOMAS, PRESIDENT OF the New Orleans City Council, noticed the blockade after a long day in and out of the water on a rescue boat. (“I had sores on my feet for two months,” he said.) “Let’s talk basic human rights,” Thomas said. “You’ve got these people on the governor’s bridge—stopping Louisiana citizens from crossing the bridge? Old people, children, people peacefully walking through a route literally that’s the only way out of a city covered by water. By whose authority? And let’s talk jurisdictional issues. This is an outside force telling our people they can’t walk across the bridge? By what right?”