

TASK FORCE PANTHER

82nd Airborne Units Deploy to New Orleans

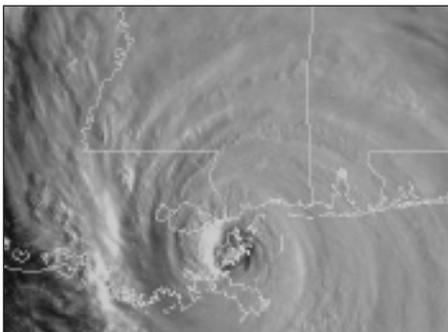
COLONEL BRYAN R. OWENS AND CAPTAIN ROBERT B. HAMILTON

At 1000 hours on September 3, 2005, Task Force Panther was ordered to deploy to New Orleans. The mission was twofold. First, lead, organize, and conduct search and rescue operations (SAR) throughout Orleans Parish. Second, secure key infrastructure sites within the city of New Orleans. Within six hours of notification, TF Panther was en route to New Orleans. Shortly upon arrival, the regiment secured the New Orleans Convention Center, the Superdome, began rescue operations and evacuating displaced Americans.

TF Panther deployed with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment; 3rd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (soon to be 5-73rd CAV); 307th Engineers; and 82nd Forward Support Battalion, but in reality, TF Panther led a much larger, joint task force. Upon arrival, the regiment took on a more pronounced signature by incorporating elements from the U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Coast Guard, National Guard, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, Emergency Medical Services, and state and local police. TF Panther galvanized these assets, to include more than 90 watercraft ranging from the *USS Tortuga* to Zodiac inflatable watercraft. TF Panther brought to the area of operations command, control, communications and leadership. There were many organizations willing to assist with a multitude of diverse capabilities, but lacked direction and a way to insert as a solution to the challenges that faced New Orleans.

In the matter of 14 days, TF Panther conducted 219 search and rescue (SAR) patrols and more than 102 infrastructure operations to restore the city's infrastructure. As a result, TF Panther rescued 853 displaced Americans and evacuated 4,906 — this does not include the more than 350 pets also taken to safety. While saving lives, TF Panther also focused on saving the city by removing debris around fire stations, police stations, hospitals, schools, and other key government buildings and historical landmarks, to include St. Louis Street and Orleans Avenue Housing Projects, the Superdome, the U.S. Mint, Louis Armstrong Auditorium, Aquarium of the Americas, Charity Hospital, Touro Hospital, and St. Louis Cathedral. Concurrently, elements of the 307th Engineer Battalion cleared more than 75 miles of road enabling the city to re-open as the waters receded.

As a part of its search and rescue operations, TF Panther became the first link in connecting displaced Americans with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It commanded the All-American Evacuation site. At the evacuation site, elements from 2-505th PIR and 82nd FSB established a medical triage/treatment facility to provide fast effective medical attention to hurricane



victims prior to evacuation. With a combination of busses and helicopters, the TF was able to evacuate Americans 15 minutes after completing their medical exam. In conjunction with this effort to provide medical assistance, the task force provided Medical Civilian Assistance (MEDCAS) to the community. In four days alone, the MEDCAS program treated more than 1,400 Americans. They provided more than 1,500 vaccinations for Tetanus and Hepatitis A. For those who

chose not to evacuate, they provided food and water. In every neighborhood TF Panther entered, its units were met with praise. The task force received glowing reports from over 55 embedded national and international media sources. In one NBC broadcast, Tom Brokaw warmly noted, “The French Quarter is the home of the 82nd Airborne Division.”

TF Panther employed the 21st Chemical Company to establish the first decontamination site in support of Operation American Assist — the first real-world decontamination operation in recent Army history. The site serviced both military and civilian assets, decontaminating more than 500 persons and 1,000 pieces of equipment.

Throughout Operation American Assist, TF Panther pulled on its diverse resources to meet the challenges facing New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Most importantly, TF Panther drew deep from its most treasured resource, its paratroopers. From a battalion commander using Vietnamese to comfort a family's fears about evacuation, to a medic using his native tongue of Tagalog to reunite an elderly Filipino woman with her daughter across the United States, TF Panther continues to personify the “All-American” spirit of the 82nd Airborne Division.

Upon completion of responsibilities in New Orleans, TF Panther was called upon to weather Hurricane Rita and assist as necessary in the Orleans and Terrebonne Parishes in Louisiana, which they did masterfully. In short, TF Panther was key to the success of quickly gaining control of the chaos that reigned after both Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The paratroopers of TF Panther showed the same dedication and commitment to America while in Louisiana that they have shown throughout their distinguished history.

Colonel Bryan R. Owens currently serves as the commander of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He previously served as the deputy G3 of the XVIII Airborne Corps.

Captain Robert B. Hamilton was commissioned through the ROTC program at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1998. He is currently serving as the Regimental Trial Counsel, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, at Fort Bragg.



Department of Defense photos

Soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division patrol the streets of New Orleans in support of the Hurricane Katrina relief effort.



Soldiers trudge through the flooded streets of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.



Major Todd Berry of the 82nd Airborne Division points out key locations on a map of New Orleans.



Paratroopers from the 3rd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, perform a search and rescue mission on September 13 in New Orleans.