

'Defiance and Unity'

As communities in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico sustained damage during last year's hurricane season, VFW Posts rallied to offer support

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Hurricane Harvey caused the windows of VFW Post 3904 in Rockport, Texas, to blow in. Air pressure forced the roof off the building, and it landed in three neighboring yards. Part of the front wall also fell in.

But days later, Post members held a meeting in the parking lot, amid the destruction.

"It was a complete act of defiance and unity," said Post Commander Jimmy McCombs. "It was our way of saying Harvey can kiss our — you know."

Hurricane Harvey, which made landfall Aug. 25, was the first major hurricane to hit the Texas coast since Celia in 1970, according to the National Weather Service.

McCombs, who served three tours (1983, 1992 and 1996) in the Persian Gulf and during Operation Desert Storm with the Navy, said as soon as word spread about the damage to Post 3904, he started receiving calls. Messages arrived from as far as Boston, Mass., and Tacoma, Wash., along with various Texas Posts. As of September, the Post had received about \$4,500, according to McCombs.

As the Post awaits word from the insurance company to determine how to proceed, McCombs said, the American GI Forum in Rockport is allowing the Post to meet at its building.

'There's Not Even a Leaf on a Tree'

Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, swept through Puerto Rico Sept. 20, leaving at least 18 dead and the majority of the island without power, according to The Weather Channel.

Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Buchanan, life member of VFW Post 8800 in Canyon Lake, Texas, and

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commander of U.S. Army North, is the Department of Defense's liaison in Puerto Rico. He arrived on the island Sept. 28 and said the damage "was absolutely catastrophic."

"It was far worse than anything I'd ever seen," Buchanan said.

Maria, according to Buchanan, is the "10th most-powerful storm ever recorded," including those that did not hit land. Maria earned its place in the top 10 alongside hurricanes Katrina and Rita, The Weather Channel reported.

The island also sustained "tremendous wind damage," according to Buchanan.

"For much of the island, there's not even a leaf on a tree," Buchanan said.

Buchanan said that after Maria hit the island, DoD realized its requirements in support of FEMA and the local governor would be "far larger than we had in Irma." He oversees the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps teams totaling about 17,000 federal responders, the majority from the DoD.

Given the extent of the damage, Buchanan said, parts of Puerto Rico "have rebounded fairly quickly." Major roads, he added, have been cleared, and minor roads "up in the mountains" were in the process of being cleared in October. The number of military aid flights had diminished, too, according to Buchanan.

The number of island inhabitants in October with power, according to Buchanan, was "hovering around 21 percent." It was around 2 percent when Buchanan arrived in late September.

"It's still way below what anybody would be satisfied with," Buchanan said.

About 60 percent of the island had access to water, as of October, through its normal system rather than "delivery of clean water," according to Buchanan.

The people of Puerto Rico's "sense of community," according to Buchanan, has shone through in the hurricane's aftermath and will "help them get back on their feet."

"The one thing that has amazed me is the sense of community and the power of families and the fact that people seem to be bending over to help each other," Buchanan said.

'Filling the truck was the easy part'

Floyd Stewart, Post 4709 commander in Conroe, Texas, said that when Harvey hit, a call went out from Friends of Conroe, a nonprofit group.

The county, according to Stewart, had "three major shelters running" that the Red Cross

could not reach with its equipment.

“We were preparing three meals a day and shipping it out to about 2,000 people a day,” Stewart said.

Mark Windsor, VFW Post 2493 commander in Mt. Wolf, Pa., led a donation effort with Post 556, of York, Pa., to make deliveries to Conroe.

Windsor said he wanted to show that Post members were willing to send donations, as well as be on hand to deliver them.

“It’s a relief to know that you’ve got other VFWs that care enough to drive 25 hours straight through just to offer any assistance they can,” Windsor said.

Donations came from throughout their communities, including local businesses.

“Filling the truck was the easy part for me because of the community,” said Windsor, who served in Korea in 1989-90 with A Co., 102nd Military Intelligence Bn., as an electronic intelligence interceptor.

Windsor also took \$6,850 in checks and cash to Conroe. In making the trip, Windsor joined forces with past Post 2493 Commander Matthew Baskette, Post 2493 Auxiliary member Cheryl Witmer, Post 2493 staff member Kelly Witmer and Post 556 Commander Ron Etheridge.

One member of Post 4709, Mike Eshenbaugh, waded through knee-deep waters in Spring, Texas, near Cypresswood and Interstate 45, to help residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

“I’m a veteran,” Eshenbaugh said. “That’s what veterans do.”

A veteran’s counselor for the Texas Veterans Commission, Eshenbaugh served in the Army from 1992 to 2001 with tours in Bosnia and Saudi Arabia with B Btry., 43rd Air Defense Artillery as a Bradley linebacker crewmember.

“I just wanted to help out in any way I could,” Eshenbaugh said.

Dave Raborn, commander of VFW Post 2019 in Mount Airy, N.C., said his Post opted to take donations for hurricane relief in Florida and Texas because “that’s what we’re supposed to do.” His Post also partnered with Post 9436 in Pilot Mountain, N.C.

Raborn, who served in Vietnam (1967-68) with the Air Force’s 3rd Security Police Squadron as a security policeman, said the Post, along with other partners in town, started collecting donations in early September. But still, he said, “we wish we could do more.”

‘It was total devastation’

The Pennsylvania contingent was in Texas for one full day, and Stewart showed them the affected areas.

“We went into River Plantation subdivision, which starts out high and dry and drops to the river bottom. And they still build houses in there,” Stewart said. “[The road] dropped off one hill on River Plantation Drive and within 100 yards of going down that hill, it was total devastation.”

The Pennsylvania Post members wanted to take photos, so, Stewart said, they stopped in front a house, not knowing whose it was.

“A lady comes out of the house, and I went over to introduce the guys from Pennsylvania,” Stewart said. “The first thing she did was grab me around the neck [in gratitude]. She had been at the Post and got supplies and got food when her house first flooded.”

Windsor said that was “the defining moment” of the trip.

“I knew in my heart and my soul that we took our supplies to where they needed to be,” Windsor said.

The United States Coast Guard also has been involved in recovery efforts in the wake of Harvey, Maria and Irma. Vice Admiral Karl Schultz, Atlantic area commander, said manpower has been “leveraged” throughout the Coast Guard from as far away as Guam, Hawaii and Alaska.

At the height of recovery, there were more than 2,000 Coast Guard members on site for Harvey, including active duty, reserve, civilian and Coast Guard auxiliary, Schultz said. Irma and Maria had “well over 1,000,” according to Schultz, and there were roughly 800 active-duty Coast Guard members already assigned to Puerto Rico prior to Maria.

As of mid-October, Schultz said, the Coast Guard was in Texas, “still deeply in the fight” and is a “supporting player” in Puerto Rico.

Key West: ‘Extensive Damage’

Hurricane Irma made landfall Sept. 10 at Cudjoe Key as a Category 4 hurricane. Later that day, the storm had weakened to a Category 3 by the time it reached Marco Island, some 220 miles away.

VFW’s southern-most Post, Post 3911 in Key West, Fla., “suffered extensive damage,” according to Post Commander Abe Conn.

Conn, who served three tours in Afghanistan (2002-03, 2005-07 and 2012-13) with the 930th Army Liaison Team of the Florida National Guard, said the building's roof "peeled back," allowing water to get into the building, damaging the restaurant and bar. He estimated the Post suffered between \$200,000 and \$300,000 in damages.

Though Conn said there was "a lot of devastation" at the Post, the building itself was still standing.

Jose Rosa, commander of VFW Post 3282 in Port Orange, Fla., said his Post remained in good shape, though it lost power for about six hours.

"Overall, we didn't fare too badly," Rosa said. "I have to say we were pretty blessed."

Rosa's Post opened its doors to the public and offered to send resources where needed.

"We have helped several people who were isolated by the storm and helped them clear up their yards and their fences," said Rosa, who served in Vietnam from 1971-73 in the Air Force as a C-130 crew chief and during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002.

Conn had not personally set foot inside his Post home, but said other members had gone in to "assess the damage and figure out what's what."

"We hope to see all of our brothers and sisters and neighbors down here," Conn said. "We've got a very big vacationing crew. We hope everybody who comes down will stop in and say hello and have a cold drink with us."

To donate to VFW disaster relief efforts, text "NEEDS" to 91999 to make a donation, or mail checks earmarked "Emergency Relief" to: VFW Quartermaster General, 406 W. 34th Street, Kansas City, MO 64111.

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