

SEABEE COURIER

www.cnbc.navy.mil/gulfport
QUICK EDITION

Vol. 2 No. 26

Naval Construction Battalion Center, Gulfport, Mississippi

August 19, 2019

50 years after Hurricane Camille: How the Navy Seabees' "Can Do" spirit helped the Gulf Coast recover

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The Gulf Coast region has been no stranger to extreme weather throughout the years, especially during hurricane season. More recent storms that spring to mind when people talk about hurricanes impacting the Gulf Coast are Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the coast of Mississippi in 2005, and more recently Hurricane Michael, which ripped through the Florida panhandle as a Category 5 storm just last year.

One storm that generations past have always referred to as synonymous with desola-



tion and destruction was Hurricane Camille. This Category 5 hurricane made landfall in Pass Christian, Miss., 50 years ago on Aug. 17, 1969, and left its mark on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for years to come.

The nation was in the middle of the Vietnam War at the time, and U.S. Navy Seabees from Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport were rotating battalions in and out of Asia, building and maintaining roads, bridges, hospitals and other facilities in the Quang Tri province of South Vietnam. Mobile Construction Battalion (MCB) 128, as it was called at the time, was just returning from its second deployment to Vietnam, just as MCB 74 and MCB 121 were in the midst of preparations for their upcoming tours in country.

Hurricane Camille put a damper on any deployment plans or post-deployment rest and relaxation as the Category 5 storm tore through the Mississippi Gulf Coast late that Sunday night and early the next morning.

Capt. James M. Hill, Jr., commanding officer of NCBC Gulfport back then, along with emer-

gency management staff, had already reviewed and implemented hurricane preparation plans, and the base opened up shelters on the installation for dependents and base civilians to weather out the storm. The captain and staff also worked with local governments and civil defense officials to coordinate their response to the coming hurricane, and later how to deal with its aftermath.

To this day, the maximum sustained winds of Hurricane Camille are still not known since the storm destroyed all wind-recording instruments within the area of landfall, but revised estimates put wind speeds along the Mississippi Gulf Coast at around 175 miles per hour, with a storm surge in Pass Christian of nearly 25 feet.

Since the Seabee base was on the eastern side of the storm's eye, it took a great deal of wind damage that night. A total of 46 buildings on base were destroyed by the high winds and rains, including 11 of the 20 warehouses onboard the center. Only one of the base's barracks was still in livable conditions.

In the days that followed, more than 1,700

Seabees from the installation – supervised by the 20th Naval Construction Regiment – rolled into the surrounding communities to help with recovery efforts. Seabees and corpsmen from MCB 121 combed through the ruins of the Veterans Administration Hospital in Gulfport, Miss., helping move patients who had sheltered there to ambulances and buses for transportation to Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi so they could be flown to hospitals in Jackson, Miss., and New Orleans, La.

Members of MCB 128, who had just returned from Vietnam, assisted with recovery efforts in Gulfport and Long Beach, Miss., while Seabees from MCB 121 rolled into Pass Christian to help with search and rescue and clean-up efforts. MCB 74 members who hadn't already deployed for their rotation to Vietnam were also helping with recovery efforts, and about 500 trainees from the base's Construction Training Unit (now known as Naval Construction Training Center (NCTC)) mobilized to assist the Seabees in Pass Christian.

The Seabees aided local civil defense and oth-

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er disaster recovery teams with house-to-house searches for survivors in the first few days following the storm. At the same time, they also helped clear fallen trees and other debris strewn across the streets to make roads passable for emergency and rescue vehicles. They used any available vehicles and equipment they had working at the time – bulldozers, trucks, front-end loaders, fork lifts and power chain saws – to assist with debris removal and other recovery efforts.

While repairs on the base were being made, the Seabees also set up a mobile trailer park known as 'Camille Court' just to the north of the base to house installation families who had lost their homes during the storm. At its height, the park consisted of almost 60 three-bedroom, two-bathroom trailers.

For nearly six weeks, Seabees from NCBC Gulfport worked daily to assist with recovery efforts in Gulfport, Long Beach and Pass Christian. Their efforts earned the base the Navy Unit Commendation for the exceptionally meritorious service the Seabees provided in helping the Mississippi Gulf Coast get back on its feet.

"The Seabees provided much needed manpower and equipment to help the communities of the Mississippi Gulf Coast," said Jon Scott, Seabee Historical Foundation operations manager. "I believe that using his or her skills to assist those in need during a crisis or natural disaster is the most rewarding task a Seabee does."

That willingness to assist and 'Can Do' spirit persists even to this day, as evidenced most recently by the Seabee's response to Hurricane Michael in October 2018. Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (NMCB) 11 and 133 conducted relief efforts on two military installations in the Florida panhandle – Naval Support Activity (NSA) Panama City and Tyndall Air Force Base – helping these

installations to get back up and running. NCBC Gulfport even opened its arms to evacuees from the area, taking in about 50 people from NSA Panama City, and it coordinated with members of their emergency management team and assisted with communication efforts to keep evacuated personnel up to date on recovery efforts in Panama City.

The current NCBC Gulfport Commanding Officer, Capt. William Whitmire, reaffirmed the strong relationship the Seabees have with their Mississippi Gulf Coast neighbors, and to supporting the mission of the U.S. Navy wherever they're needed.

"Since 1942, the Mississippi Gulf Coast community and the Navy Seabees have shared a long heritage and history together, and Hurricane Camille was a defining moment that solidified that relationship," said Whitmire. "Following the devastation caused by the storm, the work that the Seabees did – that they were both proud and happy to do – helped make that relationship even stronger than what it had ever been, and that relationship has continued to this day. The Seabees will always be there to help out wherever they can, whenever they can, and however they can."

(Information for this story was compiled from editions of The Seabee Center Courier from August-October 1969 and <https://www.weather.gov/>)

