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NAVFAC Southeast CERT Deploys to MCLB Albany

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. – Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Southeast dispatched one military and five civilian personnel to Marine Corps Logistics Base (MCLB) Albany, Georgia from NAS Jacksonville and NAS Pensacola Jan. 25, as part of a Contingency Engineering Response Team (CERT) after a storm system moved through Jan. 21-23 that generated devastating tornados there.

The team of six, Gulf Coast IPT Technical Branch Head Emil Handzel, Capital Improvements Business Line Supervisory Structural Engineer Kurt Wittman and Capital Improvements Business Line Structural Engineer Tiffany Chastain from Jacksonville and PWD Pensacola Production Officer Lt. Aaron Kotlarz and PWD Pensacola Engineering Technicians Tommy Hampton and Daniel Adams all volunteered to be a part of the team.

Public Works Department Pensacola Production Officer Lt. Aaron Kotlarz served as the Officer in Charge for the deployed CERT.

“As a CEC (Civil Engineer Corps) officer, I have a unique skill set and ability to be able to respond to emergency scenarios,” said Kotlarz. “I feel a need to employ those capabilities when people need help. NAVFAC and the Seabees have a proud tradition of answering the call when disasters happen and I was proud to volunteer to carry on that tradition.”

“The base’s industrial area, which includes the Marine Depot Maintenance Command production plant, sustained extensive damage after a tornado impacted several buildings and knocked out power to some areas of the installation on Sunday,” said Pam Jackson, a spokeswoman for MCLB Albany.

The tornado outbreak was one of the largest outbreaks on record not only for January, but for any winter month, featuring one of the longer tornado tracks on record, according to data from the National Weather Service. The EF3 tornado that impacted MCLB Albany traveled at least 70 miles leaving a swath of death and destruction in its wake. Seven tornadoes were confirmed across southeast Alabama, southwest Georgia and the Florida Big Bend resulting in 16 deaths and numerous injuries. Five deaths were reported in the Albany, Georgia area.

Storm surveys done jointly by the National Weather Service offices in Peachtree City, Georgia, and Tallahassee, Florida, found that the EF3 tornado that ravaged parts of Albany, Georgia, January 22 was on the ground for an hour and 12 minutes, tearing an almost 71-mile path through parts of five Georgia counties.

As the Team Lead Kotlarz coordinated with MCLB Albany Public Works team for taskings and reach back support required from NAVFAC Southeast in Jacksonville.

“I was amazed by just how quickly the public works team on the base responded to prioritizing the damage and began the cleanup efforts to get the base back operational,” said Kotlarz. “There were literally hundreds of people working and planning to get the base back in business, and it was awe inspiring to see the dedication of so many people working so hard to get the base back to its mission.”

“I was asked to contribute my electrical skills to the team and to assist in the disaster recovery process where I could,” said Adams. “I witnessed some pretty unique things including trees snapped in two like toothpicks and a trailer from a tractor trailer lodged up in a tree! I was glad to be able to work side by side with so many different types of engineers. It was a great learning experience.”

Sending engineers around the world is not new to NAVFAC.

“We always have a trained CERT ready to go at a moment’s notice,” said NAVFAC Southeast Production Officer and Disaster Preparedness Officer Lt. Cmdr. Craig Peck.

Peck explained that the CERT has Disaster Assessment Teams (DATs) which consist of structural, electrical, and mechanical engineers, architects, roofing specialists, community planners and construction contract specialists that deploy to begin Rapid Damage Assessments. It is during this phase that debris is removed and basic functions are restored such as opening roadways, sanitation, water, electricity and communications.

Typically, these teams are deployed to assess hurricane or other storm damage to military installations such as was the case most recently in October 2016 when teams deployed to the United States Navy's Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center (AUTEC), located on Andros Island in the Bahamas after Hurricane Matthew impacted the facilities there.

“I served as a structural engineer on a DAT,” said Wittman. “We toured various facilities on base and provided a rapid assessment of the tornado and wind damage. We documented this damage to start the process for repairs. We also documented and marked any facilities that we felt were unsafe due to damage so that safety hazards could be avoided and mitigated.”

“There was widespread devastation from tornado damage not only on Albany MCLB but also in the surrounding community,” continued Wittman. “We saw pre-engineered metal buildings that had been reduced to a pile of twisted metal and a mangled CONEX container that the tornado had picked up, bounced across one of our tall warehouse roofs and deposited on the other side of the building in a bent up mess. There were downed and broken trees everywhere and so much debris everywhere that it looked like a warzone.”

“You see the true character of a team when it is facing adversity and under stress and the character of the MCLB Albany team and the CERT team from NAVFAC Southeast is a great example of the fighting spirit of the United States Marine Corps and U.S. Navy civilians,” said Kotlarz.

The six CERT members returned to their respective bases Sunday, Jan. 29 and continue to finalize their reports.

Photos Available:

170127-N-PA772-005

MCLB Albany, Georgia (January 27, 2017) Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Southeast Contingency Engineering Response Team (CERT) member PWD Pensacola Production Officer Lt. Aaron Kotlarz inspects a facility Jan. 27 for damage aboard MCLB Albany, Ga. The CERT was dispatched to the base January 25 after a storm system moved through January 21-23 that generated devastating tornados there. (U.S. Navy photo/released)

170127-N-PA772-015

MCLB Albany, Georgia (January 27, 2017) Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Southeast Contingency Engineering Response Team (CERT) members PWD Pensacola Engineering Technician Daniel Adams (left) and Gulf Coast IPT Technical Branch Head Emil Handzel (right) inspect a facility Jan. 27 for damage after a storm system moved through the local area in Albany, Ga. The CERT was dispatched to Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany January 25 to evaluate facilities on the base. (U.S. Navy photo/released)

170127-N-PA772-020

MCLB Albany, Georgia (January 27, 2017) Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Southeast Contingency Engineering Response Team (CERT) member Integrated Product Team Gulf Coast Technical Branch Head Emil Handzel is seen inside one of the many facilities aboard Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany that received major damage after storms passed through January 21 through 23. Handzel is part of the CERT that was deployed from Jacksonville, Florida to help inspect and assess facilities on the base. (U.S. Navy photo/released)

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Naval Facilities Engineering Command: The Facilities & Expeditionary Combat Systems Command

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