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Church honors Iwo Jima crew for Katrina aid

BY HATTIE BROWN GARROW THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

NORFOLK — Sailors brought hope – along with a bunch of cleaning supplies – to a New Orleans congregation after Hurricane Katrina.

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, one of the oldest Greek Orthodox churches in the nation, reopened to parishioners shortly after the August hurricane. Members of the Iwo Jima helped make that possible.

On Saturday, several officers and crew members of the Iwo Jima were recognized at a gala hosted by Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Norfolk. The annual ball is in celebration of the Annunciation, believed to be when the archangel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, as well as the Greek Independence Day. This year's event also recognized the church's 95th anniversary.

Sailors from the Iwo Jima helped many other churches, schools and people during their month in the Gulf Coast region.

However, Cmdr. Milton Gianulis, a Navy chaplain who is Greek Orthodox, said he was struck by the devastation at Holy Trinity.

The water, which at one point was 3 feet high inside the church, had receded by the time the roughly 50 sailors and a few National Guardsmen arrived. They cleaned the altar, ripped up moldy carpet and salvaged prayer books and other meaningful items.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Laura Oakes still recalls the pungent odor – like something that had been out in the sun too long – that hit her when she walked into Holy Trinity for the first time.

That Sunday, for the first time since the hurricane made landfall, a handful of parishioners who were still in the area gathered with some from the Iwo Jima for a service.

They participated in the Liturgy, the time when church members partake of what they believe is the body and blood of Christ.

"It just seemed like taking that first step toward a normal time," said Oakes. "It just seemed like a symbolic thing to do."

An Orthodox Christian's life is centered on the Liturgy, said Andrew Protogyrou, who organized Saturday's ball.

During the event, Protogyrou presented the Iwo Jima with an icon with the image of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors. With its relics and other holy items, Holy Trinity brings parishioners into the presence of God. And that, Protogyrou said, was just what church members needed.



YOON S. BYUN/SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT Iwo Jima Capt. Richard Callas speaks at Saturday's

annual ball.