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EXERCISE VIGILANT GUARD

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n annual event, Exercise Vigilant Guard tests the capabilities of National Guard units, mainly in various homeland security and civil emergency scenarios across the United States each year. Two large earthquakes formed the setting for Vigilant Guard 17-1 which took place across California and Nevada in late 2016.

California, with its vulnerability to earthquakes and large wildfires, devotes considerable resources to mitigate the worst effects of potential natural disasters. Over 14 months in the planning, Vigilant Guard 17-1 involved around 9,000 personnel. It drew participation from the California, Arizona, Nevada and Hawaii Army and Air Force National Guards. Also taking part were the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region IX, Los Angeles County Fire Department, and a wide range of local organizations such as County Sheriff and Police Departments across a number of locations.

Disaster Scenario

In the simulated scenario staged for Vigilant Guard 17-1, a major 6.7 magnitude earthquake struck Nevada on November 12 between Lake Meade and Las Vegas. Less than 48 hours later a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck along the San Andreas Fault with its epicenter at San Bernardino, California. Eight counties were heavily affected with fatalities and damage to major infrastructure (airports, mass transit, bridges, ports and roads) as well as utilities (water, potable water, wastewater, electrical power, communications and natural gas). The damage was compounded by fires that ignited because of downed wires and ruptured gas lines.

Aircraft and helicopters are vital in helping to deal with the level of devastation generated by large earthquakes. Rapid mobilisation is therefore very important. Key assets conducting emergency tasks in Vigilant Guard 17-1 were helicopters from the California Army National Guard (CA ARNG). The Headquarters of the US Army's 40th Division, responsible for California and much of the Western United States, is located at Los Alamitos, a large Joint Forces Training Base (JFTB) within the South West Los Angeles metropolitan area. Although the division's aviation component, the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade (40th CAB) is headquartered in Fresno, Los Alamitos was designated as the division's headquarters for JFTB-40 and the main operations base for Army National Guard aviation units, taking part. Supporting the event, across the state, were more than 500 members of the California National Guard mainly from helicopter units of the 140th Aviation Regiment; numerous ground units, California Air National Guard's 129th Rescue Wing from Moffett Field and the 146th Airlift Wing from Channel Islands Air National Guard Base. California has a large National Guard component with approximately 4,500 full-time and 21,000 part-time personnel in state, military and Guard Bureau positions.

EXERCISE VIGILANT GUARD MILITARY

Mutual Support

Another significant contributor to the exercise were 175 Guardsmen from Hawaii's Air and Army National Guard, temporarily deployed to California. The personnel were assigned to Hawaii National Guard's CERF-P (Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear high-yield explosive Enhanced Response Force Package). CERF-P team commander, Major William Flynn outlined the unit: "The CERF-P is a team composed of Army and Air National Guardsmen who respond to disasters which exceed the capacity of local agencies in terms of search and rescue, mass casualty decontamination, medical triage, fatality search and recovery, and communications." Their participation in Vigilant Guard 17-1 was assured because Arizona, California, Hawaii and Nevada all form part of FEMA's Region IX, so mutual assistance is a necessity, despite the large geographical distances involved. Hawaii Air National Guard's, 154th Medical Group, Detachment 1, together with their California Air Guard counterparts and civil emergency responders formed the on-scene medical response element. In a real situation, once an official request for assistance is made, Hawaii's CERF-P is capable of deploying within a relatively short time.

Damage Assessment

One urgent task following a natural disaster, especially an earthquake, is to gain a picture of the affected area and the extent of damage sustained. Fulfilling this role for the exercise was A Company, 3rd Battalion, 140th Aviation Regiment, which deployed two LUH-72A Lakota helicopters from Stockton Metropolitan Airport to JFTB Los Alamitos.
military exercise vigilant guard

arrived with specialist decontamination and a KC-135R Stratotanker from Hickam the same airfield. A C-17A Globemaster survey, as the pilot hovered in position. Sgt Powers was constantly using his hand major highway intersections in the city.

MX-15 to evaluate the extent of damage at various points along the route. Sensor facilities. Working gradually northwards out to the coast at Long Beach, searching for potential damage to the port handling facilities. Working gradually northwards up the coast, pausing for a few minutes at various points along the route. Sensor operator, Sgt Eric Powers, using the MX-15 to evaluate the extent of damage to Los Angeles International Airport and major highway intersections in the city.

As ‘Shadow 11’ headed north and out toward the coast, two C-130Es from the 40th Airlift Wing of Camarillo Air National Guard Station and Naval Air Station Point Mugu exercise operating location (the two facilities share the same airfield). A C-17A Globemaster and a KC-135R Stratotanker from Hickam were parked on the extensive aprons, having arrived with specialist decontamination.

A few miles to the east, the pilot circled the south eastern perimeter of Camarillo Regional Airport, close to an exercise rescue and disaster training area co-located there. During ‘Shadow 11’ entire flight, a live feed from the mx-15 was transmitted to a small, trailer-based, mobile control unit, part of the 99th Civil Support Team, the unit located, for exercise purposes, on the edge of Camarillo airfield. Sgt Powers was in constant contact with them, re-tasking the sensor and zooming in to capture detailed imagery in response to specific requests from the control.

Artfields like Channel Islands Air National Guard Station, Camarillo and many others, would be key entry points into California for external civil and military relief efforts, during the exercise and in the event of a real disaster, so establishing their condition and any significant damage is an early priority. Following a brief refuelling stop at Camarillo, after nearly two-and-a-half hours in the air, ‘Shadow 11’ headed back towards Los Alamitos, via central Los Angeles and Hollywood, once again checking for damage to infrastructure over the gargantuan metropolis sprawl.

Casualty Evacuation Special Operations, Rescue and Camp Buehring in Kuwait. At a similar FEMA training facility in Sherman Oaks, near Los Angeles, soldiers are all better prepared to respond efficiently.”

When an actual incident does come up, we have an understanding of how we work, so everyone understands how they work. They, in turn, are exactly the type of injuries we see in a civil disaster the wing would fly. Refueling Wing said: “One good thing about exercises like these is that the simulated injuries and casualty evacuation exercises across California and Nevada for some time, many military personnel had an opportunity to work alongside civilian counterparts from the police, fire and civil emergency services. Some for the first time. Lieutenant Eric Neubauer, with the 579th Engineer Battalion, summed up the exercise by saying: “Really, the bottom line is that we build relationships with civilian agencies and get an understanding of how they work. They, in turn, have an understanding of how we work, so when an actual incident does come up, we are all better prepared to respond efficiently.”

Heavy Lift

CH-47 Chinooks assigned to B-Helicopter Company “Delta Schooners”, 1st Battalion, 160th Aviation Regiment also based at Stockton Metropolitan Airport, also deployed to Los Alamitos for the exercise. B Company deployed with staffing accommodation and equipment carried on board their Chinooks which was used to build the JTF-400 Headquarters, set up early on the way back to Los Alamitos with the JTF-400 Headquarters, set up early on.

The unit received 12 new CH-47F Chinooks in February 2015, and addition to their daily operations, has been utilised for logistical support to the USMC throughout the state in recent years. The CH-47F allows for a more advanced and externally sling loads, medical teams or rescue personnel a massive advantage to any rescue, relief and recovery operations and would be heavily tasked in any real emergency.

In addition to flying heavy lift support during the exercises, the Delta Schooners provided transportation for visiting state and military officials.

As Lt Col Darcy Swaim, from the 161st Air Refuelling Wing who personnel (a component of the KC-135-Met Flight) met by the resident 161st Medical Group Arizona for treatment. On arrival they were waiting C-130s, including a 130th Rescue Squadron HH-60A which dropped off the helicopters, casualties were carefully loaded aboard two waiting C-130s, including a 130th Rescue Squadron MC-130P for a flight to Sky Harbor National Airport in Arizona for treatment. On arrival they were met by the resident 161st Medical Group personnel (a component of the KC-135-Exploiter) Capt Steve Reel, who used their decontamination training and triage procedures before treating the patients.

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During a civil disaster the wing would fly rescue and evacuation tasks. Some of the 129th Rescue Squadron’s five HH-60G Pave Hawk combat search and rescue helicopters from their training base at Tucson, Arizona for treatment. On arrival they were waiting C-130s, including a 130th Rescue Squadron HH-60A which dropped off the helicopters, casualties were carefully loaded aboard two waiting C-130s, including a 130th Rescue Squadron MC-130P for a flight to Sky Harbor National Airport in Arizona for treatment. On arrival they were met by the resident 161st Medical Group personnel (a component of the KC-135-Exploiter) Capt Steve Reel, who used their decontamination training and triage procedures before treating the patients.

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