



KATRINA Daily News

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CE personnel brave Katrina's winds in big rescue

By Susan Griggs
81st Training Wing Public Affairs

Noah's Ark came to Keesler disguised as a big blue vacuum truck during Hurricane Katrina.

While preparing for the Aug. 29 storm, Keesler's 81st Civil Engineer Squadron loaded the tank of the "Dominator" with water to ballast the vehicle so it wouldn't be swept away by the anticipated flood waters. The crew never expected the huge vehicle to be used to rescue both the base's water system and two of its team members.

At the height of the storm, the 81st CES operations flight had to ensure the integrity of the base's water supply, including the emergency generators that were running the pumps and wells.

"I was really worried about sending anyone out into the rising waters and intensifying winds," said Maj. Jeff Szatanek, commander of the 81st CES operations flight. "But our guys had a job to do and they hit the ground running."

Al Watkins, the base's utilities manager, and Master Sgt. Lonnie Bacon, noncommissioned officer in charge of electrical infrastructure, jumped into the Dominator to make the rounds and stabilize the water system.

Sergeant Bacon, who's experienced his share of hurricanes while growing up in Florida, was alarmed at the rapidly rising waters that skimmed the cab of the high-profile vehicle.

"I knew we had to keep things running," he recalled. "We knew we couldn't keep the base going without keeping the water flowing, and to do that, I had to keep the generators up and running."

"The base looked like an ocean," said Mr. Watkins, who explained that the storm surge from the Mississippi Sound to the south and Biloxi's Back Bay to the north pushed the flood waters up to 6 feet in many locations. "The water was



lapping up to the yellow stripe at the top of the ballfield fence."

Mr. Watkins and Sergeant Bacon had just returned to the 81st CES compound after making their rounds when a call came in that Dean Payne and James Bitton, two of the squadron's boiler operators, were trapped by rising waters at Keesler Medical Center.

Mr. Watkins and infrastructure manager Stanley Morgan grabbed a camcorder and digital camera to document the destruction as they jumped into the Dominator to retrieve their teammates.

"It was unreal how far the surge water reached and how fast it rose – I've never seen anything like it," said Mr. Morgan, who was working his fourth major storm since coming to Keesler.

The steam plant was crumbling and Mr. Payne and Mr. Bitton had sought refuge in personal vehicles as the Dominator plowed through the water at the north side of the medical center.

From left, Stanley Morgan, Al Watkins and MSgt. Lonnie Bacon, 81st Civil Engineer Squadron, are credited with saving two trapped co-workers, as well as the base's water supply, during Hurricane Katrina Aug. 29. Behind them is the Dominator, used for the rescue mission. (U.S. Air Force photo by Susan Griggs)

Mr. Morgan couldn't force the door open from inside the cab, so he rolled down the window to open the door from the outside. The door's metal frame buckled from the force of the flood surge as they pulled their co-workers into the two-person cab with them for a snug ride back to the compound.

"We weren't scared – the adrenaline really kicks in when you have a job to do and you know people are counting on you to get it done," Mr. Watkins stressed.

"In my book, these guys are heroes among heroes," Major Szatanek pointed out. "The guys at the medical center made a heroic effort to keep the steam plant operating, and Mr. Watkins and Mr. Morgan were true heroes in risking their own lives to save other members of our team."

97th Air Expeditionary Group arrives at Keesler
For more about this new unit, see article
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KEESLER BASICS:

General Information

Evacuation info – All remaining dependents who plan to evacuate are required to report to the Levitow Bldg. (Fish Bowl/Family Assistance Center) to identify your method of evacuation. Please sign up at the Fish Bowl as soon as possible. If you are leaving via **military airlift**, the deadline to evacuate is Sept. 8. If you are leaving by **commercial airline**, military buses will provide transportation to Mobile airport daily from the Levitow Bldg. at 7 a.m. today through Friday. Contact vehicle operations at DSN 597-2430 or 2432 to sign up. Please provide your departure date. If you are leaving via **POV**, please provide your departure date.

Food – Hot meals are available at both dining facilities.

Breakfast: 5:30 to 8 a.m. at the Azalea Dining Facility.

Lunch: Soup, Sandwich and Salad at the Azalea dining facility 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Dinner: 5 to 9 p.m. at the Magnolia Dining Facility.

AAFES – The mini mall BX hours of operation are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The BX accepts cash, credit and debit cards and personal checks.

Gasoline – Gasoline is available 24 hours at the AAFES Service Station; \$30 limit with a major credit at unattended pumps.

Fish Bowl Movie Schedule –

Wednesday: Benji, 10:30 a.m.; Beauty Shop, 7 p.m.; **Thursday:** Babe, 10:30 a.m.; Hitch, 7 p.m.; **Friday:** 10:30 a.m., Little Giants; Independence Day, 7 p.m.; **Saturday:** Charlotte's Web, 10:30 a.m.; Indiana Jones' Last Crusade, 7 p.m.; **Sunday:** The Emperor's New Groove, 10:30 a.m.; Patch Adams, 7 p.m.

Fitness Center – The Blake Fitness Center is open from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Claims Information

Claims Briefings – Legal representatives provide claims briefings for all personnel at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. daily. Call DSN 597-5404 for more information.

USAA – Representatives are located at the Levitow Bldg. Their hours of operation are 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Personnel should contact a representative calling toll-free (800) 531-8222 before visiting.

GEICO – A representative from GEICO is available to answer questions at the Levitow Bldg. until further notice. Please call claims into the GEICO regional office at (800) 841-3000.

SARC – Keesler's Sexual Assault Response Coordinator is available 24 hours a day. If you are the victim of an assault, contact DSN 597-7278 or the Keesler Command Post at DSN 377-4330 for immediate assistance.

Finance Information

Finance – Limited financial services are available at the Levitow Bldg. from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Customer service hours are 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. To reach a representative for customer service/travel pay related issues call DSN 597-7479. For budget issues, call DSN 597-2770. Contact a finance representative at DSN 597-7256 for additional information.

Cash Advances – Up to \$200 is available from the finance office located in the Levitow Bldg. Additionally, Travel pay and pay advances are available to military members and their spouses from other military installations' finance centers.

Health Care Information

Emergency Room/Urgent care clinic – Medical care is available at the EMEDS tent hospital located directly across from Tyer House and beside the Sablich Center. Routine or non-urgent sick call hours are 8-11 a.m. and 3-6 p.m. daily. 24-hour emergency care is available. Those not in the local area can contact the nearest military medical facility or call (800) 444-5445.

Life Skills – Life Skills Support Teams are located in the Fish Bowl and at the EMEDS tent hospital. A mental health provider is on-call 24 hours through the EMEDS.

Health Care for Military Families – Wherever Keesler's family members are located, their health care needs will be

met. Military treatment facilities across the U.S. have extended hours, established refugee clinics and begun many other creative programs to take care of displaced active duty family members and retirees. Further, TRICARE has waived referral requirements for Keesler's TRICARE Prime enrollees. Necessary care can be obtained from any network provider with no preauthorization required. Family members should call 800-444-5445 for help in finding care.

Medical Transportation – A medical shuttle will transport personnel for routine medical issues from 8 to 11 a.m. and 3 to 6 p.m. Shuttles will stop at the Welch Theater, Thompson Hall, Wolfe Hall, Building 5022, Shaw House, Muse Manor and the Clinical Research Laboratory.

Dental Clinic – The Dental Clinic is open for acute needs from 7:30-9 a.m. and 1-2 p.m.. The temporary telephone number is DSN 597-3003.

NORTHAF brings 97th AEG to Keesler

NORTHAF has established the Air Expeditionary Groups (AEG) to lead the humanitarian mission and support to civil authorities.

The 97th AEG, commanded by Col. Linda Medler, is bedded down at Keesler AFB and is currently responsible for the Gulf Coast east of New Orleans.

All personnel arriving to Keesler assigned to the 97th AEG need to go to Muse Manor and tell the PERSCO team they are attached to the group.

The group is living in the Triangle Area and working out of Bryan Hall.