

# NY-TF1 Deployments to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria

By Battalion Chiefs Joseph R. Downey and Jack Flatley

**T**he FEMA Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) system (under the Department of Homeland Security) activated and deployed all 28 task forces (TX-TF1 as a state resource) to respond to the devastating Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. Numerous task forces deployed their team more than once.

New York City Emergency Management (NYCEM) sponsors the NY-TF1, comprised of FDNY and NYPD members. Members of NY-TF1 from the FDNY primarily are from the Special Operations Command and required to complete additional FEMA training, as well as the training they receive to be a member of Rescue or Haz-Mat Operations. Team members are certified and authorized to operate in all-hazard environments, able to locate, rescue and provide medical care to trapped individuals. Their training prepares them to operate at structural collapses, confined spaces, trench collapses, hazardous-materials incidents, wide-area searches and water emergencies.

NY-TF1 has a transportation fleet to move 16,400 pieces of equipment in their cache, which allows the group to be self-sufficient for 72 hours at any incident. NY-TF1 has responded to many disasters, including terrorist attacks (Oklahoma City bombing); earthquakes (Haiti); and numerous hurricanes.

NY-TF1 deployed teams in a four-week span to the three hurricanes. NY-TF1 teams deployed on August 26th and finished their assignments on October 6, 2017. It was the first time in the 25-year history of the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue system that any team had been activated for three deployments within one month. It also was the first time that mission-ready packages (MRPs) for water operations were deployed.

Hurricane Harvey had intensified into a category 4 storm with winds recorded at 130 mph before it hit the Corpus Christi area. South Texas' infrastructure was crippled; numerous residences, businesses and structures were destroyed and power was lost for days. The storm stalled in place, which caused rainfall in the amounts of 15 to 60 inches during a 72-hour span. According to the National Weather Service, it was the most significant tropical rainfall event in U.S. history.

In addition to the rain, storm surges in some areas reached 12 feet above sea level. The FEMA US&R system activated six Type I teams, eight Type III teams, 13 mission-ready packages--water rescue and six HEPP (haz-mat equipment push package program) teams for deployment to Texas to rescue and assist 6,553 people trapped in their flooded neighborhoods. Unfortunately, 68 deaths were recorded due to the effects of the extreme wind conditions and historic rainfall.

NY-TF1 was activated for Hurricane Harvey on August 26th at 1900 hours as a Type I task force. A Type I task force has 80 members who fill 19 different positions on an organization chart. It usually takes four to six hours for a team to mobilize. The notified members assembled at their warehouse on Flushing Avenue in Brooklyn. Members checked in, were given a medical evaluation by the team doctor and received their equipment for deployment. The logistics section readied the fleet of 18 vehicles and trailers for departure and at 3 a.m. on August 27th, members began their 36-hour response to Texas.

The convoy encountered few difficulties along the 1,600-mile response route except for some minor vehicular issues, which were corrected along the way. The team arrived in the Houston area while it was still raining. NY-TF1's original destination was the AT&T Center in Arlington, Texas. They were redirected to Katy and their final destination was Angleton in Brazoria County, Texas. Members set up their base of operations in Angleton to support FEMA ESF 9 activities. NY-TF1 members met their 1<sup>st</sup> Branch Director, Todd Magliocca, at the Angleton Emergency Operation Center. Alongside the Brazoria County officials, they planned operations and assigned Sectors.



*In Angleton, Texas, the Blue team of NY-TF1 rescued a farmer, who was stranded on his tractor in moving water.*

In order to cover more ground and since there were to be no night operations, the team was divided into two squads, the Red team and the Blue team. Each rescue squad was equipped with four boats (two inflatable and two flat-bottom). The Red team operated in Sector two and the Blue team in Sector five. In Sector five, the Blue team made a dramatic rescue of a farmer in a tractor stuck in moving water (see photo). The Red team operated in Holiday Lakes, where many calls for assistance were being received. Both teams operated tirelessly to conduct searches, removals (pet and human), rescues and structural assessments for four consecutive days before being relieved.

Other teams operating in Brazoria County were FL-1, PA-1, MD-1 and CA-5. All teams were relieved by TX-1.

Rescue operations transitioned to recovery as the teams from Angleton were relocated to the demobilization center in Katy. Trucks and equipment were serviced and decontaminated. Some teams were demobilized and others were released, but not demobilized, allowing the teams to move with anticipation of Hurricane Irma deployment as the storm spun up through the Caribbean.

NY-TF1 made stops in Louisiana and Alabama before finally receiving orders from Blue Incident Support Team (IST) to report to Robbins Air Force Base in Georgia. The group of teams from Angleton—except for the Florida team, which was returned to Florida as a state resource--was redirected to Georgia for potential Hurricane Irma deployment.

NY-TF1 decided to replace all 80 members. NYCEM handled





*Hurricane-force winds and extremely heavy rain caused flash flooding, cutting off families from water and food in Puerto Rico.*

this logistical task. The new team departed La Guardia Airport and was flown to Atlanta using multiple planes. The teams swapped out and the members deployed for Hurricane Harvey returned to New York. The NY-TF1 Hurricane Irma team was a Type I, activated on September 6th, at 0700 hours, in preparation for a dangerous, category 5 hurricane heading for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Preparing the equipment cache to fly to San Juan, Puerto Rico, proved challenging, due to the restrictions on flying hazardous materials. The equipment cache had to be reconfigured to fit on the C-17 airframe. Due to its limitations, some equipment and support members of NY-TF1 were unable to fly to San Juan. NY-TF1 members left at Robbins Air Force Base became part of the FEMA Incident Support Team (IST), flew to San Juan and performed admirably in the logistics section of the IST for more than three weeks.

NY-TF1 travels in an eight-pallet ARM (air readiness module) configuration with its equipment packaged for air transport. The gear is stored on 463L airframe pallets and inventoried with hazmat declarations (haz-decs) for military transport on C-17s, C-130s and C-5s. NY-TF1 flew to Puerto Rico and staged there, but Irma only skirted the island with limited damage and NY-TF1 was demobilized on September 13<sup>th</sup>, returning home to New York on September 18<sup>th</sup>.

Fourteen Type I teams, one Type III team, two Type IV teams, three HEPPs, four MRP/Canine Search teams-Live Find and one MRP/Canine Search team-Human Remains Detection were activated for Hurricane Irma and operated in Florida, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The US&R Task Force teams saved or assisted 1,590 people and searched 28,260 structures in temperatures reaching 100 degrees.

There was no rest for the weary-eyed teams as Hurricane Maria geared up to hit Puerto Rico as a category 5 storm on September 18<sup>th</sup>. NY-TF1 received another activation order on September 20<sup>th</sup> for a Type IV, 27-member team to fly back to Puerto Rico. As a result, the logistics section had to build three new pallets and hazdec for a limited cache of supplies. NY-TF1 drove to Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh, New York, and waited for an aircraft. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, the team departed for Puerto Rico, picking up MA-TF1 on the way.



*NY-TF1 members operated in Puerto Rico, performing reconnaissance missions to remote areas that were inaccessible due to a bridge collapse. Food, water and medical treatment were provided.*

NY-TF1 arrived in Puerto Rico at 1820 hours on September 23rd. The island was divided into three regions: East, West and Central. One team was sent to the central region to perform recon from the ground and the other team was sent to recon from a helicopter. Three areas of concern with no communication in the central region were surveyed from the air during the afternoon of September 24<sup>th</sup>. NY-TF1 resumed air operations early the next morning and landed in three areas that were believed to be inaccessible by vehicles. Local officials were met and the needs of the communities were identified and taken back to the Incident Support Team in San Juan. Utuado was the area in greatest need of assistance.

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, all NY-TF1 members went to Utuado, where a bridge had washed out off Route 123. The bridge was the main way off that side of the mountain over the Rio Grande de Arcibo (Vivi River). With the bridge washed out, it meant more than





*NY-TF1 members set up a guideline across the Rio Grande de Arecibo (Vivi River) with anchor points on either side. The guideline was used for an inflatable boat to bring members, food and water across the river.*

all 125 residents in need.

This same boat operation was repeated later in the week with additional food and water. On the second trip, needed medications were taken by the team doctor and delivered on Monday, October 2nd. The medication was transported over the river using the same method as the previous two trips.

During the deployment to Puerto Rico, members performed many functions, including restoring generators to hospitals and nursing homes. Due to the lack of cell phone service, wellness checks and targeted searches were performed in all three regions of the island. NY-TF1 met with local officials in many communities to gather information regarding what was needed. Besides food and water, many municipalities required diesel fuel for generators and ambulances, medical supplies and medication.

### Definitions

**Type I Task Force**—70-person team with 10-member ground support. Conduct physical search and rescue operations in damaged/collapsed structures. Deploys with CBRNE (chemical/biological/radiological/nuclear/explosives) capabilities and equipment for all water environments.

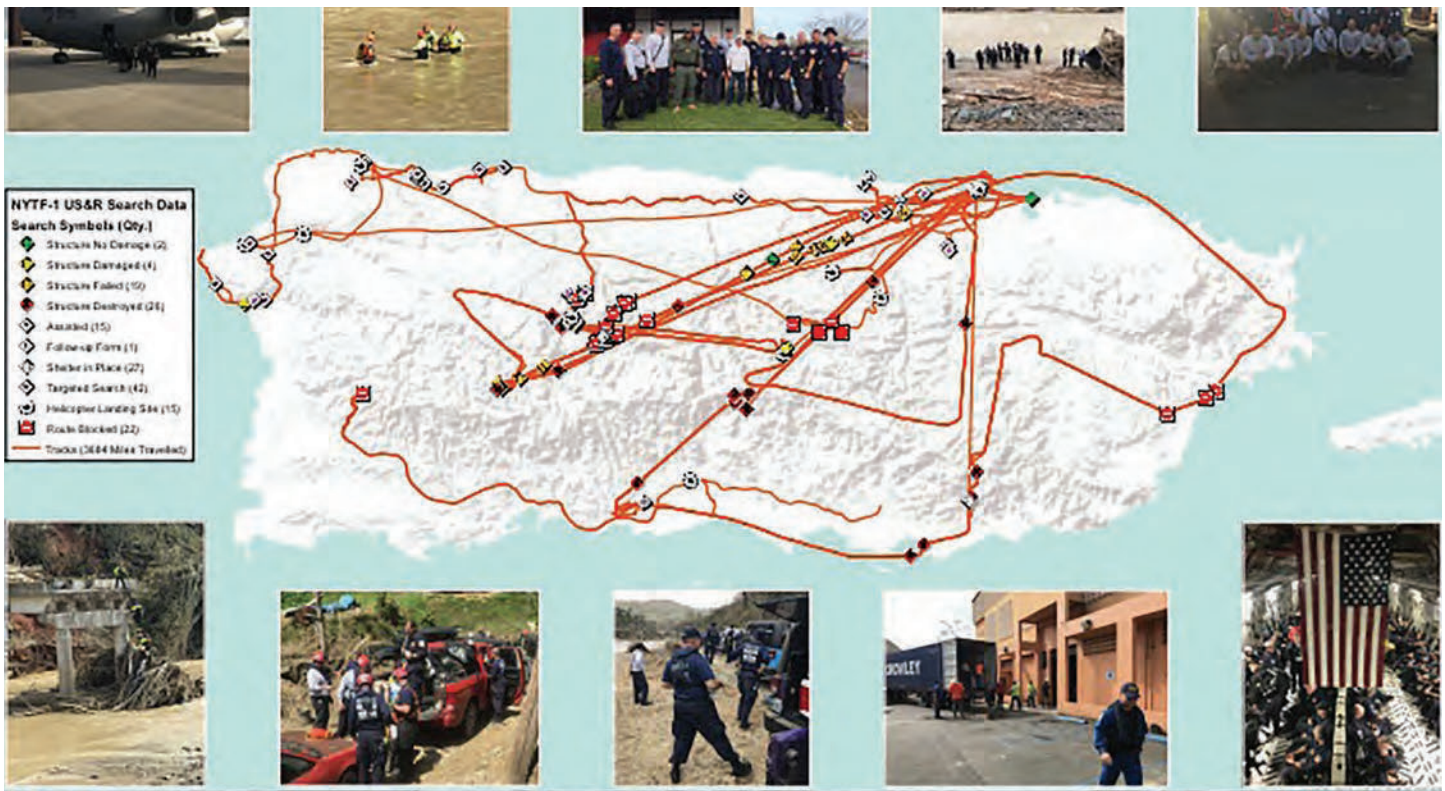
**Type III Task Force**—35-person team with five-member ground support. Focus on structural collapse. Deploys with sufficient haz-mat and PPE (personal protective equipment) for members to complete structural collapse search and equipment for all water environments.

**Type IV Task Force**—22-person team with three-member ground support. Focus on structural collapse. Deploys with sufficient haz-mat and PPE for members to complete structural collapse search. Typically, does not deploy with water operations capabilities.

**HEPP**—haz-mat equipment push package program. Augments task force capabilities to respond to structural collapse incidents involving haz-mat/CBRNE considerations.

two hours on foot to get to the next town on the other side of the mountain. Wearing swiftwater suits, NY-TF1 members set up a guideline across the river with anchor points on either side. The guideline was used for an inflatable boat to bring members, food and water across the river. Using pulleys, the boat was hauled back and forth across the river. Food and water supplies were ferried across throughout the day. Residents on the other side of the river helped bring the food up the riverbank. The food and water then were brought to a local church where supplies were distributed to





**NEW YORK TASK FORCE 1  
HURRICANE MARIA - FEMA URBAN SEARCH & RESCUE  
PUERTO RICO, USA - SEPTEMBER 21ST THROUGH OCTOBER 5TH, 2017**

*Compilation of photos shows NY-TF1 members at work in Puerto Rico. The map depicts the different areas of the island where members operated in response to Hurricane Maria.*

NY-TF1 team members returned to New York via commercial air on October 5<sup>th</sup>. The cache of equipment was shipped via ocean barge arranged by FEMA and returned to NYC on November 1<sup>st</sup>.

The 2017 hurricane season proved to be a challenging one for all levels of government. The logistics of moving 28 USAR teams around the country (CONUS) and beyond (OCONUS) during a six-week period was unprecedented. Without the hard work and dedication of so many people, aid to those in need could not have been rendered.

More than 90 FDNY NY-TF1 members responded to the three hurricanes that hit Texas, Florida and the Caribbean. They overcame many obstacles and challenges and had a positive impact during the massive water rescue operations in Texas. NY-TF1 members were part of a tremendous humanitarian effort, helping

the residents of Puerto Rico by delivering supplies, medicine, food and water to survivors. Once again, NY-TF1 members upheld the tradition of those who responded before them and continue to better prepare themselves for the next man-made or natural disaster.

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**Reference**

"IMT Deployment to Puerto Rico," by Battalion Chief James C. Kane, in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/2018 issue of *WNYF*.

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