The mad rush of unforgiving flood waters is no stranger to the state of Louisiana.

Both Cajuns and Creoles wait with bated breath each hurricane season for nothing more than an unlucky roll of the dice. These waters twist and toil, rampaging without a care in the world for neither hearth nor home; destroying all in its path.

“I asked a policeman directing traffic if there was anything I could do to help,” said Mark Garlington, a rescuer. “He pointed me to a fellow that was directing the trucks as they were backing up to unload their boats.”

Garlington said during the 2016 floods he fell in with rescuers in thigh deep water and helped to get the boats off and onto trailers. Adding when boats came in with rescued people, they helped them get out and unload any belongings they managed to salvage.

Soon, this group of men and women would place a name to this collective effort: the Cajun Navy. The name became a call sign of support, of men and women who became deliverers from destruction driving their boats straight into the rushing waters of nature’s wrath.

The Cajun Navy, and men like Garlington said they started with no more than a few bass boats and sheer will during Hurricane Katrina.

“Two sheriff’s boats came in with two women and seven kids,” Garlington said. “The oldest being five or six. The three-year-old girl sat in the boat and would not move. She was terrified.”

Garlington said he began helping them out and came to the little girl’s aid.

“As I began to pick her up she locked her little arms around my neck, buried against my shoulder and began crying,” Garlington said. “I could feel her tears on my neck and her little body trembling.”

Garlington and others like him are what the Cajun Navy has come to call, “Boots on the Ground”, or “BOGs.” These “boots” have become the first line of defense to natural flooding disasters around the southern U.S., according to those who work with the Cajun Navy. With stops from Texas all the way up to North Carolina, during Hurricane Florence last September, the Cajun Navy has no end in sight.

“We have boots on the ground that drive in from just about everywhere and start working with us,” Rob Gaudet of Cajun Navy Relief said. “It’s crowd relief. I realized that citizens wanted to engage and there was no way for them to do it.”

Gaudet, an alumnus of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and the foundation he works with, have taken the spirit of the grassroots Cajun Navy and moved it beyond just saving a life, to also helping those citizens rebuild their lives after catastrophic events.

Through CrowdRelief, citizens from across the nation can help those in need with a few clicks of their mouse buttons.

“You know, all that pile of stuff in front of the homes, that’s worth $10,000,” Gaudet said. “We’re replacing those possessions for people as well as the crowd buying where you can give $35 to the Red

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Cross, or you can buy a $35 toaster and we’ll make sure it gets delivered.”

For the Cajun Navy Relief foundation, technology stands front and center for their operations. When normal rescue reaches capacity after a storm, Gaudet said those in need are turning to Facebook to plead for help from the Cajun Navy.

Facebook groups like the Cajun Navy Relief and walkie-talkie apps like Zello allow for an instantaneous response from Cajun Navy dispatchers who send out their “boots” to save lives, even as the muddy tide of debris rolls in.

“I stood there on Airline Highway trying to console this frightened little girl,” Garlington said. “Telling her she was safe now and that she was going to be alright. After a few minutes her crying lessened but her grip didn’t.”

Garlington said by that time, he was about to cry himself.

“This little girl did not know me, had never seen me before, but I think she felt that as long as she was in my arms she was safe.” Garlington continued.

As countless tales of heroism emerge from each new disaster, the Cajun Navy remains focused on helping. Gaudet said it’s just part of the Cajun way to aid their neighbors as well as inspiring a nation with a little more than good ol’ Cajun boys in their boats.

“Just to see their gratefulness and know that we put them on high, dry ground,” Gaudet said. “I mean that’s just an awesome feeling.”

Garlington said later that night as he laid in his cot, he could still feel her grip on his neck and her tears on his shoulder, adding how he wondered how she was and if she was still scared.

“I lost everything yesterday, but as I drifted to sleep I wasn’t thinking of any of it,” Garlington said. “I was thinking of that little girl.”