

FORWARD

KATRINA

Story by Stephen Martinez

Soon after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, several USACE Forward Engineer Support Teams (FESTs) were mobilizing to provide support to the devastated areas. The FEST from Europe District began deployment to Keesler Air Force Base (AFB), Mississippi the following day.

At this point much of the media focus was on the devastation caused by flooding in New Orleans. And, by the time Europe District's FEST arrived to Southern Mississippi, the citizens were in their third week struggling to survive the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

No video of the devastation can accurately describe Katrina's impact on Mississippi, was a common statement by witnesses working for the Gulfport Police Department.

FEST members, most of who served in FEST missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both, attest that the extent of the destruction surpassed anything they had experienced on previous missions. Although the FEST concept was designed to support the war fighter, team members prepared to apply their experiences from previous operations to the humanitarian recovery effort on American soil.

One challenge for the commanding officer in the early weeks of the disaster was how to best apply FEST capabilities. Ultimately, however, the team's accomplishments cemented the fact that FESTs add significant value to all USACE missions, whether supporting the war fighter in contingency operations or for humanitarian recovery efforts.

The base for emergency operations was the Recovery Field Office (RFO) on Keesler AFB staffed with over 100 USACE employees. The RFO consisted of various Planning and Response Teams (PRTs). The main PRTs were the Temporary Public Structures Team, Debris Team, and Roofing Team.

The FEST was embedded in the RFO and reported directly to Col. Anthony Vesay, the commander of Vicksburg District and recovery operations. Within the first days on the ground, it became evident that there were design requirements for temporary public structures that they could help satisfy. Maj. Thomas Asbery, the FEST leader from Europe District, was assigned to provide design support to the temporary public structures team.

Understanding the volume of work involved, Asbery broke the five-man FEST into two teams and assigned projects to design layouts of temporary structures for public offices and schools. Rudimentary sketches quickly evolved into formal design products that were then coordinated with the on-site contractor.

"The quality of the FEST's products is important. It's a reflection of USACE, the Europe District, and our FEST's professionalism," said Asbery who reviewed and approved all design products prior to delivery to the respective mission managers.

Kenton Spading, a resident engineer for Hurricane Katrina relief and who serves as the assistant to the chief of the Engineering and

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Construction Division at the St. Paul District said, "The FEST, equipped with CADD software in their mobile kits, helped with this portion of the PRT mission. They were able to come in and take the load off of us."

The FEST's ability to do the CADD helped out Spading's team on the ground in Mississippi and in St. Paul because the district was able to keep their CADD operators for projects that were needed in the district.

"We'd take them to a site, show them the site, and tell them what was needed and they'd do it," said Spading. "I was most impressed with their ability to react independently and quickly."

This was the first time Spading had worked with a FEST, and he felt they were highly adaptable from supporting the war fighter to humanitarian relief and were willing to go above and beyond what was expected.

"I told our emergency operations center to request FESTs for future PRT missions," said Spading.

After designing temporary structures for several projects including the Gulfport Police Department and St. Martin High School, the FEST was tasked to support the Debris Team. The debris mission included several components. One of which was the demolition mission requiring entry into private property to demolish structurally unsound homes and debris removal. There were many challenges to overcome and there was debate on how best to approach this mission's objectives.

Open questions were how to calculate the quantity of debris that was going to be generated, the management of hazardous materials (including ammunition, human and animal remains), and how to set up an efficient debris removal contract. But once a strategy was developed, the two teams from the FEST broke off to execute.

An on-site Geographic Information System (GIS) team assisted the FEST by mapping out sectors of the Gulf Coast for use during neighborhood-by-neighborhood reconnaissance.

The FEST calculated a volume of 1.4 million cubic yards of debris that needed to be removed, while 6,000 homes would require demolition. This was only a partial count of lives wrecked by Katrina. The effort resulted in a \$500-million contract being awarded for debris removal on private property.

While the FEST was always busy with missions, there was one thing that they could not forget – the human element. When the team first arrived they were warned about the possibility of encountering distraught residents.

Fortunately, the opposite was true during the 60-day deployment. Community residents were very grateful for the Corps' presence. In fact, the sight of Corps' employees provided comfort to residents, and the FEST engaged with locals as much as possible when out in the field. The team's success was due to excellent leadership, experience, teamwork, and the technical skills of team members. The USACE FEST concept proves itself abroad based USACE and customer resource with seemingly limitless potential.

SUPPORTING THE NATION





Photo by Ron Mott

Clockwise from top: In Mississippi, as in much of the Gulf Coast area affected by Hurricane Katrina, devastation was all around. It wasn't uncommon to see debris from cars and houses entangled throughout the region.

Brig. Gen. Robert Crear, commander of Task Force HOPE, talks to children who can continue their education due to the Corps' Temporary Public Structures mission.

Talking to the Contractor about the placement of the trailers to house different public facilities.

Ron Mott and his FEST colleagues from Europe stop to survey, document, and photograph a fraction of the destruction to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.



Photo by Maj. Thomas Asbery



Photo by Ron Mott