

225th EN BDE fights three floods in 2016

by
1LT REBEKAH MALONE and Louisiana National Guard Public Affairs Office staff reports

IF YOU ASK the soldiers of the 225th EN BDE, Louisiana National Guard (LANG), what they did in 2016, the response would be: fight floods. Through the many missions, the engineers provided support to local, state, and federal officials as together they battled historic floods.

During the three floods in January, March, and August 2016, 56 of 64 parishes were declared federal disaster areas. The August flood alone cost at least \$8.7 billion in damage, not including public infrastructure damage. Rivers rose to record-breaking levels. The water rose so high, some of the gauges were washed away, leaving only estimates at the final level.

The August flood was flood number three in eight months, but was by far the worst. The Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness released staggered statistics on the flood.

More than 130,000 homes were damaged. Emergency Operation Centers, 9-1-1 centers, fire stations, police stations, prisons, nursing homes, places designated as shelters during emergen-

cies were all flooded. The state was hit hard with a "no-named" storm that dumped 7 trillion gallons of water in Baton Rouge and the south central part of the state in 48 hours; it takes the Mississippi River 18 days to discharge that amount of water into the Gulf of Mexico. In the small town of Amite, the fire chief also serves as the emergency response director. His home and that of all his firefighters was destroyed, along with every school in the city.

There were 30,000 official search and rescue missions in August; of that, 20,000 were conducted by the Louisiana National Guard. Many more unrecorded rescues were conducted by volunteers, neighbor-to-neighbor, and the Cajun Navy.

ENGINEER MISSIONS

Through the three floods, the Engineers completed more than 260 missions. Missions included more than 8,900 search and rescues by high-water vehicles, flat bottom, zodiac, and bridge erection boats; assisting with 210 super sack sling-load operations; serving as parish liaison officers; providing security at disaster supplemental nutrition assistance program and shelter locations; operating points of distribution (PODs); conducting

assessments of levees, bridges, and roads; serving as bus drivers; conducting commodities distribution; evacuating 500 people from a prison in Richland parish; constructing 14,000 linear feet of HESCO; and laying 2,600 linear feet of Tiger Dam and 1,400 linear feet of AquaDam that slowed the encroachment of water threatening Woman's Hospital.

In the January flood, Engineers worked in 18 separate locations to fill and lay down sandbags, erect and fill HESCO bastions, and construct land berms around the perimeter of the city of Krotz Springs.

"We're doing everything we can to fortify these levees to keep out any potential water and protect the community," said SSG James P. Crolley, wheeled-vehicle mechanic with A Co., 769th BDE EN BN.

"Some of the locations are a little difficult because there are large holes in the levee that have been washed away or dug out," said 1LT Aaron J. Ulery, platoon leader with A Co., 769th BEB, and OIC of the mission. "For those holes we have to lay large culverts in, put some aggregate, then the HESCO barrier on top, and then fill those with sand."

"It's a good thing that the National Guard comes in and does things like this.

It saves a lot of hardship," said Carroll B. Snyder, mayor of Krotz Springs. "Our townspeople are really grateful for their effort. They really do a great job and we're really proud of what they're doing for us."

On the gulf coast, 256th Infantry Brigade Combat Team and the 225th EN BDE worked with the Saint Mary Levee District, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the Port of Morgan City, and several local private businesses

Louisiana National Guardsmen convoy to a boat launch in order to conduct door-to-door Search and Rescue missions near Maurepas, La., Aug. 17, 2016. The Louisiana National Guard continues to conduct response efforts, recovery missions, and preposition vehicles and assets in potentially affected areas, as directed by Governor John Bel Edwards, since operations began on 12 August. U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD PHOTO BY 1SG PAUL C. MEEKER

The Louisiana National Guard continued to work around the clock, constructing HESCO barrier levees on Avoca Island, LA, on 11 January 2016. The project prevented backwater flooding from reaching Morgan City and other towns in south Louisiana due to high river levels. U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD PHOTO BY SPC JOSHUA BARNETT



to construct a levee of HESCO barriers 2.5 miles long on Avoca Island to protect Morgan City and the surrounding area from flooding.

"The terrain that we're having to work in right now is kind of mushy because the water and the tides have come up, and that is a challenge for us," said MAJ Jim Williams, task force commander of the south region. "But we are overcoming that challenge to get this project put in on time. The work we are doing will tie in to the local terrain to better protect residents."

Transporting the equipment and supplies across the Atchafalaya River from Amelia to the island required the heavy-duty Improved Ribbon Bridge system. The 2225th Multi-Role Bridge Company made countless trips using three bridge erection boats with five bay package.

"We couldn't get as much accomplished as quickly as we have without the National Guard," said Frank Grizzaffi, Morgan City mayor. "You watch these guys work around the clock—wherever they're needed, they show up."

During night operations, the military barge was escorted by local tugboat *Vicky Lynn*. The brighter lights on the tugboat made night operation safer.

Will Toups, a crewman on the *Vicky Lynn* and resident of Amelia, said that he is glad to see the Guard out on the island. "The teamwork and dedication the soldiers are showing building this levee is amazing," Toups said. "I'm really happy that there was a way we could help out."

Even though the conditions were challenging, everyone knew why the mission could not fail.

"The main mission is to get the levees built up, because right now with the water that we are expecting, if that levee is not built up, Morgan City and four or five other parishes can experience flooding all the way up to Iberville and all the way to Baton Rouge on the backwater side," said Mac Wade, executive director of the Port of Morgan City.

Engineers worked alongside USACE and the 5th Levee District to conduct 24-hour levee patrols in the parishes of Concordia, East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas to inspect for any issues caused by the winter river flooding.

"We have the National Guard out here with us to assist with monitoring the territory on the levees since there is so much ground to cover," said Steven Evans, a construction controller with USACE.

Approximately 200 miles of levees were monitored around the clock for leaks, sand boils, and seepage. Sand boils are caused by a difference in pressure on the two sides of the levee. These can cause erosion in the levee by creating a pipe through the levee where sand and soil moves through it with the water.

SGT Aerial Fredricks, of Monroe, a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear specialist with HHC, 528th EN BN, 225th EN BDE, said the state active-duty deployment was eye-opening for younger soldiers experiencing their first activation.

"The younger soldiers are getting to see and understand exactly why the Louisiana Guard is here. They get to see it's about the community and protecting the people, letting them know that we are here for them," said Fredricks.

In March, engineers from the 1022nd EN Co. in Monroe and the 844th EN Co. out of West Monroe assembled emergency levee walls on the banks of the Ouachita River in Monroe, to protect the city from rising river levels.

These citizen-soldiers worked in conjunction with the Tensas Levee Basin District to transform half a mile of hinged concrete slabs, which are usually the sidewalk alongside the river, into a six-foot tall levee.

"This levee is a modular system which can be put up and put down in a day or two," said 1LT Sean Place of West Monroe.

The 225th's BEBs were heavy hitters during the flood for search and rescue operations.

One particular mission involved rescuing a 90-year-old resident who had refused help earlier until he began to medically suffer after his electricity was shut down. The boats on hand just didn't have the power to cross the strong currents to get to him, so engineers dispatched two BEBs to accomplish the mission.

COL Rodney Painting, then commander of the 225th EN BDE, explained that the BEBs were sturdier and more powerful with greater capacity, making them essential when strong waters make more typical rescue watercraft impractical.

SGT Jason C. Carroll, electronic warfare specialist with the Louisiana National Guard's 528th EN BN, 225th EN BDE, carries a young resident through flooded streets in Monroe, LA, on 10 March 2016. The 528th used high-water vehicles, in cooperation with the Ouachita Parish Sheriff's Office, to navigate high waters to assist evacuating residents. U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD PHOTO BY SPC TARELL J. BILBO

"It brings me back to when Hurricane Katrina passed in 2005, and I saw the National Guard around all the neighborhoods. That's what persuaded me to join," said SGT Bryan Campo of the 2225th Multi-Role Bridge Company. "I signed up to protect my state and country, and it's rewarding to see the impact and the sense of hope we give the community."

Campo said that at one point his unit was spread out in three cities: Livingston, Ponchatoula, and Independence. Their main mission was to use their powerful bridge-erection boats to navigate floodwaters too deep for high-water vehicles to get through and where the currents were too strong for other boats. "This is one of my proudest moments," he said.

Rescues were not always easy. SGT PJ Freeman and SGT Jared LeBlanc, both with the 922nd EN Co., 769th BSB, were returning to their boat launch site near Highway 16 when they saw the citizens struggling in the strong currents near a low-elevation bridge.

"We really didn't have many options at the time.



The guy was holding onto a tree in a strong current, and our only mission at that point was to get him out of there," said Freeman. "I jumped in the water and got sucked in by the current instantly and had to grab onto a tree [branch] to prevent myself from going under the bridge. I then grabbed another tree close to the citizen and grabbed his arm as SGT Leblanc grabbed his other arm and pulled him to safety."

The four local residents had been trying to return to their residence to check on their property when the current flipped their boat.

"The current was moving extremely fast, and the situation could have turned from bad to worst in a matter of seconds," said Freeman.

Throughout the August flood, LANG had more

than 3,820 Air and Army Guardsmen assisting with emergency flood operations and have rescued more than 20,000 citizens and 2,660 pets. The LANG has also issued more than 78,945 MREs, 465 tarps, 439,515 bottles of water, and 961,500 sandbags. The Guard also issued more than 2,200 cots and 1,700 blankets for shelter support.

Over the course of these operations, Louisiana Guardsmen supported local, state, and federal agencies with more than 280 high-water vehicles, 55 boats, 11 bridge-erection boats, and 9 helicopters.

TRAINING AND LESSONS LEARNED

Every spring, the LANG makes training for emergency response a priority by participating in the Gov-

ernor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness Disaster Response Exercise.

A scenario is developed that involves a hurricane hitting the Gulf Coast of Louisiana. Local, state, and federal partners all participate in the exercise to test the systems in place and identify needs. It also is a time for agencies to work together and learn each other's capabilities because the ability to integrate with partners during a response is critical.

This year, Louisiana's annual exercise was replaced on 11–16 April with Vigilant Guard, a federally funded exercise to prepare for all-hazards response and emergency operations.

"Vigilant Guard 2016 has been about stressing our systems and processes so that we can identify

any gaps, analyze them, and improve our response capabilities," said MG Glenn H. Curtis, adjutant general of the LANG. "We want to make sure that we are as prepared as we can possibly be, that we have thought of as many potential obstacles as possible and worked through them now when lives aren't on the line."

COL Cindy Haygood was named the commander of the 225th EN BDE in June. She knew from lessons learned during emergency responses that it was important to anticipate the needs of the communities.

"Based on the weather report, it looked like we were going to have another repeat of the March flood. We knew that area (Tangipahoa parish) was definitely going to be impacted," said Haygood.



Louisiana Army National Guardsmen SGT PJ Freeman of French Settlement, LA, and SGT Jared LeBlanc, of Baton Rouge, both with the 922nd EN Co., 769th BDE EN BN, work together to rescue one of four citizens (all rescued) whose boat had capsized in fast-moving floodwaters in the French Settlement area. Freeman and LeBlanc were performing search and rescue duties when they spotted the victims near Highway 16 on 17 August 2016. U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD PHOTO BY SPC MIGUEL TOEFIELD, 922ND EN CO.



"So we immediately went there because I wanted to assess what their needs were because we had already received the first mission for high-water boats and boat assets. I wanted to see what else they think they will need so we can anticipate their needs and make sure we support them and we are reacting in a timely manner," she said.

"In August drill, we conducted the All-Hazards Confirmation Brief. The alert rosters were 100 percent up to date, JMD (Joint Manning Document), all of our equipment statuses, communication status. We went through every pre-scripted mission, commodities distribution ... so I wanted to make sure, because we had a new battalion commander that everyone understood his or her role."

LTC Greg St. Romain had also just been named the administrative and executive officer for the

225th when the August flood hit but said for the engineers, staying trained and in contact with local, state, and federal partners is a process that is ongoing through the year.

"We actually brief on command meeting days who is trained as bus driver familiarization, LNO [parish liaison officer], to coordinating with Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Departments to conduct interoperability training with our flat-bottom boats and BEBs annually.

"Throughout the year, the engineer brigade coordinates with all the partners that we are land owners of," said St. Romain. "We know who the mayors are; we aren't strangers. Our LNOs contact those emergency directors regularly."

St. Romain said understanding the risks from driving high-water vehicles through swift currents during floods also has led to changes.

"We've identified high-

water vehicles, the level of water they can go in as far as maintenance is concerned," he said. "We've identified we require life jackets in those high-water vehicles with ropes they can tie off with. The depth of water with BEBs is critical. We can't put them in shallow waters. You are doing nothing but damaging them."

Training engineers to conduct sling-load operations has become an important mission in Louisiana, which requires coordination with aviation counterparts.

"We're to house all the bags, all the slings. We're the lead on this for the state of Louisiana," St. Romain said. "We're the first ones on the ground to conduct assessments of these levees or any breach that will require super sacks or sling-load operations. At that point, it's just easier for us to conduct the entire mission from the assessment to the sling-load operation because we're

Soldiers with the Louisiana National Guard's 225th EN BDE go door-to-door near Tickfaw, LA, evacuating stranded citizens in Tangipahoa parish on 13 August 2016. COURTESY PHOTO BY U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

the eyes on the ground for aviation."

"We're force multipliers. We can do so many things for communities," said St. Romain.

2016 may have been a busy year for the Engineers, but COL Haygood said the one thing that stuck out to her is how professionally her soldiers responded while still showing kindness.

"Our display of humanity and professionalism and our care for the citizens was impressive," said Haygood. "Every single day, morale was high with our soldiers. They had this sense of pride because they were helping rescue citizens ... They felt like they were doing something and making a difference." 