

ATSS-MH (870)

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Personal Experience Papers

1. I, MSG PATRICK J. FLAHERTY, have submitted a Personal Experience Paper to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences from my participation in OPERATION SOUTHERN COMFORT OCT '05 that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

(☒) None
() Other:

I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

Date: 15 MARCH 2011

Printed Name: PATRICK J. FLAHERTY, MSG

Signature: 

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

Printed Name/Date: LOOKER, KEITH 16 MAR 2011

Signature: 

USASMA FORM 7273-R, APR 06

Running Head: KATRINA, OVERCOMING DISASTER

Katrina, Overcoming Disaster

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United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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1st Sergeant, Saint Bernard Parish Relief

Abstract

Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made land in the New Orleans Parishes of Louisiana in the United States. Ten to twenty feet of seawater and chemicals from area industrial plants covered the area. Some residents took supplies for a few days and left the area. Many waited out the storm. After the hurricane subsided a national tragedy developed. Military and law enforcement personnel provided assistance to the remaining residents. Eventually residents returned to their devastated homes. President Bush declared a National Emergency. State Governors offered National Guard assistance. Hundreds of Idaho Air and Army National Guard volunteered for Operation Southern Comfort. I was 1st Sergeant of 135 providing relief to the Saint Bernard Parish residents of New Orleans.

KATRINA, Overcoming Disaster

My phone rang on a Sunday afternoon the middle of September 2005. The voice on the telephone was the Unit Readiness NCO from my unit, the Idaho National Guard 25th Army Band. I was too familiar with his voice. My unit just finished three busy months. It was my first year as First Sergeant of the Idaho National Guard 25th Army Band. The months started with two long weeks at Ft Gordon, Georgia. We replaced the Active Duty Band for our two weeks Annual Training Mission. Then we returned home to perform for POTUS or as we quickly learned the new acronym, President of the United States, George W. Bush. We earned some fame for a National Guard Band by playing all the musical honors for the President instead of being benched by the customary White House recordings. My previous military training and experience was Army Band, NCO schools and a Unit and Battalion level Supply and Property Book Technician at Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho. I was accustomed to creating musical teams within the band. I worked in the supply field daily and knew the supply process very well.

I wanted our schedule to settle down. The call changed everything. The “Raging Bull” Alert phone call from Sergeant Sterner instructed me to determine the number of qualified personnel that could volunteer to deploy. He relayed the verbiage of an email requesting assistance from the band. The mission was Operation Southern Comfort following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. My limitations were: no students currently enrolled in school and no one with medical issues. It was a combined Army and Air National Guard mission. Most of the Soldiers from the Idaho Army National Guard were in Iraq with the 116th Brigade Combat Team or Afghanistan with the 183rd Aviation. The Governor offered assistance to the Governor of Louisiana with remaining Idaho Army and Air National Guardsmen.

Preparation for Deployment

All members/ reported Monday at 0700 to begin Soldier Readiness Processing (SRP) and received State Military Orders until early November. The SRP lasted two days. All individuals updated Medical and legal records, briefs on the Lautenberg Amendment, Law of War/Rules of Engagement, health insurance and beneficiary forms and received the required shots for the New Orleans area. We bused to the firing range for small arms weapons qualification. Meals were MRE's. I tasked a Sergeant to compose and test a unit alert roster for the deployment and assigned a Sergeant as a Rear Detachment Contact for the ten Soldiers that were students or medical issues to remain in Boise.

The deployment conflicted with our band performance schedule. The Dance Band schedule showed a high profile performance at the end of the week. The dignitaries for the performance were Governor Kempthorne, Adjutant General Lafrenz and the MHAFB Wing Commander at Mountain Home Air Force Base (MHAFB). Task Force leaders decided to delay my fifteen member dance band's deployment until after the performance. Five of my band members left with the convoy.

Convoy

The first serial of the Task Force convoy left Gowen Field, Boise for New Orleans, LA at 0700 on Wednesday September 28th. I rehearsed the dance band for the Mountain Home Air Force Base (MHAFB) Dance. The theme for the performance was WWII Big Band music from the 1940's. The next day, Sunday October 2 at 0700 we reported to the Gowen Field flight operations center and staged for a C-130 mission to New Orleans. After our families left we received the initial Safety Brief and boarded the C-130. We landed at Belle Chasse Air Base near New Orleans, Louisiana around 1300 and transported to the Federal Emergency Management

Agency (FEMA) camp in Belle Chasse. We drew billets and scouted the area awaiting our assignment. Monday, October 3rd we reported to the supply area. CW2 Durfee, our Band Commander, received the task as S-1 over Unit Supply. I used the thirteen members from my band and their construction expertise to build the temporary supply area. This took three days. I assigned another Sergeant to accomplish driver training, testing and licensing all of us on the available military vehicles.

Drive By Devastation

We finished our supply tasks and licensing and boarded our 2 ½ ton M35A2 truck on October 7th. An NCO drove us to the Belle Chasse ferry where we crossed the Mississippi delta. The sergeant tried to prepare us for what we saw. He described the scene as a battle zone minus damage from munitions. We drove through the hurricane disaster area for about two hours. It was shocking. All the vegetation was dead. There were no animals. The ground was covered with 6 to 10 inches of crusty dry hard sludge. When the vehicle stopped there was no sound. It was eerie. There were no people. Residents were not yet allowed back to their homes to see the devastation. Boats and cars sitting on homes or balanced on fences became common sites. One shocking image was a barrier the length of the road between the Ninth Ward and the St Bernard Parish. It was made of abandoned vehicles stacked three high with a razor wire fence. This barrier attempted to keep the Ninth Ward residents from crossing the boundary into the St Bernard Parish and looting. Armed guards patrolled the barrier around the clock.

After our two hour tour of the area we stopped in a parking lot by a Walmart store in the St Bernard Parish around 1500. The store was closed and boarded. There was a water line twenty feet up across the Walmart name. A few vehicles sat haphazardly around the parking lot. Eight Soldiers guarded the perimeter of the parking lot. We dismounted and spread out to find the area

leader. Soon we met an Air National Guard Lieutenant Colonel. He introduced himself as LTC Bartlow, the St Bernard Parish Field Commander. I accompanied him to an impromptu meeting of the highest ranking NCO's. The meeting was to acquire resources to setup a TOC in the field in that Walmart parking lot. The senior NCO's shared no resources to help him and made no effort to help. I watched briefly. Then I called Chief Durfee at the Unit Supply at our Belle Chasse Camp. I ordered the materials LTC Bartlow needed for his task in just a few minutes. Then he tasked me to create a new parking lot security detail from my Soldiers. Security guards carried no live ammo. The rest of us prepared the area around the Walmart for FEMA trailers and a temporary hospital.

Change in Assignment

As dusk set in I wondered how everyone returned to the Belle Chasse camp. No one seemed to be in charge. I found a group of senior NCO's talking. When I asked what the plan was and where the commander was they told me he left around 1600. They also said he put me in charge. With that news I immediately organized the convoy of twelve vehicles and we headed out for the Belle Chasse ferry and camp. We arrived around 1900. LTC Bartlow sat in the mess tent waiting for us. He seemed very surprised to see us. He told me the convoy never arrived before 2300 or 2400 over the last three days. Troops missed their last meal each day. NCO leadership seemed very weak. He told me to get up early the next morning, meet him at the assembly tent in the center of the camp and be ready to work.

At 0430 I reported to the tent to see my name assigned as the ISG for the parish. LTC Bartlow appeared. We gave out assignments for the day to the Soldiers and Airmen. The convoy left at 0615 for the ferry. I met my driver. My call sign was "Shirt 1." Our vehicle was an M1043 HUMMV with communication for the duration. The convoy arrived at the St Bernard Walmart

area and all teams dispersed on their missions. This began many long, tiring but very rewarding days.

Walmart TOC

I assigned Sergeants to set up a 2 ½ ton M35A2 in the Walmart parking lot in the St Bernard Parish as our field TOC. It was a makeshift supply with weapons racks, water and MRE's. I acquired a laminated 4' x 5' map of the New Orleans area from the Port Authority and posted it in the truck. Then I assigned a young energetic sergeant as the communications sergeant. She tracked each squad hourly with cell phones as they performed relief missions throughout the St Bernard area.

Daily Routine

Each day began as the 16 member Security Detail left camp at 0530. LTC Bartlow and I held a Daily Briefing for Troops was at 0630. The convoy left for the ferry at 0700. After landing on the other side we drove to the Walmart parking lot area. When we arrived we split into assigned teams and combed the area. Each day posed new challenges. It was an education working with the local authorities. Politics and turf wars were common. We avoided most of them. Residents slowly returned. They stunned by the devastation to their homes and the area. Their lifetime of possessions was reduced to rubbish. The troops worked hard to help the residents in their time of need. Each team offered water, MRE's and assisted with removing refrigerators and freezers from homes. This was an import accomplishment for each family. The stench from an opened refrigerator or freezer was unbearable. Each team used an assigned call sign and followed a route in the St Bernard Parish. My communication sergeant tracked them hourly. We relieved our Security Guards as scheduled throughout the day. A Crew brought sack lunches and supplies to the TOC before the noon hour each day. I spent each day planning the

next day's teams, NCOIC's, vehicle assignments and missions. At dusk we convoyed back to Belle Chasse Camp.

The end of the day for most of the troops was around 2100. LTC Bartlow and I attended a brief at the Belle Chasse TOC at that time. Then I resolved situations for my troops. My sleep was necessary but troops' needs were more important than a long nights sleep.

Teamwork

The daily roster read "PLEASE HAVE ALL VEHICLES DRAWN, FUELED, PMCS's, CLEANED, WARMED UP AND IN CONVOY ORDER ON THE STREET BY THE END OF ROLL CALL. WE LEAVE AT 0700." This insured minimal vehicle problems and saved time for the convoy at the beginning of each day. I bargained with the Colonel over the St Bernard Parish Task Force TOC for a couple mechanics. I gave them a vehicle, tools and a radio. They maintained all the vehicles and repaired them when problems occurred. Our vehicles were old, worn and driven from Idaho. They held up as needed.

Troop Support

LTC Bartlow and I soon recognized the need for some MWR time. The Task Force Commander maintained a no time off policy. He felt everyone was here to work. He enforced a no drinking rule until the return to Boise. LTC Bartlow and I felt sixteen hour work days would eventually lead to accidents. Our solution was a daily squad nicknamed the Daily Reserve Deployment Force. I reserved a bus at the motor pool for the team to use unless they were called up. I changed the list daily. This allowed each person a weekly rest day.

The J-6 at the Belle Chasse Camp TOC set up an Internet Café for the troops to communicate with their families at home. One day my driver and I stopped at an area Starbucks while driving around to find an electronic patch cord. We wanted a great cup of coffee. A

company was cleaning out the store. It was abandoned for a month and all the contents were out dated. The person in charge gave us all the coffee, cups, flavorings and some coffee makers for our camp. This became a real morale booster back at camp. The tent of band members kept a cot labeled "PFC BUCKS."

As work progressed we needed supplies. The typical list was: Tow chain, Tie down cargo straps, hand trucks, coolers for on the trucks, sledge hammers, halogen tool, hair clippers, bolt cutters, crow bars, step ladders, port a pots, push brooms, duct tape (to hold the refrigerators closed), light rope, chains & C straps, hydrogen peroxide, dry erase board, markers, 2 dollies, safety glasses, etc.

I was very fortunate to be assigned an Air National Guard Public Affairs Photographer to my group. She was a very talented photographer and captured many rare images of the area to tell the Katrina story. I assigned two young sergeants to take stories from our work teams and turn them in to historical glimpses of their daily missions. One story shared "The only item one woman wanted from her devastated home was her mother's rosary. It was on the night stand when she left for the hurricane. They found it after an hour of searching in the rubbish and muck. They cleaned it up for her. Then she thanked them and left." I received a visit from an Army Chaplain one day. We set up a church service schedule for the troops. Everyone's morale was good.

Time to Move

After week three the St Bernard Parish Task Force Commander decided to move us to a camp in the St Bernard Parish near our work area. This was a one day logistical operation. After we settled into the new camp troops developed various nasal conditions. Near the field where we camped was a tall brick smoke stack labeled with the name "Kaiser." Five days later we moved

back to the Belle Chasse camp. After we left the area the local residents told us the area was the site of an old Kaiser industrial plant. We guessed there was dangerous residue in the ground.

Hazmat Conditions

While we camped near the Kaiser smokestack the Commanders realized there was residue from the burst tanks of local chemical companies mixed in the muck in homes. Residents said tanks belonging to the Murphy Oil Soap Company burst during the hurricane. The toxic chemicals mixed with the sea water and settled on the ground and throughout the buildings. Everyone's safety attitude changed. All personnel participated in a Hazmat class. Everyone wore Hazmat suits from then on.

Preparation to Exit

Late in our fourth week the Arkansas National Guard appeared. They returned from Iraq two months before and received orders to report to St Bernard Parish as our relief. They struggled to make a tremendous adjustment from the Bagdad environment. They tried to remember what it was like to stop at traffic signals and slow down for residents.

At the end of the fourth week we out processed with physicals and a blood draw. The Command created a flight list based on urgency for all the troops. I composed a list of all personnel to estimate the size and weight of the payload. After weeks of assisting residents with their devastation we prepared to return home.

Party Time and a Skit

We decided to hold a large party the last night all the troops were together. LTC Bartlow negotiated a large load of fresh shrimp. A local resident prepared them as a Cajun Shrimp Boil for all the troops. One squad produced a skit with a script for our final assembly at Belle Chasse Camp called "Duece 20 Skit." A band member squad read their recollection called "Thoughts of

Task Force St. Bernard.” The narrative reflected on lessons the deployment and described what we learned to be thankful for with one liners from our St Bernard Parish, Louisiana experience.

The Big Picture aka Lessons Learned

I felt the Task Force operation with the Air and Army National Guard members start with division. This was apparent at the NCO leadership level. Army NCO’s didn’t appreciate the cultural difference of the Air members. I grew up with it. The Army versus Air division disappeared after working together six weeks. It is not possible to prepare for the tragedy of such devastation. We are all required make new rules to operate successfully. NCO leadership is sometimes strong. Senior leadership makes the difference. Always be prepared to take initiative and lead as and NCO. Always mentor your NCO’s to do the same. Find your leaders at any rank. Create teams with the best fit possible. Making teams from who is available is critical. Give clear expectations and hold them responsible. When troops know why we do what we do they become more involved and complain less. Single out those who step up to the plate when leadership calls and award them appropriately. It is the right thing to do and worth the effort. Safety is always a must. Listen to all your troops all the time.

Ending the deployment with a ritual is important. The final party and personal quips brought closure to our very successful tour. Everyone missed home but we were thankful to be included in the St Bernard Parish residents’ relief in New Orleans. We helped a lot of people. We also developed new lifelong friendships and left with powerful memories.

Home Station

The flight touched down in Boise to cheering from the Governor, Adjutant General and other dignitaries. They shook everyone’s hand as we exited the aircraft. The press surprised some with impromptu interviews of the experience. All troops arrived home within two days. The

vehicles arrived by rail a week later. Home felt good again. All appreciated our experience and the time working together helping Louisiana during one of their worst times.

Awards and Final Closure

LTC Bartlow and I met a week later. We discussed a plan to award outstanding personnel for excellent leadership and work. This went against the Task Force Commander's policy of no achievement or commendation awards. We opposed this policy and waited for the right time. Then we prepared the awards. We decided to award the Army individuals with Air Achievement and Commendation awards and Air individuals to receive Army Achievement and Commendation awards. After many discussions we listed thirty five outstanding individuals who helped make the mission a great success. These thirty five individuals stood out as excellent NCO's. They made the mission a great success. All personnel played a key part helping the people of St Bernard Parish in New Orleans. And we were all better people because of our experience with Operation Southern Comfort.