



Civilian rescue personnel and members of the Colorado Army National Guard's Alpha Battery, 3rd Battalion 157th Field Artillery, use a rescue basket to carry an elderly Glen Haven, Colo., flood evacuee. (Photo by Sgt. Joseph Vonnida)

NCO Lessons Ensure Success During Colorado Flood Evacuations

By Pablo Villa

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The noncommissioned officers of the 4th Infantry Division's 4th Combat Aviation Brigade at Fort Carson, Colo., work every day to keep their Soldiers prepared for anything.

But it's not solely the unpredictable tactics employed by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan that has these Soldiers toiling daily to hone their skills. It's the capricious manner in which Mother Nature conducts her business that keeps the 4th CAB on its toes just as well.

Whether it was assisting the Colorado Army National Guard with fighting fires stoked by severe drought or taking part in rescue missions in the af-

termath of catastrophic flooding caused by torrential rains, 2013 was a busy year for the Iron Eagles. This year, ice jams forged by a bitter winter threaten to spur even more floods and have already done so in Montana and Wyoming. But no matter the weather and the complications it brings, the 4th CAB's NCOs say they are up to the task.

Staff Sgt. Jose Pantoja is one of those Iron Eagles. He says the work he and other NCOs took on last year was successful merely because of their presence.

"A majority of the guys we had out there were NCOs," said Pantoja, a flight medic. "Most of the guys



Staff Sgt. Jose Pantoja is a flight medic with the 4th Infantry Division's 4th Combat Aviation Brigade at Fort Carson, Colo. Pantoja took part in a slew of rescue operations during intense flooding in Colorado's Front Range. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

that went out there had enough experience to be able to handle the situation. These guys made it happen.”

The aforementioned drought coupled with record high temperatures created ripe conditions for fires in Colorado's Black Forest, located north of Colorado Springs. The state's fears came to fruition June 11, 2013. Two days after the wind-whipped blaze ignited, it was deemed the worst fire in Colorado history and it destroyed 350 homes and charred 15,000 acres. The Colorado Army National Guard dispatched 14 Soldiers from its 1157th Engineer Firefighter Company to help battle the blaze, which was 85 percent contained by June 18 when they were released from duty on the fire line.

“We very much appreciate the experience and knowledge these Soldiers bring with them wherever they are assigned,” said Brig. Gen. Pete Byrne, commander of Joint Task Force-Centennial. “We're grateful to their employers and families for allowing these Soldiers and Airmen the time away from their normal lives to serve the Colorado community.”

But that reprieve wouldn't last long.

Historic flooding

As the summer season lazily wound down, Mother Nature conjured up a frenetic finish.

On Sept. 9, a cold front stalled over Colorado's Front Range, a nearly 200-mile swath that extends from Colorado

Springs north to Fort Collins. It collided with north-bound warm monsoonal air to create the heaviest rainfall the region had seen in more than three decades. On Sept. 11, Boulder was inundated with 9 inches of rain and 17 inches total during a four-day period.

The historic rainfall battered a region ill-suited to fend off the torrent of precipitation due to fires and varying levels of drought that left trees stripped of protective branches and arid soil unable to hold off the fast-moving gushes of water.

Disastrous flash flooding ensued. By its end, \$2 billion in damage was caused and eight deaths were reported.

As the situation turned dire, pilots and medics from the 4th CAB sprang into action.

On Sept. 13, after a training flight, Staff Sgt. Jose Pantoja said he was helping move his aircraft to the wash rack when his unit received a frantic call.

“We were actually on our way out the door,” recalled Pantoja. “Somebody told us, ‘Get ready to spool up. We just got a call.’ ... And within 30 minutes, we were ready to rock and roll.”

‘We're gonna come out and help you’

The Colorado National Guard organized relief efforts to support civil authorities, setting up a command control point at Boulder Municipal Airport. Member of both the Wyoming National Guard and the active-duty 4th CAB provided assistance.

The southernmost area affected by floods was designated almost solely for the 4th CAB. And its Soldiers got to work immediately.

“We arrived there at night,” Pantoja said. “We just dumped our bags and said, ‘Hey, we're here to work,’ and we took off into the mountains using our [night-vision goggles].”

For the better part of 10 days, Pantoja and other 4th CAB Soldiers flew dozens of rescue missions. He says those missions involved receiving grid coordinates from the command control point manned by the National Guard where calls for aid were being taken and disseminated. Pilots would fly medics out to the

site where they'd look for signs of distress before going down to the ground on hoists to perform rescues.

Pantoja said Soldiers encountered various challenges including meticulous house-to-house searches, treacherous rushing water and trying to convince some elderly residents to leave dangerous areas. But having NCOs aboard the helicopters — four UH-60 Black Hawks and two CH-47 Chinooks — proved beneficial, he says.

Making it happen involved loading stranded people into the helicopters along with their belongings — luggage, boxes and animals. For the Soldiers involved, it was a far cry from the combat situations some of them have seen. But their tasks were no less important.

“For us who go out and do our job on the battlefield, I think this portion of the job benefits us as well as civilians,” Pantoja said. “Obviously we're here for them as well as our Army. It lets them know our capabilities of, ‘Hey, you guys are Americans. We're gonna come out and help you, regardless, because that's our job.’ We'll put the same amount of effort that we put downrange into the amount of our effort out here.

“It's always exciting, especially for the pilots and us medics. We love doing it. It's an adrenaline rush for us. To be able to go out there and help people out makes us feel good.”

The aftermath

By Sept. 20, the Colorado National Guard, Wyoming National Guard and the 4th CAB shifted their support of civil authorities in flood evacuation operations as the state moved from emergency response to recovery operations.

By then, National Guard and active-duty military members had evacuated 3,465 people and 887 pets. Aerial teams accounted for 2,758 of those rescues. Helicopters and crews also transported 39 tons of food, water and clothing to keep displaced residents nourished during relief efforts. Lance Blyth, U.S. Northern Command historian, said the military response to the floods, which was dubbed “Operation

Centennial Raging Waters,” was likely the largest scale rotary-wing airlift mission since the one undertaken in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina.

Despite the monumental challenges presented, Pantoja said no serious situations arose during the 4th CAB's time in flood-ravaged areas. He credits that to the unit's daily training, which teaches them to be ready for anything.

“It's the training from our leaders, our NCOs, that helped us,” Pantoja said. “The op-tempo that we're at, we fly every day. Taking into consideration the experience from past deployments and the preparation that we do within the training that we do out here, that's pretty much what led to most of the success of the mission. That's how we were able to perform and do what we needed to do on such short notice. It basically boils down to experience. We all came together.”

It also helped that civil support was just as capable and worked hand-in-hand with their military counterparts. Pantoja said his team had not been trained to perform swift-water rescues. But civil support members who could perform the job were simply taken aboard a helicopter and dropped down into the situations that required their assistance.

“We had a melting pot of volunteers and people who wanted to help,” Pantoja said. “When it comes to situations like that, I think we all meld together and make it happen.”

Today, Colorado has regained a semblance of its pre-flood state even though some areas continue to rebuild. Still, while taking care of property damage and replacing flooded belongings entails some heartache, the lives saved by efforts from Soldiers are a priceless extra benefit of the daily training of NCOs who teach their fighting force to be prepared for any contingency.

“I think what other NCOs can learn from us is perseverance,” Pantoja said. “Perseverance is being able to adapt to situations. Just because something goes wrong — whatever it is — as NCOs, we're supposed to make it happen. Don't quit. If something needs to get done, there's always a way.” ■



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