

# Collaboration, not getting stuck on stupid, is the way to fight a pandemic

Fifteen years ago, a plain-speaking, cigar-chomping Army general set the tone for how to respond to a disaster when the federal government had initially proved hapless. Now, another former general who was there in New Orleans is implementing the lessons learned after Hurricane Katrina, at the convention center in South Boston.

By [Kevin Cullen](#) Globe Columnist, Updated April 20, 2020, 5:23 p.m.



General Jack Hammond, now retired and in charge of a 1,000-bed field hospital at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, met with a village elder in Kabul province in Afghanistan in 2011. MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

I was in New Orleans right after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. It was nuts.

Nobody seemed to be in charge.

The mayor was talking [nonsense](#). The police chief was [no better](#). Out in Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana, various politicians tried to reassure the public, but no one was buying what they were selling.

The feds were absolutely [useless](#). Jesse Jackson [got buses to the Superdome](#) before FEMA did.

All looked bleak until a plain-speaking, cigar-chomping Army general showed up and took over. His name was Lieutenant General [Russel Honoré](#). If you want to get an idea of what General Honoré was like, imagine General George S. Patton as an African-American Creole from Pointe Coupee Parish, La.

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General Honoré sounded like Strother Martin in “Cool Hand Luke,” except instead of saying there had been a failure to communicate, he said there had been a failure to collaborate. As commander of Joint Task Force Katrina, he said the time for personal and

inter-agency squabbling was over. People on the Gulf Coast needed to be rescued, and they didn't care who rescued them or who got the credit.

As another hurricane threatened Louisiana, a journalist tried to get General Honoré to engage in the blame game for the hitherto ham-fisted government response.

"Don't get stuck on stupid," an exasperated General Honoré replied, meaning there would be plenty of time to assess blame, but it was now time to focus on saving lives.

An Army lieutenant colonel named Jack Hammond was there, leading a team of Massachusetts National Guard soldiers and police officers, sent down to help with security after Katrina. The lessons he learned in New Orleans informed him as he rose to become a brigadier general, and later as the head of [Home Base](#), which treats the invisible wounds of war: post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury.

Hammond got a call a few weeks ago from Governor Charlie Baker, who asked him to take charge of a [1,000-bed field hospital](#) at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center to handle COVID-19 patients and take pressure off the region's hospitals. It's a partnership involving the governor, Mayor Marty Walsh, Partners HealthCare, and Boston Health Care for the Homeless.

While Partners put up the \$10 million to build and operate the field hospital, all of the city's hospitals are helping out, supplying staff and expertise, Hammond said.

Despite minor differences, Baker and Walsh have worked as a team in a state that has some of the highest per capita infection rates, much of it in the state capital. They have been reassuring presences in their daily public briefings.

"That matters," Jack Hammond said.

Hammond said unified political leadership from a Republican and Democrat sets a tone.

The 1,000-bed site was built in seven days because union construction workers agreed to work alongside nonunion workers around the clock.

For a generation, the Boston Police Department and Massachusetts State Police have been unable to resolve jurisdictional disputes in the Seaport. But they came to an agreement on how to police the field hospital in three days.

Hammond has watched medical professionals from different organizations, including 30 from Home Base, work seamlessly.

Of the roughly 500 workers at the field hospital, 165 are soldiers from the Massachusetts National Guard and Army Reserve medical team. Army chief of staff [General James McConville](#), a Quincy native, visited last week and was impressed by the collaborative approach of political, medical, and military and law enforcement leaders.

“I saw tremendous teamwork,” McConville said.

Hammond named the facility Boston Hope.

“We know what Boston Strong means,” he said. “Now we need hope.”

Watching people put aside egos and other petty differences in a time of emergency reminded him of the way people of different backgrounds and perspectives served as a unified team in combat under his command in Afghanistan.

Speaking to me on what was Patriots Day, Jack Hammond, a real patriot, said, “It is really refreshing to see what we can do if we all work together. It’s inspiring.”

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