

What parascuemen and combat controllers did during the nation's worst domestic crisis

By David P. Anderson
National Guard Bureau

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Air National Guard rescue and special tactics units employed the skills they would use on the battlefield to rescue residents of New Orleans stranded by floodwaters. These pararescuemen and combat controllers were part of the largest military response to a domestic crisis in U.S. history.

As many as 45 Air Guard pararescuemen and combat controllers from Kentucky's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron, Oregon's 125th Special Tactics Squadron, New York's 106th Rescue Wing, California's 129th Rescue Wing and Alaska's 210th Rescue Squadron traveled to Naval Air Station New Orleans to conduct ground rescue operations. Along with their highly-specialized skills and talents, they brought rubber Zodiac boats, radio equipment and medical supplies.

The Air Guard's participation in the Katrina rescue effort resulted in 1,282 victims rescued on the ground by Air Guard pararescuemen and an additional 161 by Air Guard rescue helicopters. Air Guard combat controllers evacuated 11,927 people and controlled 3,249 helicopter sorties.

The 123rd STS was the first unit to arrive Aug. 31, setting up an ad hoc command post in an abandoned hangar. There were no rescue operations underway and no coordination between civilian and military agencies for search and rescue efforts. This absence placed the burden of a comprehensive rescue plan on the members of the 123rd. With a map of the city, they went to work.

While searching the flooded neighborhoods for victims, each of 14 rescue boat teams cautiously navigated the flooded streets, carefully avoiding hidden hazards such as submerged street signs. Air Guard crews soon earned residents' trust by treating minor injuries and distributing food and water. As the boat teams patrolled, they used loudspeakers to tell stranded residents that they were Air Force rescue personnel, often having to convince the residents to evacuate. One victim accidentally fell out of a rescue boat into the sewage-contaminated waters. Combat controller Senior Master Sgt. Thomas DeSchane immediately jumped in after her, rescuing her again.

Crews worked 14-hour days in hazardous conditions. For over a week, these pararescuemen waded through contaminated water to reach stranded victims. Because of their near-constant contact with the water, several of them developed skin rashes and respiratory rashes, or received fuel burns. None of them suffered long-term health problems.

Take a number

Air Guard combat controllers from the 123rd and the 125th STSs played crucial roles in the rescue effort. Being certified by the Federal Aviation Administration, they directed helicopters working with the Zodiac crews to the few highway overpasses and

cloverleaves that were not underwater and which served as makeshift helicopter landing sites. To make these landing zones safe, the combat controllers sawed down light and telephone poles so the helicopter rotor blades would not hit them.

In order to communicate with arriving helicopters, combat controllers spray painted their radio frequency in bold numbers on the landing zone. They also managed the crowds of victims awaiting evacuation. The sheer numbers and limited space for people to wait forced the controllers to devise an evacuation process similar to that used by restaurants. When a family checked in, a

combat controller wrote down their names and the number in their party. Evacuees were then directed to sit away from the landing zone and wait for their number to be called.

During the first three days, combat controllers landed helicopters every 50 seconds. According to Chief Master Sgt. Jonathan Rosa of the 123rd STS, the landing zones "became the busiest airports on the face of the earth" and controllers "received three helicopters a minute for five hours straight, averaging 10 survivors per helicopter."

Rescued from above

In Jackson, Miss., rescue crews from the



Air National Guard History Office photo

Combat controllers work at a makeshift landing zone evacuating victims of Katrina.

GUARD FACTS

The National Guard's response to Hurricane Katrina:

- 50,000-plus Citizen-Soldiers and -Airmen deployed to stricken area
- 17,000-plus people rescued
- 70,000-plus people evacuated
- More than three times the number of Guardmembers deployed to any previous natural disaster
- More than three times the number of troops on the ground as all other services combined
- The largest and fastest disaster response in the Guard's history

106th RW and two of the wing's HH-60G helicopters went to work. Crews from the 106th did not have difficulty finding people needing rescue. Often, crews spotted stranded residents waving at the helicopter from rooftops. Other times, pararescuemen were lowered to rooftops by cable from a hovering helicopter. They then searched homes for victims through holes cut in the roof.

New York HH-60 pilot Maj. Kevin Fennel recalled bringing his helicopter in for a final approach to pick up one group when he noticed another group waving to be rescued. His crew loaded the first group, flew it to a transfer site and quickly returned to pick up the second group. This operations tempo continued for days, Fennel said.

Each rescue with a cable and winch required a pararescuemen to accompany each victim up to the helicopter. The pararescuemen made sure the evacuees did not slip out of the sling or injure themselves while entering the cabin. Once the victims were safely strapped in, the pararescuemen immediately provided first aid. Many of the survivors pulled in were drenched in a watery slime and clutching their only remaining possessions. Others were distraught at the thought of leaving behind family pets. Unwilling to increase the victims' trauma, pararescuemen often found room for the furry companions.

A number of residents were reluctant to leave their homes because of the fear of looters. Other residents refused rescue because their fear of flying was stronger than their fear of drowning. To the Air Guardsmen, it seemed that the hardships experienced by the residents of New Orleans culminated when they were rescued by helicopter and got their first glimpse of Katrina's destruction. While flying high above their flooded homes, their faces expressed shock at seeing the extent of the devastation.

This month in Guard history

April 7, 1712: HANCOCK'S FORT, N.C. — South Carolina's Col. John Barnwell, commanding a combined white militia and friendly Indian force numbering about 300 men, again besieges this main encampment of the hostile Tuscarora Indians. The Tuscaroras had launched a surprise attack in September 1711, killing about 130 colonists and prompting North Carolina to ask Virginia and South Carolina for help. Barnwell's army was composed mostly of South Carolina militia.