Film crews re-enacting rescue at Atchafalaya

HENDERSON (AP) - Dark gray clouds hung over the Atchafalaya Basin, spitting intermittent rain on the Interstate 10 overpass, film crew and stunt car drivers.

During a break in the rain, two cars and a tractor-trailer careened toward the cameras. Only feet in front of the ground camera, stunt drivers jerked their steering wheels; all three vehicles spun on the wet pavement.

The big rig stopped sideways across two lanes, close to the film crew. Explosives were planted on its windshield, and stunt men catapulted into the Atchafalaya, more or less as a trucker did on Aug. 11, 1988.

The crew in south Louisiana last week was re-enacting the dramatic accident and rescue for a fall episode of the CBS television series "Rescue 911" hosted by William Shatner.

Texas A&M students Bill Kessler, 26, and Fred Lalumandier, who were given the Andrew Carnegie Award for heroism for leaping into the Atchafalaya to rescue trucker Robert Fordham, were brought to Henderson for the re-creation.

So were fisherman Mark Green, who helped paramedics get Fordham into his boat, two boys who had been fishing with Green, paramedics from Air Med and Acadian Ambulance Service and friends who had been with Kessler and Lalumandier.

They were interviewed for background, allowed to watch the filming and played themselves in some of the less dangerous scenes.

"Local support was so nice. We couldn't do it without them," said Elizabeth Moffly, field coordinator for the show. "The Air Med, Louisiana State Police, all the players, all the real people, just everybody was fantastic.

This was one of the nicest places to go to work."

Bryan Viator, a paramedic who was in the second ambulance to show up at the accident, described how the trucker slowed down to try to avoid a two-car wreck, but was unable to maneuver around the cars. Fordham hit his brakes, jackknifed and hit the guardrail on the left side of the overpass, pinning a blue pickup on the right side and a green Chevy Blazer on the other.

Kessler picked up the story from there.

"We were behind the 18-wheeler in a Winnebago. When we stopped, I ran over to the railing and saw the driver bobbing in the water," he said.

Lalumandier, who was a passenger in a rental truck, was about to jump in alone. Kessler told him it would take both of them to get the driver to the bank.

They took off their shoes and jumped in. Fordham complained of an injured back, so they kept him afloat until Air Med paramedic Chuck Thompson came over the side of the overpass with a scoop stretcher.

After they got Fordham into Green's boat, they took him to the end of the bridge, where a helicopter was waiting. Lalumandier and Kessler stayed with Green's young son and nephew.

Keith Simon of Acadian Ambulance said that during the filming, the younger boy told Green he'd wait while Green rode in the boat, but didn't want to be left behind again in the swamp.

The film crew and director had impressive credentials, but didn't really want to take the spotlight from the rescuers. Some viewers may recognize the stunt-driving style as similar to that of the old "Dukes of Hazzard" series, since John Sherrod was stunt coordinator.