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Governor Edwards to Louisiana Guard: Exhaust all efforts

12 HOURS TO SAVE WOMAN'S HOSPITAL

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IN THE MIDST OF AN HISTORIC flood in Baton Rouge and south central Louisiana, the Louisiana National Guard (LANG) received a mission on 14 August 2016 from Governor John Bel Edwards: Save Woman's Hospital.

More babies are delivered at Woman's Hospital in Baton Rouge than any other hospital in the state, topping 8,700 a year. During the flood, 63 babies were in the neonatal and infant intensive care unit, making evacuation a last-resort option.

As the rain continued to pour down, Kurt M. Scott, vice president of ancillary services at Woman's, and the hospital staff watched as the rising waters of the 18-acre detention pond surrounding the building became a serious threat.

The state hydrologist's estimate, along with the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, confirmed the hospital's fear. "Potential worst-case, we were going to get two to three feet of water in the building if we didn't do something, based on the flood rate at the time," said Scott.

The call was made. With only 12 hours until the hospital would begin taking on water, the Louisiana Guard and its 225th EN BDE began preparations.

LTC Jason Mahfouz, deputy construction facilities management officer for the LANG, explained that Edwards' intent for this mission was clear.

"He wanted to exhaust all efforts to mitigate the flooding at that facility just because of the human cost involved in moving critical-care infants and women," said Mahfouz. "That was the type of urgency he imparted to us. We had to make it happen."

Mahfouz said that, by design, a

detention pond was built on lower ground at the hospital complex to hold water as it slowly drained off site as a flood control measure. Unfortunately, the severe flooding and excessive rainfall would not allow the system to keep up. Backwater flooding of the bayou was forcing the Amite River to flow backward, pushing more water into the pond, aggravating the problem.

"The river was pushing back into the bayou and the bayou was pushing back into the detention lake. At the rate it was coming up, when the engineers got the mission, they had about 12 hours to get the Aqua Dam in place to keep the hospital from taking on water," Mahfouz said.

An immediate request for 1,500 feet of Aqua Dam between the Department of Transportation and Development, and Gulf Coast AquaDams of Abbeville was approved for Woman's, with an additional 1,600 feet to be placed alongside Airline Highway to keep it open.

The plan was to use the Aqua Dam to prevent the encroachment of the water from the detention pond, allowing the engineers to use pumps to force the water out of the low-lying areas at the facility back into the pond.

The distributor of the product, Gulf Coast AquaDams, said the product has two inner tubes that are filled with water to inflate the AquaDam. The outer tube confines the water-inflated inner tubes and prevents them from moving away from each other. Counter friction/hydraulic pressure between the inner tube and the outer tube, along with the mass and weight of the water, creates pressure and stabilizes the dam, even when lateral water pressure is exerted against it. Because of its flexibility, the product makes a seal that keeps water seepage to a minimum.

"It's a unique application of a product; I would say it's an innovative resource. You are essentially using water to stop water," said Mahfouz. "To say

that they stopped the water is a misnomer because water does find a way, but they slowed the encroachment of the water to a point that pumps could keep up with it and keep the facility from flooding."

The engineer officer in charge of the project, MAJ Tony Dorsa, said he was incredibly proud of his engineers.

"I'm proud of this project because the soldiers were unfamiliar with the product. It wasn't the normal Tiger Dam we were expecting; it was the larger Aqua Dam."

Dorsa said the engineers got started immediately laying out the first 500-foot section once the soldiers and product were on site, starting with the most threatened area.

With an initial crew of 16 soldiers, work began.

"[The] initial crew had very little rest over the last 48-hour period. We had additional troops on the way, so once those troops made it on site, we were able to send the initial 16 into a rest cycle. The unit itself, the 527th, did a very good job of managing their work/rest cycles. They had three shifts so soldiers were getting the rest they needed, and the mission continued," said Dorsa.

"We pushed all through the night; we laid out all the pieces and the filling began. That 500-foot section took about four hours, then we went in the other direction 900 feet for a total of 1,400."

"I think the soldiers did a wonderful job," said Dorsa. "The conditions were pretty rough at first ... once they got the flow going, they knocked it out. [They] did their jobs, and we got the mission completed."

LTC Greg St. Romain, administrative and executive officer for the 225th EN BDE, said without having worked with this type of product on a very large and complex mission, the engineers stepped up and refused to fail.

"First and foremost, it's identify-

ing the right type of leaders to go out there. That to me is critical," said St. Romain. "We sent MAJ Tony Dorsa out there and he was able to simplify that [project] for us and did an incredible job. As you look at the type of missions we get, that's a perfect example. [Losing] Women's Hospital could have been devastating for Baton Rouge. We took the mission on and said, 'We got it,' with equipment and material we weren't familiar with because we don't get to train on that stuff. That tells you the quality of people we have.

"Maybe it's a challenge for the soldiers in the Louisiana National Guard, but we're not going to fail," St. Romain continued. "Maybe that's just what our thought process is. We've been hit with so many emergencies, we are willing to step out and expose ourselves and do whatever it takes to save our community." 

