

Divers return from New Orleans

AMBER MINNINGS
STAFF WRITER

Now that Lt(N) Todd Dupuis has returned from 22 days on the Gulf Coast, he has time to reflect on his experiences in the hurricane ravaged area.

He paints a picture of a ghost town, a city abandoned by residents and destroyed by nature, the streets silent, void of life and movement.

"It was very surreal," says Lt(N) Dupuis, one of 18 clearance divers deployed to the area. "We drove to New Orleans and it was completely empty. There were no pedestrians, no traffic. The only people we saw were the military and the media."

The stench of rot and compost filled the muggy air, growing worse the closer the divers got to New Orleans, says Lt(N) Dupuis.

An 8 p.m. curfew left only the military and police to walk the streets at night; the few residents left disappeared into the remaining upright buildings as dusk approached.

Eighteen clearance divers from Fleet Diving Unit (Pacific) were deployed on

Operation Unison to help clear harbours and waterways of the underwater carnage left from Hurricane Katrina.

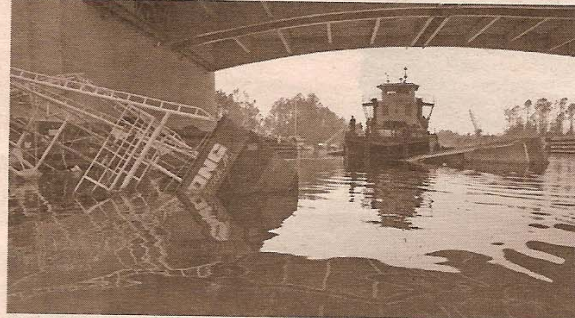
Along the coast where the team did most of their work, the air wasn't as thick but the destruction was just as devastating.

"Everyone saw the images on TV. There were a lot of scenes of complete devastation," says Lt(N) Dupuis. "You saw a lot of things you wouldn't expect to see — cars overturned, and houses without roofs."

Boats in the middle of the street, on lawns and porches, and even sticking out of the walls of houses was a very strange sight, he adds. "It isn't often that you see large boats out of the water, but the storm lifted boats of all sizes and deposited them all over the city."

Working conditions were challenging; once divers were in the water they couldn't see anything. "The water was very turbid. Divers had to do everything by feel."

Despite the obstacles, three waterways were cleared because of the team's efforts.



MCpl Colin Kelley, Combat Camera

Two wrecks lie in shallow water under a bridge in Gulfport, Mississippi. The barge in the background carries a team of Canadian divers preparing to raise them out of the waterway.

"We would've liked to have done more," he says. "The remaining projects are large in scope and scale. There's tons of damage. It's going to take them years to clean up."

Their efforts didn't go unnoticed by residents, and the divers have plenty of anecdotes of gratitude. "People were very thankful. It was hard to see how overwhelmed people were with emotions," he says.

Those emotions spilled over to him, and he says it was tough to witness up-close the individual tragedies. "There are moments when you get

kind of choked up. You realize that people may never recover or will spend the rest of their lives trying to."

To be a part such a high profile, large-scale relief effort has left the sailor forever changed.

"You always want to know that what you do makes a difference. We all went down there with the sense that we were going to make a difference and help these people out," he says. "It made me appreciate my friends and family more, and attachments to possessions less."