



PRESS RELEASE

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Alaska, California rescue squadrons unite to save lives in Southeast Texas

Vidor, Texas—Air National Guardsmen from Alaska's Chugach Mountains and the heart of California's Silicon Valley spent last week in the flooded cities of Southeast Texas, with one mission—to save lives.

Aircrews, combat rescue officers, pararescuemen and support personnel from the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Wing and members of the California Air National Guard's 129th Rescue Wing joined more than 18,000 National Guard personnel who responded to the call to assist with Hurricane Harvey humanitarian disaster relief operations. The Airmen left home Aug. 28 to help their neighbors in Texas still needing relief and evacuation.

The Alaska Guardsmen departed Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson via a C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft crewed by members of the 249th Airlift Squadron bound for Moffett Federal Airfield, Calif., to pick up two HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters and aircrews from the 129th Rescue Squadron. They arrived in Fort Hood in the early-morning hours of Aug. 29 and began moving equipment to a staging area on Gray Army Airfield where they were later paired with search and rescue personnel from California's 131st Rescue Squadron.

"One of the greatest aspects of working with other pararescue teams is that we can come together under a common thread and train and work as a joint force," explained Senior Master Sgt. Brandon Stuemke, a pararescueman with the 212th Rescue Squadron. "It allowed for us to seamlessly combine forces under one common goal; to save and assist those in need."

The combined 29-man team drove five hours across Texas, through Brazos Valley and The Woodlands, down flooded roads and through waterlogged towns in a 10-vehicle convoy bound for Houston. Dusk was quickly approaching and the severity of the storm was moving east. They continued toward Liberty, where they began operations the next morning from a search and rescue staging area in a cordoned off parking lot.

Half of the team was airlifted to the Orange County Convention and Expo Center—where the local emergency operations center was housed—by a Texas Army National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopter from the 2-149th General Support Aviation Battalion Aug. 30.

"In its simplest forms the situation was a combination of controlled and uncontrolled chaos. There was a large presence of local, state and military personnel aiding those in need from across the United States," said Stuemke as he described the mission. "Individuals drove from across the nation to provide boat support in flooded areas, adding to the immense volume of those looking to assist others in need."

Fifteen men who flew to Orange were transported later that afternoon by city dump trucks from Vidor, a small town in Orange County, headed for a fire station there. The giant trucks rolled down the wrong side of the road due to a westbound lane closure. They passed vehicles, trailers and boats littered

alongside Interstate 10 as the truck's oversized tires traversed over flooded roads.

Under the guidance of Fire Chief Bryant Champagne, the team immediately inflated their boats, loaded them into dump trucks and set out to patrol the flooded streets of Vidor. They waded waist-deep in water to help residents into the boats, providing much-needed relief, safety, and any necessary medical care before transporting them to the nearest shelter.

The teams passed vehicles and houses submerged in water as they floated down Highway 12. Livestock huddled together trying to keep themselves above water. The men helped residents in and out of the boats until dark, when the city dump trucks were no longer able to operate.

The other half of the pararescue personnel who stayed behind in Liberty split up for various missions and several made their way by road, through flood waters, to the emergency operations center at the Orange County Convention and Expo Center. They assisted Texas Task Force 1 with coordinating response for requests routed to them through the emergency operations main number. They sorted the calls based on priority—people requiring medical care, the elderly and infants, and in consideration of resources that were available. At any given point and time, there were more than 250 responders, with more than 50 boats and high-water trucks each at the operations center.

Early Aug. 31, the rescue team working from the fire station in Vidor branched out to assist the surrounding communities of Pine Forest and Lakeview along the swollen Neches River. Residents and their pets were loaded into the boats. Some carrying luggage, others without shoes on. Overhead, HH-60 Pave Hawk, UH-60 Black Hawk, CH-47 Chinook, MH-60 Jayhawk, and Border Protection helicopters flew alongside C-130 Hercules supporting the rescue efforts.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," resounded from the residents throughout the area.

With the combined efforts of the Air and Army National Guard, Coast Guard, Texas Task Force, Department of Public Safety, Orange County Sheriff's Office, Florida and Louisiana Wildlife Conservation, Cajun Navy and many other volunteers, approximately 1,800 people would be rescued from the area.

"Every one that was saved or assisted was grateful for the help and support," said Stuemke, who explained that some were reluctant to leave and plunge into the unknown during the dire situation.

"In these cases, we tried to offer guidance on what possessions to bring or words of encouragement, along with the plan to get them further assistance and into a shelter if necessary," Stuemke said. "This made all the difference."

Chief Champagne shifted the focus of the mission the morning of Sept. 1, to identifying the emergency and critical needs of the community. The pararescue personnel set out in dump trucks and boats going door-to-door conducting health and welfare checks. Teams operated out of the fire station responding to medical calls and rescuing people still stranded.

The Alaska-California Air National Guard team rescued 93 people, 16 dogs, a cat, and horse from the flooding waters. They also responded to five emergency response calls from the fire station's dispatch.

With the rescue phase of the mission transitioning to the recovery phase, the specialized skillset of the pararescue team is being replaced by additional manpower that is needed to conduct health and welfare checks across Southeast Texas and Louisiana.

"I have nothing but respect and admiration for the local authorities in the areas that our team worked in. From the hospitality and mutual support shown in a time of crisis to the joint coordination to save and assist others, they were truly a pivotal force for aid," said Stuemke as he gave accolades to the

hundreds of volunteers he encountered. “Their job has just begun and as the waters recede and lives start to rebuild, they have a long road ahead of them.”

The fire station’s motto, “Moving forward, together” will now linger through East Texas as its citizens begin to repair and rebuild their communities together.

The Alaska Air National Guardsmen returned to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Sept. 3, where they rolled back into their full-time mission to train for combat search and rescue.

212th Rescue Squadron and 249th Airlift Squadron personnel prepare today to deploy to Florida this week in support of Hurricane Irma disaster relief operations.

The National Guard Bureau continues to work closely coordinating with the Texas and Louisiana National Guards to ensure they have the forces and equipment they need for the long term, sustained effort.

“That Others May Live,” the motto of USAF rescue, is stitched into the unit patch worn by members of Alaska’s 212th Rescue Squadron. Only three Air National Guard are home to pararescue teams—in Alaska, California and New York—and they are part of the small and elite U.S. Air Force rescue community that includes a total of nine pararescue units. These teams are made up of combat rescue officers, pararescuemen, and specialized support personnel whose core function is personnel recovery.

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen
2. **Flickr link** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (Flickr is not generally accessible from .mil computers.)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157685896267363>

3. **DVIDS link** includes full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers. <https://dvidshub.net/r/6738np>

4. **DIVDS Video A-roll:** <https://dvidshub.net/r/zsc8hl>

Video B-roll:

Loading HH-60 into C-17: <https://dvidshub.net/r/qr6ze3>

Texas Arrival: <https://dvidshub.net/r/4i7dkm>

CH-47 Transport: <https://dvidshub.net/r/romjng>

Vidor SAR: <https://dvidshub.net/r/58liu2>; <https://dvidshub.net/r/tsk99m>;

<https://dvidshub.net/r/e787gz>

Photos, next page



Alaska Air National Guardsmen conduct water rescue missions in Vidor, Texas, Aug. 30, 2017, in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. The Airmen, assigned to the 176th Wing’s 212th Rescue Squadron, are patrolling the area in boats, looking for people who are trapped in their homes or on rooftops because of the massive flooding. Once the residents are rescued, the pararescuemen provide any necessary medical care and transport them to the nearest shelter.



California Air National Guard with the 129th Rescue Wing's 131st Rescue Squadron conduct water rescue operations in Vidor, Texas, Aug. 31, 2017, in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. The Guardsmen are patrolling the area in boats, looking for people who are trapped in their homes or on rooftops because of the massive flooding. Once the residents are safely in the boats, the Guardsmen provide any necessary medical care and transport them to the nearest shelter.



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Air National Guard search and rescue personnel from Alaska and California conduct water rescue operations in Vidor, Texas, Aug. 31, 2017, in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. The Guardsmen from the Alaska's 212th Rescue Squadron and California's 131st Rescue Squadron push a vehicle trapped in flood waters to safety while patrolling the area, looking for people who are trapped in their homes or on rooftops because of the massive flooding.