



NEWS | Aug. 29, 2013

# Hurricane Katrina, eight years later: Former Guard chief reflects on the Guard's "finest hour"

By Tech Sgt. John Orrell National Guard Bureau

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ARLINGTON, Va. - Aug. 29 marks the eight-year anniversary of what has been described by the former chief of the National Guard Bureau who oversaw the Guard's response to the disaster as the "finest hour" in the National Guard's near 400-year history.

"By any measure, it was the fastest, most massive military response to any natural disaster that has ever happened," said retired Army Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum. "Our response was the epitome of what the National Guard is and why it is a national treasure."

Hurricane Katrina, a category 5 on the Saffir/Simpson Hurricane Scale, caused an estimated \$81 billion worth of damage, took more than 1,800 lives and forced nearly 1.2 million Gulf Coast residents to evacuate.

However, the preparation and actions of the more than 50,000 National Guardmembers who responded to the disaster made the difference in lives saved and lives lost, said Blum.

"It all converged. It all came together, so that when we were needed, we were there," he said.

On the morning of Aug. 25, 2005, Katrina was upgraded from a tropical storm to a category 1 hurricane. It first struck land between Hallandale Beach and Aventura, Fla., causing then Gov. Jeb Bush to declare a state of emergency.

It also allowed Air Force Maj. Gen. Douglas Burnett, the adjutant general of the Florida National Guard, to activate 800 personnel, including 75 who prepared high-clearance vehicles for flooding in the southern part of the state.

When it struck Florida, the storm weakened, but it also entered the Gulf of Mexico and regained strength. With wind speeds of about 95-100 miles per hour, it was quickly upgraded to a category 2.

The storm's impact area was also growing, which caused Florida to call up about 130 more National Guard troops.

At the same time, then Gov. Kathleen Blanco of Louisiana and Gov. Haley Barbour of Mississippi declared a state of emergency.

With plans changing, Guard officials were forced to look at all their options. Mississippi turned to a disaster response plan set up after Hurricane Camille in 1969 and decided to preposition 3,000 Guardmembers at Camp Shelby in the south and Camp McCain in the northern part of the state.

"We sheltered people in place where we thought they would be safe to survive the hurricane," Blum said. "Then they and their equipment would be able to immediately respond to the after effects of the hurricane."

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As Mississippi was preparing for Katrina to hit, the Louisiana Guard was planning for Katrina's arrival. About 3,000 Soldiers and Airmen were positioned throughout New Orleans and the southern parishes. They also moved fuel tankers to Hammond Airport northwest of New Orleans.

By Aug. 29, 2005, Katrina was a category 5 hurricane with winds reaching more than 170 mph. Mississippi took the brunt of the storm. The damage was catastrophic with a zone of destruction stretching almost 90 miles long and 20 miles wide.

"The devastation of this hurricane was far greater than anyone expected," said Blum. "The entire electrical grid was gone. The Internet was down, the telephones were down, no cell phones, radio and television ceased to exist."

It took Mississippi Guardmembers about six hours to drive 60 miles to the devastated area.

"Everything was a slab," Army Maj. Scott Lippiat said after the storm. "The only thing you saw on the coastline of (interstate) 90 were slabs and steps. I have been to combat, I've seen stuff in Iraq, but this was totally different from what you experience because of the total destruction."

The adjutants general of the Mississippi and Louisiana National Guard, now retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Harold A. Cross and Army Maj. Gen. Bennett C. Landreneau, respectively, contacted Blum and initiated the first round of Emergency Management Assistance Compacts (EMACs) with Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, Florida.

"We put out a call for help, once we saw the magnitude of the destruction," Cross told interviewers at the time.

It was becoming evident to both adjutants general and Blum that more personnel would be needed to assist with the relief effort.

Within 96 hours of Katrina's destruction, an additional 30,000 troops were sent to New Orleans. They assisted in search and rescue, medical treatment, evacuation and security.

With every passing minute the situation became worse, and Blum said he knew he couldn't wait for higher command, so he moved forward. "We didn't ask for permission, we didn't wait for orders," he said.

Water levels in the city continued to rise and would not stop until four days later.

"The flood control walls started failing, and the city of New Orleans basically filled up and flooded," said Blum. "It was not the hurricane it was the aftermath of the standing water in Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River that over ran the

flood control walls."  
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High flood waters disabled the Louisiana Guard's joint operations center, based at Jackson Barracks in New Orleans.

"When it actually came through ... we were watching the water come up," said Army Capt. Lydia Jensen, a Louisiana Guardmember, who was working in the operations center on that day. "We had lost all power. We lost all communication ... so we were just waiting for it to end so we could evacuate."

After the storm, thousands of New Orleans residents, who decided to ride out the storm, made their way through flooded neighborhoods to the Superdome, where about 200 Louisiana Guardmembers provided medical care, security and transportation.

"When the sunlight came up, we were still flooded," Jensen said. "Our first experience of seeing the city was from the air. All we saw was water ... I never want to experience it again. I never want to look at people and know that they have lost everything that they had."

The focus was on downtown New Orleans and the Superdome, but another situation was brewing at the New Orleans Convention Center.

With no food and no water, and the situation becoming more desperate, Army Lt. Col. Jacques Thibodeaux was directed to immediately secure the complex.

"Our job was to come in and conduct a rescue mission, to provide law and order, provide relief and then to evacuate the facility," he said.

Because of the lack of communication and the rumors about the conditions being violent at the convention center, Thibodeaux prepared his team of about 1,000 Guardmembers for the worse.

As they advanced with weapons, flak jackets and Kevlar helmets, the troops prepared for a three-prong surprise approach. As they marched into the center, they were greeted with a hero's welcome and were able to stabilize the center in less than 30 minutes without firing a single shot.

By the end of September, members of the Army and Air Guard had flown more 10,200 missions, airlifted more than 88,000 passengers to safety, moved roughly 18,000 tons of supplies and relief aid and saved more than 17,000 lives.

"The Guard did, what the Guard does best," said Blum. "It answered the call, it saw the need, it prepared so that when it was needed it was ready and it was there."

Blum said he has strong feeling about the Guard's response to the largest relief operation in U.S. history.

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"If I sound a little proud about the Guard, I am," he said. "I couldn't be more proud."

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