

# Relief Flight

At its peak two days after Hurricane Katrina hit on Aug. 29, 2005, the Louis Armstrong International Airport in New Orleans housed approximately 30,000 people without electricity or running water. The FAA rushed to reopen one runway for relief flights, which were being organized by the Air Transport Association, an airline trade group, with cooperation from major US commercial carriers, among them United Airlines.

*United flew into New Orleans on Friday morning, Sept. 2. Arriving just after 10:00 a.m., the flight carried a full crew, as well as screeners from the Transportation Safety Administration, several air marshalls, additional fire and medical personnel, and thousands of pounds of food and water. It returned to Chicago that evening with close to 200 evacuees.*

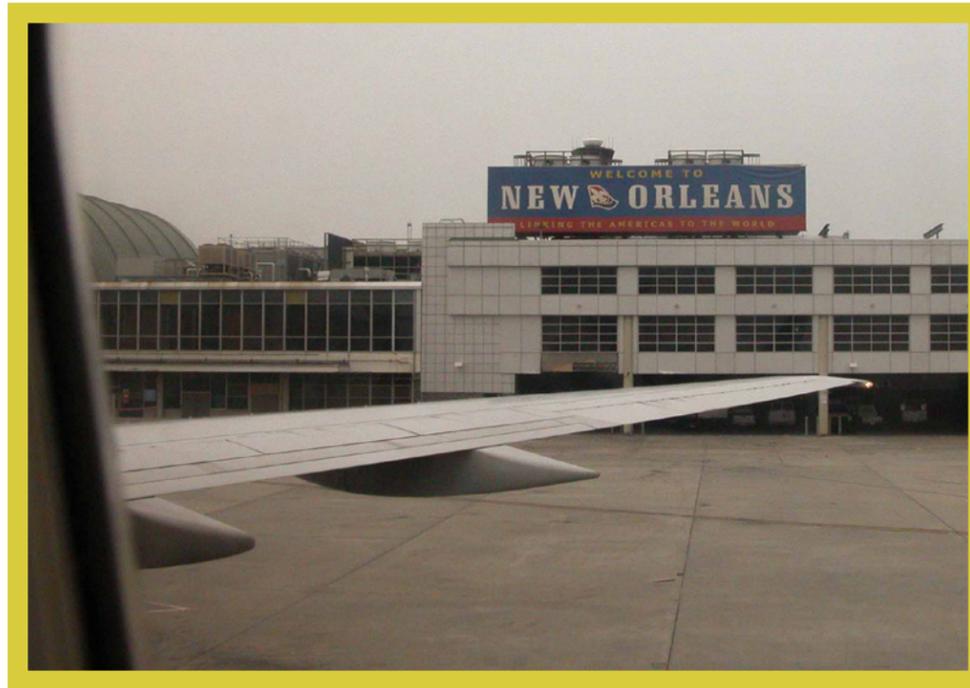
*Sharon VanDivier, a United flight attendant, was on that first flight.*

I was on reserve in Chicago, and I saw a posting looking for volunteers to take the flight, and I thought to myself, no way, no how am I going to volunteer for that. I just wasn't sure I could deal with it. Then, at 8:00 the night before, the crew desk called and asked me to be on the crew. So I said yes. I called my husband and said guess where I'm going, and he said 'I know it's not New Orleans,' and I said well, that's where you're wrong.

We wanted to leave Chicago early because the airport in New Orleans had no electricity and we needed to have enough time to get everyone on board and take off before it got dark.

Check-in was at 5:45 a.m. We had an extensive briefing about what to expect, and how the flight was going to run. United would fly the evacuees from New Orleans to Chicago, and then from Chicago they had a free ticket to wherever they wanted to go in the United States. We'd help them with flight arrangements once they got to O'Hare.

We boarded tons of snack boxes, and hot dinners for as many people as we had seats. We also had extra water and bananas. They told us that the passengers could have anything they wanted, and we tried to anticipate any need they could have



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during the flight.

We flew a 757, and I worked in the back of the plane with one other flight attendant. We flew low into New Orleans, and looking out the windows you just saw the devastation. There was water everywhere, and everyplace you looked you could see collapsed buildings, and debris - wood, cans and trash, it was all just floating.

*The flight landed, and within an hour began loading passengers using air stairs to bring them up to the plane. VanDivier and the other flight attendants met the passengers at the first-class entrance.*

The first people on the plane were the ones who needed medical treatment, they were in first-class. After that, there were just so many people, whole families, and 13 kids, I remember because we had to count them. Some people didn't want to get on once they got to the plane, because they didn't want to leave someone behind, or they changed their minds and wanted to stay

A lot of people had animals with them, and we let them bring them on board. When we took off and landed, we stacked the cages in the bathrooms to keep the animals safe. I remember one little dachshund was going berserk in there, so we let it sit with its owner.

Most of the people had never been on a plane before, and a lot of them were afraid to fly. We let them sit wherever they wanted, and we gave them water and snack boxes right away. United had told us to do whatever we needed so that they were comfortable. They were all just so grateful for anything we did.

It was kind of loud on the plane, and people had a lot of questions. Most didn't even know where they were going until we told them after they got on board. We answered a lot of questions about how long the flight was, how we heat up the food, a lot about the plane and flying. A lot of them were afraid to fly. You could see the panic on their faces, but we talked to them and answered their questions, and just tried to treat them like normal. Mostly they needed a smile and a laugh.

The hardest part was hearing their stories. So many people had so many sad stories about what they'd lost, or worse, who they'd lost, that it was hard to listen to them all. Some didn't know where their family members were, or their houses were gone, and they had nowhere to go. One man told us the water came up and they were on their roof, and someone came in a boat to get them, and then someone else brought them to the airport, and now they were on the plane.

I remember a mother and her two young kids, maybe 10 and 12. The father had been away at cancer treatment outside of Louisiana, and their goal was to get to him before he died. I just remember her trying to be so strong for her kids.

I also remember two sisters, both in their early 70s, who were going on from Chicago to family members in Atlanta. They'd never flown before. I gave them snack boxes when they got seated, and they

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couldn't believe they were being fed.

One of them asked me very quietly if there was anything else, and I told her yes, after we take off we'll serve them a hot chicken dinner, with mashed potatoes and gravy, corn and an apple dessert. After I told her each thing, she kept asking, 'really?', and I said yes, that's exactly what we're having. She

just looked at me, then broke down crying. She made me cry too.

When we got to O'Hare, you could see a lot of people thinking oh my god, what now. It was almost a haunted look that they had. A lot of them looked relieved, and a lot were just scared, you could see it. They were scared about what they'd lost, and about what they were going to do next.

We had United folks at the gate to meet us, and they took people to the showers in the airport, helped them with their animals, and made flight arrangements for people who were going someplace else. Everyone got a change of clothes, and a \$100 voucher.

United also had counselors at the airport to help the crew members, and it was a big help. It was the proudest I've ever been of United.

The thing I regret is that I didn't have time to get phone numbers of some of the people so I could follow up with them to see if they were okay, or to find out what happened to them.

I keep dreaming about them. Did they ever go back to New Orleans? Did that one family make it in time to say goodbye to their dad and husband, or what happened to the two ladies who were so thankful for that chicken dinner. Their family didn't even know they were coming. I had such a good time with them, and I wish I knew what happened to them when they got to where they wanted to go.

This was something that really makes you stop and think about what's important. and I'm very happy I did it. It makes you a different person knowing that people can go through something like that and come out of it. So many of them weren't focused on what they'd been through, they were just so thankful for whatever you did for them.

It was a good flight. 🍷