

Texas Soldiers prepare for hurricane rescue

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AUSTIN, Texas – A CH-47 Chinook hovers 10 feet above the lake as Soldiers drop into the murky water below. Soldiers swim to an awaiting boat and then speed off to a distant island. Their mission: to rescue nursing-home patients and staff members who've been stranded by high flood waters for four days after a major hurricane without food and water.

The scenario recalls the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but is actually a joint training exercise to ready Soldiers of the Texas Army National Guard's 143rd Long Range Surveillance Detachment (Airborne), 36th Infantry Division, for the next storm.

The training brought together aviators of the division's 149th Aviation Battalion and the Republic of Singapore Air Force. Based in Grand Prairie, Texas, the Singaporeans assisted with Katrina's relief efforts.

The training culminated three months of hurricane-preparedness drills which included medical tasks, waterborne operations and infiltration and exfiltration methods, according to Capt. Matthew H. Peritte, detachment commander.

All detachment Soldiers are certified combat life-savers, Peritte added, and a majority of them have civilian life-saving training.

"We have a lot of real-world experience that we can draw from. Many of our Soldiers are civilian paramedics, firefighters and law enforcement officers," Peritte said.

Each Soldier must complete a swim test; swimming 500 meters in uniform carrying 10 pounds for 25 of those meters, then tread water for five minutes. The hazards of air and water operations require Soldiers be in top shape and maintain safety standards, said Sgt. 1st Class Shane T. Ruppel, detach-



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A Soldier of the Texas Army National Guard's 143rd Long Range Surveillance Detachment, 36th Infantry Division, jumps into Lake Walter E. Long from a Republic of Singapore Air Force CH-47 Chinook helicopter during a hurricane preparedness exercise in central Texas.

ment first sergeant.

While his Soldiers still train for their combat mission, Ruppel said they like knowing their military skills may help their fellow Texans during a natural disaster.

"It's also an added benefit for our Soldiers to be able to train with our Singaporean allies on this type of rescue mission because it will benefit the people of the U.S. and the people of Singapore," Ruppel said.

The Soldiers practiced helocasting, an insertion method designed for a wartime mission but also useful in massive flooding.

During the training Spc. Robert M. Dupalo faced role players portraying angry civilians in need of

medical treatment and evacuation.

"It's pretty stressful with everybody yelling at you, but you have to take into consideration the situation and their feelings, and be sensitive to it," said Dupalo, who participated in Hurricane Rita recovery.

Dupalo added he likes being able to help people in his own community.

"It makes me feel good to know I'm doing the job I was trained to do and at the [same] time helping others and making a difference. That's what it's all about."

The unit can be ready to deploy to any part of Texas within 48 hours.

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