



Helicopter aircrews rescue hurricane victims

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9/15/2008 - **MOFFETT FEDERAL AIRFIELD, Calif. (AFP)** -- Airmen from the 129th Rescue Wing took off from Kelly Field in San Antonio Sept. 13 and helped rescue stranded victims of Hurricane Ike near Galveston, Texas.

California Air National Guard members of the 129th RQW here are deployed to San Antonio to conduct search and rescue support operations following the Category 2 hurricane that hammered the Gulf Coast.

Four Joint Task Force-129 HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters, including two from the 129th RQW, departed from Kelly Field at 10 a.m. Overall, JTF-129 members rescued 48 people and 13 dogs in response to Hurricane Ike on this day.

The crews knew they had a busy day ahead of them.

"We were told that more than 200 911 calls were made in the morning," said Maj. Rhys Hunt, a 129th RQW pilot. "When we got to Galveston, it looked like a war zone. There were four or five houses on fire, Galveston Airport was completely underwater, most of the city was flooded and several piers were demolished."

Instead of being tasked with picking up victims in specific locations, the helicopters trolled low and slow. The crews hoped the sound of the rotor blades would prompt survivors to come out of their homes and seek help in evacuating the area. It wasn't long before survivors did just that.

Aircrews aboard the HH-60G spotted a woman poking her head out from her porch. Two pararescuemen rappelled down to convince the woman to evacuate. The helicopter then landed in a baseball field near her house and discovered two elderly women and a middle-aged man stranded in the house. The survivors asked to be evacuated because one of the women was sick and needed treatment.

The three people boarded the helicopter and crews promptly transported them to Texas City High School, a main collection point for survivors.

The aircrew returned to the disaster area and proceeded to troll over the Bolivar Peninsula near Galveston. The crews were stunned by the destruction witnessed overhead.

"Half of the houses appeared flattened in Crystal Beach," Major Hunt said.

The aircrews continued their search for survivors and came across a man and woman and their dog wading through the water. The helicopter landed on a dry road near the trio and picked them up. The man and woman provided information about additional victims requiring evacuation.

Based on this tip, the helicopter took off and found the home. An elderly man, two of his family members and a dog were stranded. The pararescuemen rappelled down to the house and used the hoist to pluck the family from danger.

After dropping off the group of survivors, the HH-60G crew searched for people in Gilchrist on the Bolivar Peninsula. They came across small groups of people sitting on porches and balconies. Surprisingly for the crews, when asked to evacuate, the people opted to stay put.

At the end of the day, searching for survivors and performing rescues was a grueling but very gratifying mission for the JTF-129 Airmen.

"All the crewmembers were glad to be there and help when people needed it most," Major Hunt said.

"The task force members did an incredible job over the past 48 hours flying in extremely violent conditions," said Col. Mark Sheehy, the 129th RQW Operations Group commander and JTF-129 commander. "They epitomize the Air Force rescue motto of 'These things we do that others may live.'"

JTF-129 is a self-contained search and rescue unit comprising more than 100 people, including pararescuemen, four HH-60G helicopters and two MC-130P Combat Shadow tankers. Air National Guard members of the 106th



Joint Task Force-129 pararescuemen rescue a hurricane victim Sept. 13 in Galveston, Texas. The JTF-129 crews rescued 48 people and pets stranded in the Galveston area. (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Brock Woodward)

Rescue Wing from Gabreski Airport in New York, and the 176th Wing from Kulis Air National Guard Base, Alaska, are also part of the rescue task force.

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