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Honolulu District Personnel Supply Experience, Manpower to Hurricane Relief Efforts

By Sarah H. Cox, Honolulu Engineer District Public Affairs

(HONOLULU – October 27, 2005 NR-26-05) Days before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Emergency Operation Centers (EOC) around the globe were preparing for 24-hour operations. The Honolulu Engineer District / Pacific Ocean Division EOCs began making preparations for deploying response teams to provide assistance when called upon by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Honolulu District's EOC serves as a command center for local, regional and national emergencies, coordinating taskers, alerting, preparing and deploying response teams, putting plans in place and preparing daily situation reports. The EOC is managed by the Emergency Manager for the District Commander who oversees the District's overall emergency response.

"As a storm develops, we monitor it closely via various weather internet sites," said Honolulu Engineer District Emergency Operations Planner Lincoln Gayagas. "In the Pacific, we are the responding organization for storms like Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; we are a support organization - providing volunteers and expertise as needed in support of FEMA."

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2-2-2 HED RESPONSE

The first HED volunteers, a Power Planning and Response Team (PRT), left Honolulu on their "pre-declaration mission" two days before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. It's not uncommon for specialized teams to be deployed before the President declares a state of emergency.

The eight-member team, made of specialists for contracting, liaisons, mission management, data management, logistics and quality assurance, arrived in Mississippi on August 26 to await the costliest Atlantic Ocean hurricane in U.S. history.

The HED Power PRT joined with members of Vicksburg District, Soldiers from the 249th Engineering Battalion (Prime Power), the Power PRT from Pittsburgh District, USACE contractors, and local and state civil defense officials to provide emergency generator power to critical facilities such as hospitals, police stations, water pumping stations, water treatment centers, and civil defense and emergency operation centers.

"We set up our staging area at Camp Shelby (Mississippi)," said HED Motor Vehicle Operator Kenneth (Kennji) Santiago.

"We'd inspect the sites where the generators were needed and match up the request with the FEMA inventory of generators. The contractors would 'haul and install' the units and our quality assurance folks make sure the generators were working properly."

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina roared across the U.S. Gulf Coast leaving behind \$200 billion in damages, five million homes without power, thousands of homeless families and more than 1,280 dead.

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3-3-3 HED RESPONSE

The Camp Shelby generator yard utilized an inventory of 187 generators ranging in size from 11.5 KW to 600 KW. Local civil defense officials determined which critical facilities would receive the generators. The Corps had completed 468 generator assessments just days after the storm

Santiago, who has deployed on numerous FEMA support missions in various capacities, feels volunteering for disaster deployment is one of the most rewarding parts of his job.

"It's an honor to know we can help somehow, in some way, to get people back to their everyday lives," Santiago said.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi and Louisiana coastlines, HED deployed a three-person Logistics PRT and a six-person Roofing Quality Assurance team to work the FEMA temporary roofing mission out of USACE's Louisiana Recovery Field Office (LA RFO) in Baton Rouge.

The roofing team supported FEMA's Operation Blue Roof Program by assessing the damage, providing temporary plastic sheeting and conducting final inspections of the blue roofs installed for homes with roof damage. The program allows victims to return to their homes, business and normal lives quickly and greatly reduces the need for expensive temporary housing. So far, the Corps has received approximately 106,000 Right of Entries (ROE) request forms, which gives roofing teams permission to enter private property and install the blue roof plastic sheeting. Before the mission is complete, FEMA officials estimate the Corps will provide more than 132,000 blue roofs throughout the State of Louisiana alone.

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4-4-4 HED RESPONSE

Members working with the Operation Blue Roof teams had direct contact with Katrina's victims.

"The people really appreciate what we're doing, they have hope now," said HED Project Manager Jon Hosaka, one member of the Operation Blue Roof QA team.

Although not on the front lines of the disaster, the HED Logistics PRT members were working behind the scenes - seven days a week in 12-hour shifts providing support, tools and supplies to those working in the field. This team also in-processes incoming USACE personnel and performs a myriad of behind-the-scenes duties critical to the recovery efforts.

"Anything that helps these people get their lives back is a help," said Lauren Vizcarra, an HED engineering technician and a member of the Logistics PRT.

HED PRTs found that working under austere conditions requires a bit of determination. The lack of electricity and motel rooms forced some of the first volunteers to sleep in their rental cars. A few days after the storm, FEMA set up a tent city to house the thousands of relief workers who converged on the Gulf area. Some Corps responders utilized sleeping quarters aboard the Corps' Quarterboat moored on the Mississippi River. The self-sufficient barge generates its own electricity and has its own cafeteria. Many of the POH responders traveled two to three hours each way between their lodging on the quarterboat to their work sites in remote parishes in northern Louisiana.

Gayagas said relief and recovery challenges for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita continue with the missions ever-changing. Volunteers are still needed and welcomed.

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5-5-5 HED RESPONSE

"As the recovery efforts progress, so do our requirements," said Gayagas. "In the beginning we were working on water and power and now we are concentrating efforts on roofing and debris removal."

Gayagas added that there is still plenty of work to do. "Basically anyone who wants to help in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, we can get them a job."

According to HED Emergency Operations Planner Katie Tamashiro, what makes the FEMA missions successful is having the right people. "Having people who truly want to make a difference, people who have the right mind set is necessary to every mission."

Tamashiro and HED EM Chief, Joel Hendrix deployed to Louisiana, each as a member of FEMA Strike Team for St. Bernard Parish and for Washington Parish, respectively. Both were assigned as the USACE Liaison to manage, monitor, and provide support to all mission assignments from FEMA in their Parishes, i.e. emergency power, temporary roofing, temporary housing, debris management, technical assistance, as well as disaster-related missions under the Corps' authorities.

With such high visibility in the remote parish communities, Tamashiro said she briefed the Parish President, State Senator, City Mayors and community leaders several times a week on the USACE missions, including the progress of the popular and highly successful BLUE ROOF Program and the number of installations to date. She was referred to as "The Blue Roof Lady" in the remote Cities of Bogalusa, Franklinton, Angie, and Varnado, Louisiana.

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6-6-6 HED RESPONSE

Along with about 30 other federal agencies, USACE carries out the National Response Plan (NRP), which provides the framework for managing massive relief and recovery operations. Within the NRP, the Department of Defense has designated USACE as the primary agency under Emergency Support Function #3 (ESF #3), Public Works and Engineering.

"The purpose of ESF #3 is to provide lifesaving or life protecting assistance to affected state and local efforts after a disaster," Gayagas said. "The function allows us to provide water, ice and emergency power in the initial stages of disaster." ESF #3 also includes other missions such as temporary roofing, temporary housing, technical assistance, structural safety and debris management and debris removal.

As populations continue to shift to coastal regions, the Corps' support to FEMA will continue to grow and developing employees with a deployable, mission-oriented mind set will become even more important in the future.

"We need to continue developing our collective 'expeditionary mindset.' Our missions are different from those working at an Architect and Engineering firm in downtown Honolulu. The professional community needs to know that we aren't engineers who just sit in cubicles all day," Gayagas said.

"With an impending hurricane we usually have plenty of advance notice and at 96 to 120 hours out, things really begin to happen," said Gayagas. "That's when we stand up our EOC and begin alerting our people. (USACE) Headquarters creates the event in (the computer web-based) ENGLink."

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7-7-7 HED RESPONSE

ENGLink, sometimes referred to as "Disaster Tracker", is a USACE interactive web-based program used for tracking real-time information for civil and military emergency events. It is a useful tool, providing District leaders a current overview of all the Corps' activities surrounding an emergency event.

"As there are just four of us in the HED EM office, the manpower required to execute these missions comes from other HED office branches such as Resource Management, Contracting, Logistics, Project Management, and Engineering and Construction," Gayagas said.

The Corps maintains more than 40 PRTs at its districts around the world - ready to respond to disasters. As of October 26, HED had sent 25 employees to the Gulf region and more are ready to deploy.

With response teams needed after Hurricane Wilma raced through south-central Florida, the Corps' support to the FEMA mission continues in three main ways: monitoring the storm, preparing to respond quickly and coordinating a team effort with other response agencies.

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