



Air Force helicopter search goes into 11th day

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9/10/2005 - **JACKSON, Miss.** -- After saving more than 4,200 people, Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard and active duty airmen are finding far less survivors who need their skills than during the initial response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Rotating fresh crews in, Air Force Reserve Command is keeping about 100 people at Jackson to support the rescue mission and to assist the efforts on the ground as required.

"Things have definitely been tapering down for us in the past four to five days," said Col Tim Tarchick, commander of 920th Rescue Wing, from Patrick AFB, Fla. "September 1st was our biggest day. With 6 helicopters flying, we picked up 472 people in one day."

A total force effort, the Air Force rescue team here is composed of Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard and active duty units from Patrick AFB, Moody AFB, Ga., Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., Portland International Airport, Ore., Nellis AFB, Nev., Hurlburt Field, Fla., and Long Island, N.Y.

At the peak of the mission, the total force team had 23 helicopters and about 400 people working around the clock. During one 13-hour shift, 184 people were saved by a single Air Force Reserve crew on that busy Sept. 1st.

"In the 50 year history of our unit, the 920th has saved about 900 lives," said the colonel. "In 10 to 11 days here, we've surpassed that number. I am so impressed by the bravery and heroism of these guys, they've achieved great things."

Nearly all of the Reserve and active duty rescue crews have seen combat duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. Air Force reservists were the first Air Force helicopter rescue crews on scene in New Orleans.

"On Aug. 30, we flew from Patrick, refueled in Pensacola and arrived in Jackson," said Maj. John Lowe, HH-60 Pave Hawk pilot with the 920 Rescue Wing. "We pushed our bags off the helo and flew straight into the city of New Orleans."

After midnight, Aug. 31, Major Lowe and his crew were over the city trying to determine who needed the most help first.

"We first went to Baptist Memorial Hospital to move critical patients," he said. "But they weren't ready to move yet so we started trolling."

In the moonless night, the Air Force helicopter crews used night-vision devices to cut through the blackness and find survivors. Major Lowe, recently returned from combat operations in Afghanistan on Aug. 6, said that at first it was a little overwhelming because of the extensive damage to the city.

"There were several fires burning and everywhere you'd look you see somebody on a roof with a flashlight so we knew it was bad," said the major. "So we picked a flashlight and pulled the people out."

After rescuing three people, Lowe's team ran out of time. They had been working and flying for about 14 hours and had to hand-off to the next shift. As part of risk mitigation, he said the Air Force puts limits on its aircrews to ensure that they get rotated out before they become too exhausted to fly safely.

"You don't want to leave, but you gotta," he said. "Because a new crew is coming on and they need those helos and there are thousands and thousands of people who need help."

On the next night, Major Lowe's team found an overpass with more than 200 people stranded by the flooding waters. They landed their HH-60 helicopter and loaded it again and again with as many people as it could hold and ferried them to a collection point where they could get medical care, food, water and transportation out of the city.

"One of our combat rescue officers, Lt. Greg Lowdermilk, suggested he stay behind on the overpass to triage, prioritize who goes first and leave more room for passengers. It worked really well although some of the people were getting a bit impatient because they all wanted to leave first."

Major Lowe's crew saved 274 people over eight days.

"Everybody got hit by this thing," said Maj. Tim Pfeifer, a reservist with the 920th and commercial pilot with American Airlines. "Rich, poor, all races. It makes you think of your own families when you see the kids and grandmothers."

Rescuing children made the biggest impact on Senior Master Sgt. Omar Rivera, an Air Reserve Technician and flight engineer with the 920th.

"Picking up little kids, 2 to 3 years old, like my kids, is what gets to me," said Sergeant Rivera. "It kills me to see these kids in need and only have so much room. The smaller the kid, the more scared they are. Two-years old and they cry, four-years old and they are wide-eyed, but at about seven they are looking around like 'whoa hoo, I get to ride on a helicopter!'"

According to Colonel Tarchick, 95 percent of his unit's flying has been over New Orleans and the outskirts of the city. At one point they flew into the Biloxi and Gulfport region. These areas took the "right hook" or full brunt of Katrina's spinning force.

"Our folks landed there and talked with a couple of state troopers," said the colonel. The troopers told the rescuers that their time was better spent elsewhere because there wasn't anything left in the area except debris and dead bodies.

In recent days, there have been less people requiring assistance from above. Returning from a mission on Sept. 10, Senior Master Sgt. James Sanchez said that his team found only people who didn't want to be rescued. His team provided what food and water they could and later rescued a lost cat in the spirit of "leave no life behind."

"It's frustrating for us because we want to help," he said. "I can't understand why anyone would want to stay, especially after 10 days in this toxic soup."

Sergeant Sanchez saved 98 lives during the Air Force Reserve's rescue operations. As a pararescueman



Maj. Tim Pfeifer, an Air Force reservist with the 920th Rescue Wing and commercial pilot with American Airlines, prepares his HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter for another search for survivors in New Orleans Sept. 10. Based out of Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., Major Pfeifer's crew is part of a Total Force team of Air Force Reserve, Guard and active duty Airmen, who have saved more than 4,200 people. (Air Force photo by Senior Master Sgt. Elaine Mayo)

assigned to the 306th Rescue Squadron at Davis-Monthan AFB, he is a veteran of Afghanistan and said that it is difficult to compare combat to this civilian search and rescue mission.

"There's a gratification to saving fellow Americans," he said. "Although it's a little bittersweet. It's kind of the same feelings because it is exciting going in to help someone."

Used to rescuing people in foreign environments, the New Orleans and Gulf Coast searches have hit close to home for many of the reservists.

"It's hard at times because this is the place where I grew up," said Maj. E.J. Hitzman, native from New Orleans and helicopter pilot with the 920th Rescue Wing. "Ninety percent of my family still lives in New Orleans, my mother, my sister, cousins, you name it. Thank goodness they evacuated early and made it out safely."

Although his family escaped the destructive storm, five of his families' homes were destroyed.

"We do this job around the world," said the major. "This time, it's more difficult for me because a lot of the places where I grew up are no longer there."

As the Gulf Coast search in the air gives way to a greater emphasis on ground operations, weather forecasters say a new storm, Hurricane Ophelia, is threatening the Atlantic coast. If the storm leaves devastation in its wake, the reservists here say they are ready to help out wherever and whenever they get the call.

"We'll stay here until Northern Command tells us they don't need us anymore," said Colonel Tarchick. "The Air Force Reserve crews saved 1,043 people's lives and answered America's call for help. I am so proud of everything our people have done and know we helped ease some of the suffering in New Orleans and the Biloxi area."