

Local team saved many in New Orleans

By Gwen H. Jader
Daily Herald Correspondent
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Hours after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Winthrop Harbor police Cmdr. Dan Bitton led an effort that rescued more than 1,700 people, including infants, from the rooftops of Tulane University Hospital and flooded homes.

Bitton shared his experiences Wednesday at the Lake County Power Breakfast at Midlane Golf Resort in Waukegan.

"The despair was so obvious," he said. "People were scratching SOS in the shingles with their bare hands."

Medline Industries Inc., a Mundelein-based manufacturer and distributor of hospital products, contacted Bitton through the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition after learning the New Orleans hospital needed help after the hurricane struck in late August. Bitton, along with crew members Rick Concepcion, Randy Olson and Mike Felasco, responded.

They arrived at night and immediately began evacuations from Tulane Hospital. Operating from a makeshift heliport atop an eight-story parking garage tucked in between high-rise buildings, the night evacuations involved difficult flying conditions for the crew, who used night vision goggles.

The next day, Bitton said he realized military helicopters nearby were sitting idle because the crews had yet to receive orders. Bitton contacted the military to request assistance and quickly received help by way of two Chinook helicopters and two Blackhawk helicopters.

With five helicopters then operating from the parking garage, more than 1,700 people were evacuated, including more than 300 patients from neighboring Charity Hospital.

During return trips to the parking garage, the team airlifted food, water and medical supplies to hospital staff as well as to people on rooftops. After the hospital evacuations, the crew rescued people from rooftops. In total, the crew flew nearly 60 hours during a three-day period.

Bitton also conducted rescue efforts after Hurricane Rita.

"That was much better organized," he said.

The Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, coordinated by the Winthrop Harbor Police Department, is in its fourth year aiding police and rescue agencies in Wisconsin and Illinois.

The twin-engine jet helicopter is a privately owned Eurocopter EC135, made available at no cost for law enforcement emergencies on a limited basis. When Bitton and his team fly the helicopter, they work on a voluntary basis.

Lake County Undersheriff Gary Stryker, president of the Illinois Law Enforcement Alarm System, appeared with Bitton at the breakfast. He said Illinois is well prepared to handle an emergency and has recently won a national award for preparedness from the Harvard School of Business.

The monthly Power Breakfast is sponsored by the Daily Herald, the Lake County Chamber of Commerce, Midlane Golf Resort, WKRS/WXLC Radio, Comcast and Gurnee Mills. The show will be broadcast on local access cable channels Monday and Wednesday evenings throughout the month. Check www.comcastnetwork.tv for schedules.

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COURTESY OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AVIATION COALITION
Randy Olson, from left, Mike Felasco, Dan Bitton and Rick Concepcion, members of the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, helped rescue more than 1,700 people after Hurricane Katrina hit.

School of Business.

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