

# THE CARGO COURIER

123rd Airlift Wing, Kentucky Air National Guard, Louisville, Ky.

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## KyANG supports Irma relief ops

### More than 1,000 U.S. citizens are evacuated from St. Maarten, V.I.

By Lt. Col. Dale Greer  
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

Twelve members of the Kentucky Air National Guard's 123rd Airlift Wing and two of the unit's C-130 aircraft helped evacuate more than 1,000 U.S. citizens from the Dutch Caribbean island of St. Maarten Sept. 9-16, flying them to safety in Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Irma.

The Kentucky Airmen, who returned home yesterday, were part of a team that included aircraft and Airmen from the New York Air Guard's 106th Rescue Wing and the Puerto Rico Air Guard's 156th Airlift Wing, said. Maj. Aaron Zamora, operations officer for Kentucky Air Guard's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron.

The rescue mission was facilitated by 12 special operators from the Kentucky Air Guard's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron, who provided air traffic control for evacuation flights at Phillipsburg Airport in St. Maarten.

For Master Sgt. Chris Hodge, a loadmaster in the 123rd Airlift Wing, the evacuation was one of the most rewarding missions of his career.

"It was an incredible experience," Hodge said. "I've been with the unit since December 2008, and we always train, and train and train, performing homeland missions that serve an essential purpose. But obviously, a mission like this serves a much greater purpose. When you're talking about rescuing people and saving lives, that takes things to a whole different level."

Many of the evacuees, who ranged in age from toddlers to the elderly, personally thanked Hodge and his colleagues for their service, expressing deep gratitude for airlifting them off an island that has been largely devastated by the category-5 storm.

"A lot of them were in tears because they've lost everything," Hodge said. "All they left that island with was their passport, their ID and the clothes on their back.

"But they were also thankful to be alive, to have survived it, and to be going to a safe place."

Dozens of evacuees have posted to the wing's Facebook page to express their appreciation, many of whom Hodge recognizes "from having been on our aircraft."

"So grateful to you all for evacuating my daughter and I from the devastation in St. Maarten," one Facebook user wrote. "Thank

you all from the bottom of my heart!"

"Y'all rescued my (American University of the Caribbean) family from St. Maarten and I am eternally grateful!!," another wrote. "Real heroes don't wear capes, they wear dog tags! Y'all are my heroes!"

"You took 50 children and moms from (American University of the Caribbean) out, including myself and my 2 children," a third person wrote.

"When I saw Kentucky on your uniforms, I knew we were in good hands!! Strong, gentle, kind gestures for everyone on (board) was remarkable!!"

Hodge said the outpouring of support has been truly humbling.

"We all take a lot of pride in what we do, and we deeply appreciate the opportunity that we get to be involved in something like this," he said.



Kentucky Air National Guard

Aircrew from the 123rd Airlift Wing evacuate U.S. citizens stranded on the Dutch Caribbean Island of St. Maarten, Virgin Islands, Sept. 9, following Hurricane Irma.

# STS rescues hundreds following Harvey

By Senior Airman Ryan Conroy  
24th Special Operations Wing

ELLINGTON FIELD JOINT RESERVE BASE, Texas — To assist in rescue efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, 38 Special Tactics Airmen from the Kentucky and Oregon Air National Guard deployed to Southeast Texas to provide critical disaster relief in late August.

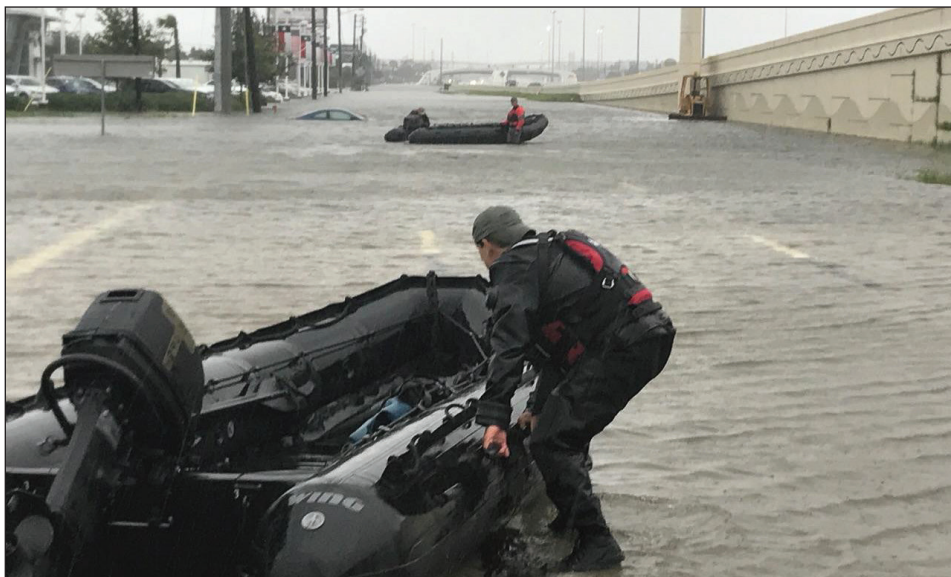
Airmen with the 123rd and 125th Special Tactics Squadrons exercised their personnel rescue and global access capabilities to provide critical relief to those stranded by Hurricane Harvey. The 123rd was deployed from Louisville, Kentucky, and the 125th from Portland, Oregon.

“It’s like the Nile formed in neighborhoods throughout the Houston area – we’re talking 4-6 feet of standing water stranding people who can’t swim, families with children and drivers who are unaware of the depth of water on the roads,” said Maj. Aaron Zamora, director of operations with the 123rd STS and the mission commander.

Special Tactics Airmen conducted a thorough assessment of airfields at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, Texas, to assess the conditions of the runways following massive rains. The assessment opened the airfield as a central hub to provide relief to Houston.

Global access teams are trained and equipped to assess air strips and landing zones for fixed and rotary wing aircraft to land anywhere from a major airfield to austere, clandestine dirt strips in either permissive or hostile environments. Once the team assesses the airfield and determines feasibility to land air assets, they maintain the capability of opening the field to air traffic, and controlling the air traffic as it arrives on station.

Following the assessment, the operations



**A member of the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron searches for victims in Texas following Hurricane Harvey.**

center immediately deployed ground-based boat search and rescue teams to start coordinating with military and civil authorities who are conducting rescue operations.

“We hit the ground running, and immediately had to begin adapting,” Zamora said.

One of those adaptations was quickly learning how to leverage the power of social media.

In the Special Tactics operation center, the team members utilized the Android Tactical Assault Kit system, which is generally used to track forces during military missions. Intelligence analysts working remotely from Kentucky, Ohio and Florida, screen information found on social media platforms and smartphone applications and use their expertise to connect potential rescues with Special Tactics capabilities.

For instance, individuals in distress can update a phone application with their whereabouts and the situations they find themselves in. The intelligence team screens the information, applies a confidence level and sends the information to Special Tactics operators, real time, in the field.

“The area we’re working in is completely inundated with hundreds, if not thousands, of requests for rescue,” said Tech. Sgt. Brian Davis, intelligence analyst with the 123rd STS. “Since we’re such a small team with a specialized skill set, we find the people who are most in need and look for people who need specialized rescue.”

By the time operation concluded, the units had rescued 333 stranded residents.

*Read more at [www.123aw.ang.af.mil](http://www.123aw.ang.af.mil)*

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We welcome your feedback. Please contact the Public Affairs Office directly if you have suggestions for articles or photography. Our office is located in Room 1160 of the Wing Headquarters Building, 1101 Grade Lane, Louisville, KY 40213.

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