



## Honorable Mention: The Anti-FEMA

As government officials dawdled, Richard Zuschlag didn't miss a beat. He sent his medics into flood-ravaged New Orleans, where they rescued more than 7,000 people.

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At some point in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, after the winds had passed and the levees had snapped, Children's Hospital in New Orleans found itself in deep trouble. The city's electricity was long gone and the hospital's neonatal unit was running on back-up generators. The only option was to airlift the babies to safety.

Fortunately, Marc Creswell, a flight-training officer for Acadian Ambulance Services in nearby Lafayette, had become an expert in the construction of makeshift helipads. He bulldozed a fence at a field next to the hospital and set up an outdoor generator and a series of lights. Then Creswell and a team of Acadian colleagues and hospital nurses began ferrying sick infants in their incubators to the landing area. Healthier babies were rushed out in their bassinets. When they ran out of those, Creswell found some cardboard boxes, wrapped the babies up tight and loaded them six to a helicopter.

Flight services coordinator Michael Sonnier kept the six choppers moving. Four hours later, more than 30 infants were nestled safely in nearby hospitals. An exhausted Creswell grabbed a few hours of sleep. Then he headed to the next mission.

Creswell was just one of hundreds of Acadian Ambulance employees who sprang to action in the wake of the worst natural disaster in U.S. history. But the quick thinking and dedication exhibited in the field started at the top, with Richard Zuschlag, the company's 57-year-old CEO.

Zuschlag founded Acadian Ambulance back in 1971, and has nurtured it into the nation's largest privately owned ambulance company, with more than 2,000 employees and some \$180 million in revenue. Much of his success stems from a longstanding paranoia about losing communications. Acadian has 18 500-foot communications towers and a large supply of satellite phones, and Zuschlag makes sure his backups have backups. After Katrina wiped out the communications infrastructure of New Orleans, Acadian had the only reliable radio system in the region. As a result, Zuschlag was aware of the extent of the damage to the region before local, state, and federal officials were.

While the bureaucrats bickered over who was authorized to do what, Zuschlag didn't hesitate. Holed up in the command center at Acadian's headquarters, he stationed medics on the roofs of New Orleans's six hospitals to help evacuate patients, staffed a first-aid station in the Superdome, and established a triage center on the Interstate 10 causeway, serviced by Acadian's fleet of 200 ambulances. In the skies, the company's eight helicopters joined 90 other aircraft sent by first responders and military units nationwide, the entire fleet coordinated by Acadian's dispatchers.

The hurricane hit on Monday. By Friday, the company had helped evacuate more than 7,000 people from the flooded city's hospitals. Reports from the field were almost absurdly heroic. At Memorial Hospital, Acadian medics encountered a ward of critically ill elderly patients with no medical records. Working fast amid the chaos, they duct-taped patients to ironing boards and doors ripped from their hinges, and lifted them into waiting helicopters. "Our goal," Zuschlag says, "was to do whatever we

possibly could until a higher power came along."

Ironically, on the Thursday prior to the storm, New Orleans was hosting a national conference of emergency medical personnel, where Acadian picked up a "gold standard" award for patient care. The next day, Zuschlag was on the golf course, certain that the storm was headed west. Soon, it was obvious how wrong he had been. Early Tuesday morning, Zuschlag began hearing firsthand from medics in New Orleans that the levees had indeed ruptured and water was rising a foot an hour. By evening, the city had no power. "I knew we were going to be the frontline," Zuschlag says.

An astute Louisiana National Guard colonel recognized the same thing and charged Acadian with directing hospital rescues. Thus began a series of 18-hour days in the command center, as Zuschlag dispatched medics, cajoled bureaucrats, encouraged exhausted employees, and generally strove to keep everyone's head above water. "Everyone works together to orchestrate our ambulance service," says Sonnier. "Richard makes sure we don't feel like we are on our own, but we also don't have to fight through red tape once we've been tasked."

A Pennsylvania native, Zuschlag was sent to Louisiana in 1970 as a communications engineer for Westinghouse. But he fell in love with a Cajun girl and never left. Looking for something to do besides engineering, he started an ambulance service with two partners. Zuschlag dispatched during the day and drove at night, and poured every dime back into the business. In 1998, he bought out his partners and restructured the business as an ESOP. The company now has numerous private accounts, big contracts with Medicare and Medicaid, and a burgeoning division that sends medics to oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Amazingly, Acadian collects on only 55% of the 250,000 patient transports it does a year because so many of the people it serves are poor and uninsured. Zuschlag has learned to live with it. "A lot of people think we're a public utility," he says.

Acadian Ambulance certainly behaved like one after the hurricane. When Zuschlag wasn't directing rescue efforts, he worked the phones, demanding action from politicians. A call to a local congressman helped clear some bureaucratic roadblocks Acadian's crews were encountering. During an appearance on Fox's *The O'Reilly Factor*, he made an urgent plea for reinforcements. When Laura Bush visited the region, he asked the First Lady to relay to her husband that it would take the full strength of the military to clear out the city's hospitals. Zuschlag's not taking credit, but the next morning, the troops arrived--almost five days after Acadian dispatched its first helicopter.

"Most people gave up because it was the biggest nightmare they'd ever seen," Zuschlag says. "But my people are great doers and wouldn't take no for an answer."

With the reconstruction of New Orleans well under way, Zuschlag says he remains somewhat in awe of his employees. He can't resist telling heroic tales of Acadian's troops, such as the one about the senior manager who redirected three empty 18-wheelers to Charity Hospital and filled the trailers with stretchers laid out end to end until 68 patients were evacuated. "Most people gave up because it was the biggest nightmare they'd ever seen," Zuschlag says. "But my people are great doers and wouldn't take no for an answer."

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