

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

*Australian Forward Assessment Team: Trip to Washington DC, USA  
by Principal Education Officer Donovan Croucamp*

---

The recent impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast of the United States has had the whole world observing with interest. This disaster has been recognised as the worst natural disaster to impact on the USA in recent history since a hurricane wiped out Galveston in the 1900s killing thousands. The losses have been quite devastating to the affected states and the economic impact is being felt across the globe. During the initial stages of the unfolding disaster Australia offered its assistance to the USA with a financial donation. This was followed by the dispatch of a small team of emergency management practitioners to assess what the needs were and how Australia could help most effectively. I was fortunate to be part of this team and here follows a short personal reflection on this experience.

A day before receiving my deployment instructions I had met with Linda Hansen, the head of the EMA Library, and we discussed collecting and collating as much information about this event as possible. The lessons learnt from this disaster would be very valuable to us as it would be a well documented case study of the evacuation of a large first world urban area. Little did I know at this point that I would be winging to Washington DC a few days later and immersing myself in the American media and government communications to assess the situation a little closer.

David Templeman, the Director General of EMA, tasked Margery Webster to lead a team including myself and John Richardson, State Recovery Manager, Department of Human Services, Victoria, to

conduct an in-country assessment of the situation and report back to Canberra. We were to be the conduit for matching any potential Australian Government response to established needs and requests for assistance.

On arrival we were collected by an Australian Federal Police Officer based in the Australian Embassy who gave us some background to the diplomatic mission and explained the basic layout of Washington, the capital of the United States of America. The next day we met with Gary Quinlan, the Deputy Head of Mission and Jane Hardy, the Congressional Liaison Counsellor and our purpose was discussed.

The political overlay on top of our emergency management mission became immediately apparent and for the rest of the two weeks we were very conscious of this as we prepared capability statements and articulated our offer of assistance to the US Government. Meeting

with FEMA was difficult as they were extremely busy and their headquarters was in 'lock down'. Our primary link to the US Government was through the US Department of State. We met with the Australian Desk Officer, Bill McCulla, who explained that all foreign offers were being channelled through a task force in the State Department and processing these offers in relation to their needs was going to take time. We formally presented our offer of assistance and after being thanked we were asked to be patient and also to prepare a written statement of capability for consideration. We then hit the computer keyboards again and between the three of us moulded a concise but practical capability statement. We spent the next day gathering information and consolidating our submission into three key areas. These areas were determined by examining other offers of assistance, discussions with the US Australian Desk Officer, lists of committed resources and



*Margery Webster, John Richardson (and children) and Donovan Croucamp.*



*Embassy of Australia in Washington DC*

information posted on the FEMA, UN and other websites.

The three key areas involved Disaster Victim Identification, Disaster Logistics Coordination and Disaster Recovery Centre management. Our offer was tabled at the White House during a Task Force meeting chaired by Condoleeza Rice, the US Secretary of State. We continued to gather local information, peruse websites and talk to contacts in the UN and the State of Louisiana. We also prepared daily Situation Reports which were sent to the NEMCC, based in Canberra.

After an interesting week, a lot of information management and diplomacy, our offer was respectfully declined. At this point we were well aware of the US capability as their enormous

logistics machine had gathered momentum. The sheer volume of available resources and the ability of the US Military was impressive. The involvement of the military was critical to this response, as was the case during the Indian Ocean Tsunami, and this is a subject area I am keen to research further in the Australian context.

With our mission complete and no further need for our presence we closed the various diplomatic and official loops and prepared to return. The Australian Embassy valued our assistance and if anything, we left them with a stronger understanding of emergency management and EMA in particular. Our efforts certainly supported their mission during this time and we said our goodbyes in good spirits with a positive cable to Canberra giving closure to our deployment.

It was frustrating that no Australian resources were deployed into the field to make a tangible contribution to relief and recovery efforts but what we could offer was really quite small and easily surpassed by the enormous surge capacity of the world's largest economy.

It was a valuable experience, although quite different to my Indonesian trip earlier in the year. We worked well as a team and our skills in disaster logistics, coordination and recovery were complimentary. Our thoughts and prayers should be with our counterparts in FEMA and other key agencies who are managing this event in a very politically unforgiving climate with the media scrutinising every move they make. We can certainly learn a lot from their experience and integrate those lessons into our own preparedness. At the time of writing this Hurricane Rita is bearing down on the Florida coast and the world is watching in anticipation. Let us not forget those people who were displaced, lost property and lost loved ones in this disaster.