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National Guard rescues people, cattle after severe winter storms

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By Sgt. Jim Greenhill, National Guard Bureau

ARLINGTON, Va. – Citizen-Soldiers and Airmen in eight states rescued people and hauled hay to livestock following a severe end-of-year winter storm that stretched from America's northern to southern borders.

U.S. Northern Command deployed a Defense Coordinating Officer to Kansas, and the command is coordinating with the National Guard, FEMA and the Kansas Division of Emergency Management to assist in relief efforts there. USNORTHCOM is also coordinating with the National Guard as it conducts relief operations in other states.

Hundreds of Guard members in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas and Washington – sometimes assisted by other states – spent their holiday season rescuing stranded motorists, carrying medical supplies and restoring power. In Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico, Guard members dropped hay from helicopters to starving cattle.

At least 13 people in five states died in the storm.

"That responsibility is one of our primary missions, and we have always responded," Air Force Maj. Gen. Mason Whitney, Colorado's adjutant general, told the American Forces Information Service. "That's the strength of the National Guard. We are the forward-deployed forces in communities across America for the homeland defense and emergency response mission."

The Joint Operations Center at National Guard Bureau – which coordinates Guard operations worldwide – and other sources provided this picture of Minutemen and women helping citizens dig out from as much as three feet of snow.

Colorado

In Colorado, vehicles stranded by a pre-Christmas snowstorm that dumped 30 inches in the mountains and nine inches on the plains rendered Interstate 25 impassable, and Guardmembers helped state troopers clear the road. Drivers were stranded on I-25, US-52 and I-70. Hundreds of miles of interstates were closed.

About 60 Colorado National Guard members rescued dozens of stranded motorists after the most powerful snowstorm in almost four years.

"They're telling me it's zero visibility," Whitney, the Colorado adjutant general, told The Associated Press. "They'll kind of bump into something, and it'll turn out to be a car with people in it."

The Guard conducted search and rescue missions, provided emergency medical transport and carried supplies to Red Cross shelters.

Citizen-Soldiers and Airmen took food and water to thousands of travelers trapped at Denver International Airport, closed more than two days by the storm.

Five days after the Colorado Guard stood down from that first storm, it swung into action again before the severe blizzard conditions of Dec. 28-29, as its joint forces headquarters issued a warning order as the second storm approached.

Colorado Guard leaders anticipated that the new storm centered on Denver and Colorado Springs on top of previously accumulated snow could again threaten lives and further disrupt travel. Even before assistance was requested, the Colorado Guard prepared dozens of high ground clearance vehicles and aviation assets to aid local emergency responders. Some 166 Guard members stayed overnight at armories to be in position ahead of time.

Challenges included snowfall that varied from seven to 30 inches and was blown by 70 mph wind gusts, forming drifts up to six feet high across roads. Hundreds of motorists were stranded, including tour bus passengers rescued by the Guard on US-287 in Prowers County. Roads again closed, including interstates. The same storm moved down to New Mexico and then on to the Texas panhandle.

Guard members took food, water, blankets and cots to shelters that ran low on supplies. People were trapped in their homes. Power was cut off. The domino effect of disrupted transportation corridors caused grocery stores across the Rocky Mountain states to run short of food for days. Gov. Bill Owens declared an emergency.

More than 126 Colorado Guard members patrolled on the ground and in the air to rescue stranded motorists, provided medical aid to five people and medical transport and distributed medicine, baby formula and other critical supplies to isolated areas along the state's Front Range.

"It's amazing to see how people work so well together under stressful conditions," Capt. Jason Stuchlik, 2nd Battalion, 157th Field Artillery, told The Pueblo Chief. Previously, Stuchlik's unit was part of the National Guard's historic response to Hurricane Katrina. "We are seeing another extreme, from hot to cold," he said. "The Katrina effort has made us more prepared for this situation."

Guard members rescued 134 people, recovered four emergency response vehicles and eight private vehicles.

They conducted medical resupply missions and – backed by Guard members and air assets from Oklahoma and Wyoming – dropped hundreds of bales of hay to some of an estimated 345,000 cattle stranded by 10-foot snowdrifts and facing starvation. In 1997, 30,000 cattle died in a Colorado snowstorm.

"You can tell immediately where they are," Whitney told CBS News. "You'll see a bunch of dark spots clustered together in a sea of white."

Guard helicopters also dropped Meals Ready to Eat outside remote homes.

"It's the middle of nowhere," Sgt. 1st Class Steve Segin told CBS News. "You lose the power, you might as well be in 1885. There's no cell phone, no lights, no contact."

Kansas

Some 114 Army and Air National Guard members assisted at emergency shelters and provided power, supplies and transportation after between 15 and 36 inches of snow stranded motorists, emergency services and medical personnel in road-side areas in western Kansas. Gov. Kathleen Sebelius declared a disaster area in 44 counties after the storm that brought 13-foot snowdrifts. More than 60,000 customers were without power for up to a week after about 8,000 transmission poles were downed.

Some 3.7 million head of cattle, worth \$3.4 billion, are located in the affected counties, it was reported Jan. 5.

A UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter stood by for rescues as Guard members helped with house-to-house welfare checks. Four armories served as shelters. Accumulating snow caused a fire department building to collapse, and the Kansas National Guard provided an armory for emergency responders. A Black Hawk dropped hay to snow and ice-bound cattle.

Kansas and Colorado agreed to support lifesaving cross-border operations.

Nebraska

About seven Nebraska National Guard members helped utility workers restore power to about 35,000 people left without power for up to a week after the storm downed an estimated 38 major transmission lines in central Nebraska. An OH-58 Kiowa helicopter and a Black Hawk helped power officials assess damage.

Western and north-central Nebraska faced freezing rain, heavy snow and strong winds. Some trees had a three-inch layer of ice.

New Mexico

About 20 members of the New Mexico National Guard using a dozen high-wheeled vehicles and helicopters provided emergency medical assistance and rescued stranded motorists, hunters and residents of remote areas. The record-setting storm turned the desert white and canceled flights. This occurred after a year that had already seen New Mexico Guard members patrolling the border with Mexico as part of Operation Jump Start and providing potable water and equipment to drought-stricken communities, in addition to overseas missions and continued counterdrug activity.

A Black Hawk rescued a stranded heart transplant patient. Another ferried a bulldozer operator to awaiting equipment so he could help ranchers get to cattle. Guard members also rescued four hunters and pulled people from five stranded vehicles. They provided cots to citizens in three cities.

Gov. Bill Richardson ordered more National Guard Black Hawks to provide welfare checks and drop hay.

"We're taking this extraordinary step to assist our farmers and ranchers as they struggle to save their livestock and dig out from the incredible snowfall," Richardson told the Albuquerque Journal. More than 15 inches of snow fell on Albuquerque, an arid desert city.

The New Mexico National Guard surveyed damage and delivered infant supplies to numerous homes, the governor's office reported.

Oklahoma

An Oklahoma National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopter joined a half-dozen Humvees as about 21 Guard members conducted air drops and search and recovery operations in Cimarron County, in the western part of the state.

Even as it responded in its own state, the Oklahoma National Guard also sent five members to Colorado to operate a Chinook providing humanitarian and livestock supplies.

Oregon

A Chinook and two Black Hawks from the Oregon National Guard were joined by a C-130 Hercules aircraft from the Nevada National Guard in a quest to save three climbers missing on Mount Hood.

The Hercules was equipped with infrared and a zooming camera lens. "This is the only one in the Air Force, so if they want this technology. It's coming from Reno," Master Sgt. Craig Madole, 152nd Intelligence Squadron, Nevada Air National Guard, told the Nevada Appeal. The same technology was used after Hurricane Katrina.

"Our hearts are going out to the families right now," Capt. Mike Brabish, Oregon National Guard, told The Seattle Times after one climber's body was found Dec. 17. The search for the other two will resume in the spring, officials said.

Texas

The Texas National Guard also anticipated the inclement weather, prepositioning about a dozen members at the Amarillo Armory who supported public safety workers in the Texas panhandle.

Washington

About 17 Guard members provided generators and other logistics to care centers for elderly people, wastewater treatment plants and other facilities after December windstorms knocked out power.

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