

Tampa Bay Crews Return From Storm-Ravaged Coast

TAMPA — Fresh from finding and treating Hurricane Ivan victims from barrier islands near Pensacola, about 60 Tampa Bay area search-and-rescue specialists returned home Monday, with stories of devastation that dwarfs the destruction caused by hurricanes Charley or Frances.

Clint Roberts, rescue manager of the Task Force 3, made up of firefighters and paramedics from fire rescue services in St. Petersburg, Tampa and Hillsborough County, said the contingent was one of 10 such rescue teams from throughout the nation sent to the Florida Panhandle.

The local team, which includes four rescue dogs and six structural engineers, was sent two days before Ivan struck land, he said.

Once in Pensacola, the Tampa Bay team was ordered to search the barrier islands for victims. Many of the bridges to those islands also were damaged or destroyed, he said.

"The Coast Guard dropped us off by helicopter, and we took boats to get to the barrier islands," he said. Million-dollar homes stood on many of the islands, he said.

"The storm surge came in and literally washed these houses away," he said. "I'm talking about big, huge concrete houses."

Keith Morelli