

KATRINA'S MESS



39th Support Battalion soldiers, (L –R) SFC Bruce Brown of Star City and SGT Mike Mathis of Conway, assist ST Bernard Parish residents move ruined contents from their homes to the curbside.

Arkansas' 39TH Infantry Brigade Lends A Hand In “The BIG EASY”.

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Less than a year after returning home from Iraq, Arkansas troops has once again answered the call of duty. More than 500 men and women from the 39TH Infantry Brigade are assisting with recovery efforts of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA. This mission of Operation Task Force Arkansas includes securing neighborhoods of evacuated residence and businesses as well as rendering humanitarian support to those returning to salvage what's left of their lives. Although the flood waters have receded, after submerging about 80 percent of the gulf coastal city, the destructive path of Katrina will be visible and resourcefully demanding for years to come.

Neighborhoods throughout the city now bare scars where tens of thousands of families once called home. Every direction you look there is damage done and in most cases total destruction.



Alpha Company's recovery team remove large displaced items such as vehicles, boats, storage buildings and trees from pathways and rooftops, to allow residents access to their homes.

Task Force Arkansas is made up of soldiers from Arkansas' Air and Army National Guard units all over the state. The majority are 39TH Brigade troops from the 2-153 Infantry and Support Battalion which make up Task Force "Gunslinger". Gunslinger is assigned to the ST. Bernard Parish, one of the most devastated areas of N.O., located along the east bank of the Mississippi River.

The presences of the National Guard troops appear to be a welcomed sight for the few residents scattered throughout the neighborhoods. For those who returned to sift through the piles of muddy rubble, which used to be the soul of their home, it is now just a nightmare of frustrations. Judging by the impressions, from troop interaction with the residents, most claim to have had enough and will seek higher grounds. The troops are convinced that aerial and televised views, of the crippled city, did no justice for the destruction they have actually seen here on the ground the past week.



SPC Chris "Lucky" Luchsinger from Cabot, AR controls the flow of traffic through a checkpoint at the ST Bernard Parish entrance. The 2-153 IN is tasked with providing security throughout the Parish.

“When we first arrived and drove through the ninth ward area, it felt like a scene from a Sci-Fi movie where the earth had been hit by some nuclear explosion and everything left was destroyed,” explained SFC Huey Davis of Pine Bluff, AR.

While patrolling through the city soldiers see the life residue, of people they’ve never met, lying displaced on the front lawns among mud soaked debris, in trees or piled up on the curbside by the home owners and by relief workers clearing pathways for travel. The debris that is settled on the rooftops and the muddy waterline stains reveal just how high the floodwaters were. In some areas the water reached sixteen feet.

Troops are in awe of the heart wrenching tales of events during the storm told by residents who chose to ride out the storm and witness the catastrophe in the making. This could explain the enormously high morale and willingness of each soldier, who waded through the six inch mud and stench that is embedded inside each home, knowing he or she is making an impact towards the disaster relief effort.

“Our soldier’s morale is high and that is due to their understanding of why we are here. We haven’t had a bit of trouble out of any of them and the things we’ve been getting accomplished for the people here have been tremendous,” explained 1SG Garry Bradshaw of Marianna, AR.



1SG Bradshaw rescued the only living and unaffected item in a destroyed evacuated house and returned it to its' rightful owner.

The 39th has been providing emergency assistance since August when hurricane Katrina made her presence known to Louisiana and Mississippi. As the needs for relief are revealed, the Arkansas Guard has increased its workforce accordingly. Soldiers have been constantly rotating back and forth from the state lending assistance.



39th soldiers operate one of several points of distribution (POD) with bottled water, ice and meal packs. (Above) SPC Brian Kitsmiller assists a local resident with meal packs.

There is plenty of work to be done here in the “Big Easy” and no single group can do it alone. It is a joint effort of FEMA, military, local and neighboring municipalities, the Red Cross, local civilian contractors and volunteers. The 39TH will remain in New Orleans throughout the month of November, before soldiers begin rotating back to Arkansas for good, unless their mission dictates otherwise. Nonetheless the Bowie Brigade will answer the call.