PARTICIPATION IN HURRICANE KATRINA RECOVERY, AND AFTER

In the days after Hurricane Katrina came ashore, I saw a need for a more proactive Department of Defense Public Affairs participation, and wrote a letter to Department of Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs making suggestion that retirees could be recalled for duty in the South. At the time there was significant activity underway in the War against terrorism and many PA assets were deployed overseas. The US Army Corps of Engineers Public Affairs Office in Washington, DC reached out to me and asked if I would serve as a rehired annuitant at the GS-11/Step 10 level to be part of the Public Affairs Team in Mississippi. I agreed, and work commenced to prepare for the mission. I deployed to the USACE Vicksburg district office in early October 2005 and reported to the PAO, Michael Logue, for duty. Mr. Logue and his staff had been working 12 and 14 hour shifts from a time before the storm’s arrival, and were exhausted.

My initial assignment was to be the USACE PAO representative in the FEMA Emergency Support Function-15, directed by Mary Hudak of the FEMA Office in Atlanta who had been deployed to do information activities in Mississippi. My task was to represent USACE interests to her, and to assist with liaison duties as needed. The headquarters function was located within an empty office building in downtown Jackson, Mississippi, close to the residence of the Mississippi Governor. Both the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency were co-located in the facility. The US Army Corps of Engineers was FEMA’s action arm, on both sides of the Mississippi River. I was not involved with activities in Louisiana, but worked a wide variety of projects and programs within Mississippi.

FEMA-MEMA-USACE Liaison functions included passing on requests to Vicksburg, attending meetings, working with the various sub-set functions of FEMA ESF-15, and with other ESF activities, as well as with deployed DOD Public Affairs personnel located in the headquarters. Essentially, I fell back on Public Affairs training and experiences and used that as a basis of operation for the one-deep position. I was permitted to write news releases concerning activities within the FEMA-MEMA Headquarters, and then, a couple of weeks into the assignment, I also was allowed to drive south to the coast to do some articles, particularly about the Blue Roof Program for residences, and about a program to construct temporary public facilities and schools for the ravaged counties on and just behind the Mississippi coastline.

The end of November, my boss in Mississippi, Mike Logue in Vicksburg, asked me to extend and to deploy south from Jackson to Hattiesburg, to fill the public affairs position within the EFO-North Office. EFO stands for Emergency Field Office. The USACE-Vicksburg had four of them as the functioning arm of the operation. An EFO was somewhat like a battalion, and took care of recovery needs within a specified grouping of counties. EFO-North was headquartered in a vacant photo processing building, and took care of debris disposal, Blue Roof, and community assistance projects within a 20 county area.
Down on the coast, where Katrina’s storm surge had done such tremendous destruction there were three EFOs; EFO-East, EFO-Central, and EFO-West, all very similar to what was being done in EFO-North, in terms of recovery operations, and working with contractors and other government agencies. The FEMA Office in Atlanta has all the statistics and information about the duties of these USACE organizations. Essentially, then, in terms of span of operations and in terms of personnel assigned, what the USACE had in place in southern Mississippi could be compared to a brigade-sized operation of four battalions. Most of the people assigned to a wide variety of duties were not US Army Corps of Engineer personnel. They were, instead, volunteers to do hands on jobs, as assignbed, and came from a wide assortment of agencies and activities across the Federal spectrum. They came in for 30 days of duty and then went back home to their normal Bureau of Indian Affairs or Park Service or Bureau of Land Management jobs, or what5 have you. Only a handful of USACE personnel were permeant party, so to speak, and filled the leadership, management and engineer positions of what was known as TASK FORCE HOPE, headed by the US Army Colonel who ran the Vicksburg District and Lower Mississippi Division of USACE. The control point for the four Emergency Field Offices was a headquarters set up in an undamaged building on Keesler Air Force Base, called RFO meaning Recovery Field Office.

I had been at Hattiesburg just a week, replacing a USACE employee who had been brought by the Corps from a District Office PAO in Japan, a couple days after the storm hit. He was needed back at his normal place of duty in Asia. I had just settled in and had visited all the operations locations of the EFO and had just started to get a handle on what was going on, when a serious medical emergency happened back home for the RFO Public Affairs Officer. I was a GS-11 and the other EFO PAOs were GS-12s, but they were heavily engaged in East-, Central-, and West- activities. Mr. Logue asked me to go south to Keesler to serve as the RFO PAO, while also “keeping an eye” on activities at the EFO-North area. I reported to Keesler and held the RFO-PAO job for December and a week into January 2006 while the USACE Headquarters scrambled around trying to find someone for the job. Alicia Embry was deployed to Baghdad, and was doing an excellent job for the Corps in Iran. They determined she was more needed back in the US and she did a hurried turnover of her duties to a military person and then headed for Mississippi. When Alicia arrived, I was then asked to go back to Hattiesburg, and served there until mid-March. We all had little time off throughout the course of the recovery, and we worked 12- and 14-hour days six days a week and sometimes seven. I was in my 60s and I have diabetes II. It finally caught up with me, and I returned to Pittsburg, Kansas for a rest and for some medical treatment. I had been home just once in the time of being a rehired annuitant, promoted to YA-02 from GS-11/Step 10. I had broken a tooth and had to have the remnants extracted, which was why I did the three days at home trip in December, a painful thing to have to do because our manpower in southern Mississippi was minimal. Mike sent his deputy to fill in for me when I did the emergency trip back to Kansas.
In early January we were just out of people. The public affairs staff for all of the RFO, meaning ther EFOs, was down to me, another rehired annuitant in his 70s who handled the worst hit of the three coastal EFOs, a secretary who took on the administrative portion of the RFO PAO job, and I used the rental car provided to bounce around, the other three EFOs. Mike Logue, before Katrina, had been training a handful of personnel at the Vicksburg headquarters in doing the PAO job as auxiliaries. The Colonel got permission for them to be activated, and by the time Alicia Embry arrived, we had some excellent workers doing—in the main—community relations and media escort tasks throughout southern Mississippi.

The biggest challenge faced by the RFO team was handling intense media interest in firefighting operations taking place at most of the EFO debris sites located in the RFO region. What had happened was that when Katrina came ashore, it spawned upwards of a hundred tornados that had travelled, in a few cases, to the Tennessee state line. These storms ripped through the pine forests of southern Mississippi. These trees had little in the way of root balls. Some of them were over a hundred feet tall. There were sticks of timber down in many, many places. A job of the Corps had been to supervise cleanup. Debris sites of some forty acres each had been established in the counties. The sticks were taken there and ground up, then spread out in piles of up to a thousand feet long, fifty feet tall and 200-300 feet wide. Each debris site had upwards of eight or ten of these strings.

There had been so much damage done by the storms and so much in the way of trees knocked down that to help get communities back up and running the vegetation material needed to be contained in specific areas. Yet this led to internal combustion problems, with temperatures of well over a thousand degrees monitored inside the strings of pine mulch, and soon there were columns of smoke reaching more than a thousand feet into the air—Katrina’s last gift.

Fighting these fires was simply beyond local fire departments so the USACE brought in commercial firefighting companies of the type used for fighting oil field fires. These operations required 24-7 Public Affairs presence to reassure the public. It took a month but the fires were extinguished by massive watering operations and by using large military bulldozers to spread the piles of mulch out. Soon, many of the debris sites had mulch four-six feet thick covering them, as well as runoff channels and pockets of water up to twenty feet deep. It became very dangerous to work at these places but the USACE personnel and the volunteers did an amazing job in keeping the public safe.

I returned home in mid March, and the USACE PAO put me on an unpaid status for reactivation, should there be another hurricane come in. There were still thousands of people living in temporary camps. I tried to convince the USACE PAO in Washington to activate an Army reserve components Public Affairs Detachment, like the one in Austin, the 100th PAD of the Texas Army National Guard.
They knew they had tremendous manning problems, all caused by the actions of the Secretary of Defense just before 9-11 when the PA manpower slots were turned into other things. Yet the USACE wanted to keep public affairs actions as an in-house task. I still think a few reservists should have been used to supplement the RFO-EFOS, not only in Mississippi but also in Louisiana.

Katrina ended my public affairs career. I did serve a few years as a volunteer in the 50th Commemoration of the Vietnam War, working as a writer for the director, General Claude M. Kicklighter until his own retirement from the directorship.

When the second Army Downsizing came about, I was fifty years of age and was told by the CPO at Fort Jackson that the job of being the deputy PAO and Chief of Media and Community Relations was not needed at the GS-11 level. He said the GS-9 in the office would move up, and that the post would try to find me a GS-7 job somewhere, probably in supply. I snorted and put in my paperwork. I liked Fort Jackson’s task of turning out good soldiers, yet I thought then and think today that about 90 percent of the post activities and personnel up beyond the basic training task needed investigation. There were a lot of things about Fort Jackson management that was simply not in keeping with Army values.

When I left Fort Jackson in January 1995 for early retirement, I had about 24 years and ten months of service, and I had no job. We came home to Pittsburg, Kansas and I spent a number of years working as an adjunct instructor at a community college, and also some time spent with a variety of other jobs, including a television news position in Joplin. The work done during Katrina put me over twenty five years of total service and the USACE made sure I received a certificate and a pin to mark the point. I am appreciative that the USACE did that for me.

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These writings were done as part of a package I put together to use as part of an application for consideration for the DOD Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs position, a job that had been held by one of my bosses in Vietnam, Lt Col Billy Greener, during the first time Mr. Rumsfeld was Secretary of Defense. My intent was to try and restore Public Affairs as a recognized weapon in the War On Terror, something I still think is needed. I spent my life writing about others so it felt very strange to write about myself. Hopefully I did it right because I really wanted the job, even though it was a political position.