HURRICANE KATRINA AFTERMATH

Looters leave nothing behind in storm's wake

Police officers seen joining in on free-for-all

By Mike Perlstein and Brian Thevenot
Staff writer

Law enforcement efforts to contain the emergency left by Katrina slipped into chaos in parts of New Orleans Tuesday -- with some police officers and firefighters even joining looters in picking stores clean.

At the Wal-Mart on Tchoupitoulas Street, an initial effort to hand out provisions to stranded citizens quickly disintegrated into mass looting. Authorities at the scene said bedlam erupted after the giveaway was announced over the radio.

While many people carried out food and essential supplies, others cleared out jewelry racks and carted out computers, TVs and appliances on handtrucks.

Some officers joined in taking whatever they could, including one New Orleans cop who loaded a shopping cart with a compact computer and a 27-inch flat screen television.

Officers claimed there was nothing they could do to contain the anarchy, saying their radio communications had broken down and they had no direction from commanders.

"We don't have enough cops to stop it," an officer said. "A mass riot would break out if you tried."

Inside the store, the scene alternated between celebration and frightening bedlam. A shirtless man straddled a broken jewelry case, yelling, "Free samples, free samples over here."

Another man rolled a mechanized pallet, stacked six feet high with cases of vodka and whiskey. Perched atop the stack was a bewildered toddler.

Throughout the store and parking lot, looters pushed carts and loaded trucks and vans alongside officers. One man said police directed him to Wal-Mart from Robert's Grocery, where a similar scene was taking place.

A crowd in the electronics section said one officer broke the glass DVD case so people wouldn't cut themselves.

"The police got all the best stuff. They're crookeder than us," one man said.

Most officers, though, simply stood by powerless against the tide of law breakers.
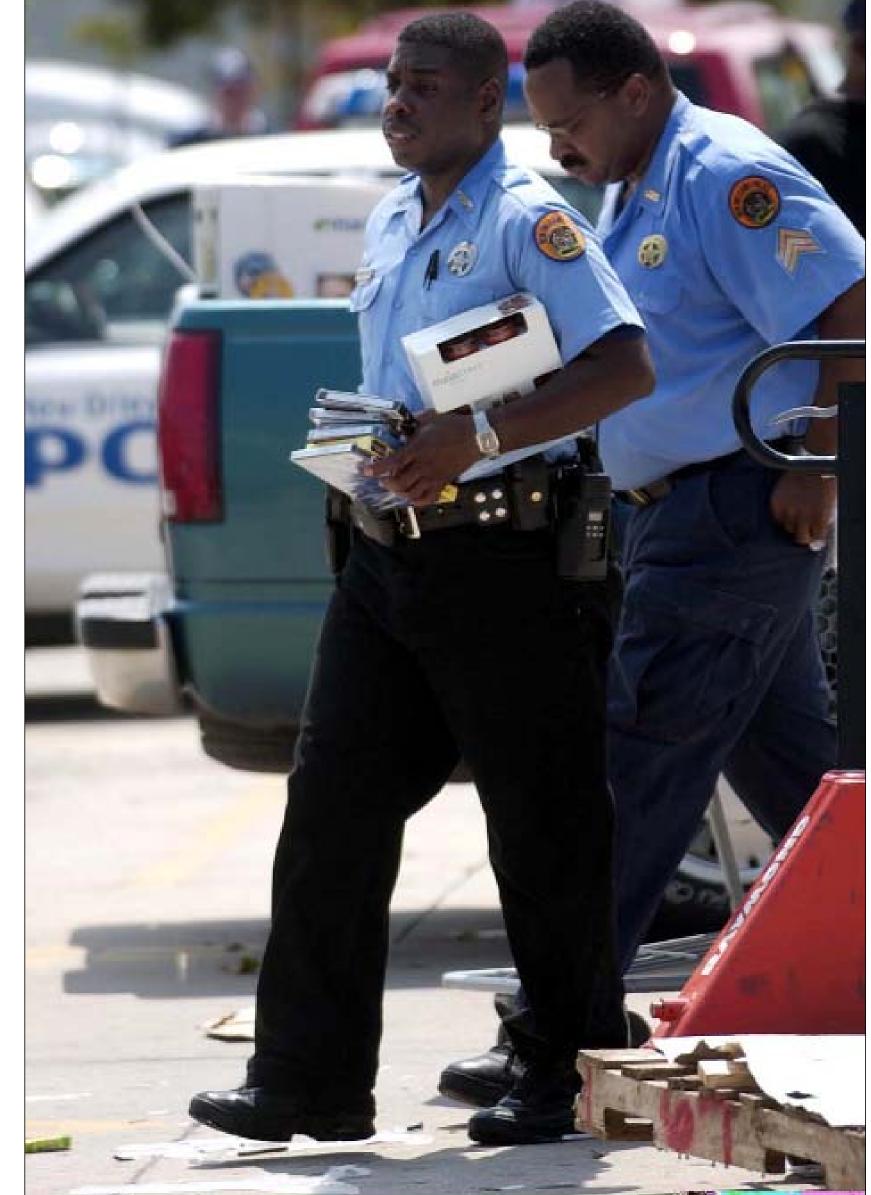
One veteran officer said, "It's like this everywhere in the city. This tiny number of cops can't do anything about this. It's wide open."

At least one officer tried futilely to control a looter through shame.

"When they say take what you need, that doesn't mean an f-ing TV," the officer shouted to a looter. "This is a hurricane, not a free-for-all."

Sandra Smith of Baton Rouge walked through the parking lot with a 12-pack of beer under each arm.

"I came down here to get my daughters," she said, "but I can't find them."

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN McCUSKER

GARDEN DISTRICT: A New Orleans police officer is seen carrying DVDs at the Wal-Mart on Tchoupitoulas Tuesday. Many police officers said they felt helpless in enforcing the looters, which were found all over the city.

The scene turned so chaotic at times that entrances were blocked by the press of people, shopping carts and traffic jams that sprouted on surrounding streets.

Some groups organized themselves into assembly lines to more efficiently cart off goods.

Toni Williams, 25, packed her trunk with essential supplies, such as food and water, but said mass looting disgusted and frightened her.

"I didn't feel safe. Some people are going overboard," she said.

Inside the store, one woman was stocking up on make-up. She said she took comfort in watching police load up their own carts.

"It must be legal," she said. "The police are here taking stuff, too."

(Staff writers Doug MacCash and Keith Spera assisted in this story.)

Looter shoots N.O. officer in the head

Relatives chose to stay behind in New Orleans

By Matt Brown
West Bank bureau

A New Orleans police officer was shot in the head Tuesday after confronting looters on the West Bank, officials said.

Details were scarce, but officials said the officer and another officer confronted several looters stealing merchandise from the Chevron station at the corner of Shirley and Gen. DeGaulle drives. One of the officers went inside the store, while the other remained outside and confronted a man he saw looting the store.

When he did, another looter came from behind and shot the officer in the head, a police officer told a reporter for The Times-Picayune.

The officer who was shot was rushed to West Jefferson Medical Center, where he underwent surgery. Other officers told a reporter that reports from the hospital said the wounded officer was expected to survive. Jefferson Parish deputies arrested four people on the scene, and police said one of those arrested was wounded in the arm after exchanging gunfire with another officer.