

Thriving company rises from disaster

Hurricane Katrina offered new directions, greater success

By Heather Hudson

When the last violent wave propelled by an angry Hurricane Katrina washed over the devastated Louisiana shoreline, along with everyone else, Robert Baker surveyed the damage.

His company, Baker Pile Driving & Site Work, LLC, which specialized in marine work, had lost virtually all of their boats, including several barges. The rest of their equipment was badly beaten up. The price of oil instantly dropped, taking with it any hope of working on the oil fields that had comprised a large part of his business. If he was the kind of guy who was prone to despair, here was an ideal moment to let it take him down.

But he isn't and it didn't.

Before he knew it, he was fielding calls from all over looking for his crew's expertise on bridge repairs, salvaging hundreds of boats.

"After Katrina, there was a lot of salvage and repair work in the water and very little piling work because the

city had pretty much been destroyed and nobody was building houses... We still maintained the oil platforms, doing repair work, piping and supplying them with goods, but we worked in water for quite awhile," said Baker.

"We developed over a dozen welding procedures and went in with a team of 40 divers. We stayed there for 88 weeks and repaired about seven miles of cracks."

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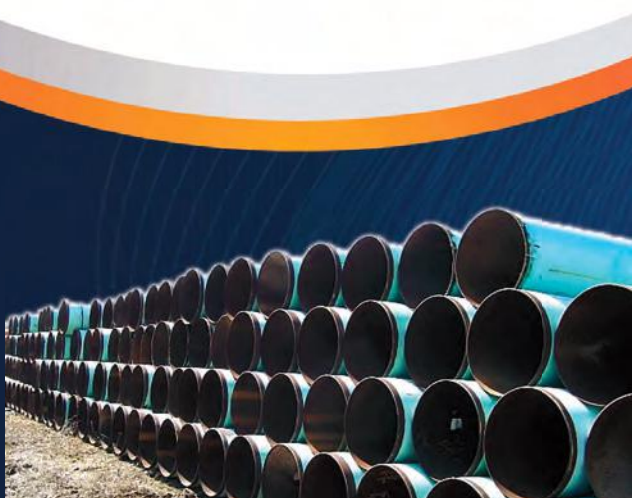
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Emergency work

Some of the biggest jobs Baker Piling has ever taken on were born out of the natural disaster. One was the repair of a water-based casino that occupied a crew for almost two years.

Before the hurricane hit, five barges in the water beneath the casino were suppressed with huge, computerized hydraulic jacks.

"They were supposed to be hurricane-proof, every time a wave would come in, 20 feet of water would come in on top of a barge. When it retracted, it carried the water that would normally float these barges, sucking it out dry. The barges and casino would fall to the floor of the beach and this beating continued for some 14 hours."

The damage included fragmented barges, which could not be removed for repair because they were holding up the superstructure.

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Another monumental job was replacing a span of one of the world's longest bridges. Katrina hadn't been kind to the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, which runs 24 miles completely over water from New Orleans to Mandeville, LA.

For weeks, Baker and his team planned the replacement of a 250-ton section. The conditions had to be just right, with a thick fog that would ensure the water was calm and flat and no wind.

When the ideal day presented itself, crews closed the causeway at midnight and under a thick fog a 30-person crew made the swap with two barges and a tugboat.

Though Baker considers these jobs among some of his company's signature work, they also heralded a turning point in his business.

"After two years of every day is a 911 situation, it made us rethink a little bit. Once those situations went away we had a nice pool of funds to go in any direction we wanted to go in. We wanted to minimize risk and exposure and step in to the void left by the medium-sized companies that got huge."

New beginnings

Making some shrewd business decisions, Baker backed his business away from high-risk marine work and got into the industrial pile driving side of things. Travelling to Finland, he bought two state-of-the-art Junttan machines. After training with mechanics in Russia, he and his crew brought them back where they instantly fit the industrial needs with their mobilization and versatility.

“We felt that this land division of pile driving would take our company and almost make us bulletproof. Today, we can do anything; we can go work an oil spill in Texas, we can drive pylons on the coast of Florida, build foundations for high rises in New Orleans... we’re versatile and extremely diverse with people who can do a lot of different things.”

Along with his own commitment to offering supreme efficiency and one-on-one attention to clients, Baker says the company’s success can also be found in his unique approach to staffing.

After working in the oil field for many years, Baker was impressed with the tremendous work ethic that can be found among the professionals there. He brought many of them with him to land work.

“We’re probably the only company that has a goal of working seven days/week, 12 hours a day. Most of our crews come from the oil fields where they’re used to working 84 hours a week in tough conditions. They thrive on challenge and can do any number of jobs,” says Baker.

“This sets us apart in a lot of ways. Our truck drivers might also operate the crane on a job or the pile buck might be a trained mechanic and welder. This helps us cut costs by not having to bring in additional people for different jobs.”

Though at one time Baker had ambitions of building an empire, today he’s proud of his incredibly streamlined company that offers money-saving value engineering and a personal touch.

“We don’t want to get much bigger because we might lose our biggest strength: our ability to take on a job instantly and with little set-up time. Everything about the company is diverse and versatile and that’s the way I’d like it to stay.” ▼

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ROBERT BAKER



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