

Industry Pulls Together To Save Lives after Harvey

by Norval G. Kennedy

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Biblical rainfall in the U.S. from Hurricane Harvey in late August prompted large-scale relief support from throughout the general aviation community focused on South Texas. Ferocious wind destroyed aircraft along the Gulf Coast, and the rain flooded Houston and surrounding communities. Military and civilian aircraft from all parts of the country descended into airports to provide relief; FBOs supported rescue operations while airports were closed to airline traffic.

With aircraft ranging in size from a Falcon 900C to taildraggers and a B-25, pilots, owners and support personnel rallied to help save the lives of people and pets. Among the earliest relief efforts was a collaboration between Sky Hope and NBAA's Humanitarian Emergency Response Operator (Hero) program. Janine Iannarelli, president of aircraft brokerage Par Avion in Houston, worked with Sky Hope's Robin Eissler of Georgetown, Texas, and Dan Hubbard, NBAA's senior vice president of communications, as they collectively organized inter- and intrastate relief missions.

Iannarelli said, "We made it a cohesive effort for relief, having never faced something this large before. Pooled resources helped maintain safety and security throughout the Harvey efforts."

Patient Airlift Services and Sky Hope Network joined forces and resources in response to Hurricane Harvey and the subsequent Houston flooding, said Eissler. Their efforts were designed to bridge the "gap between aid from the Red Cross and FEMA...to deliver essentials to smaller agencies and charitable institutions," said Iannarelli. She estimated 500 volunteers participated in Harvey operations.

NBAA's Hero database, which is continuously updated, came into play quickly. At one point, 60 business aircraft and 50 bizav professionals were available through Hero for Harvey efforts, according to a joint statement.

RELIEF EFFORTS

Beyond immediate relief coordinating pilots, airplanes and humanitarian goods, Aerobridge provided educational relief. It targeted the Port Arthur area, flying in supplies to restore classes in school as soon as possible. Aerobridge was established in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and provided assistance after Hurricane Sandy.

Fifty aircraft participated in Operation Air Drop, an effort organized on Facebook by John Clay Wolfe, of iHeart Media Radio. Pilots brought donations to Galaxy's Conroe FBO for collection and organization, then flew those relief supplies to "Beaumont, Corpus Christi, Port Aransas, Rockport and other communities more accessible by airplane than by truck," according to an Air Drop statement. Galaxy, airport staff, Montgomery County and the Salvation Army supported the mission, which handled two truckloads of donations, it said.

Texas operations concluded on September 9, with goods flown from Killeen to West Houston and Hardin County Airports. Within a few weeks of creation, Air Drop had 200 pilots who made 400 flights carrying 250,000 pounds of goods, Air Drop said.

Dassault Falcon Jet's Falcon 900C customer-response aircraft was pressed into action for a couple of days to support Harvey relief, said a company spokesman. "We flew from Teterboro to Farmingdale, N.Y., to pick up meals-ready-to-eat and medical supplies for delivery to Orange, Texas," he said. "Next day we flew within Texas delivering where it was needed."

LOCAL BUSINESS RETURNS TO NORMAL

FlightSafety International closed on August 27 because of street flooding (there was no flooding in the building). Nearby training centers in Austin; San Antonio; and Lafayette, La., were unaffected. The Houston Hobby facility reopened on August 30 with limited operations and was in full swing on September 5. "We ensured the safety of all crewmembers in for training at their hotels," said an FSI spokesman. "Training schedules that slipped for the closure are getting caught up."

A small number of employee homes were affected but no one was injured, the FSI spokesman said. Fellow workers have donated goods as needed, and "we will help with whatever they need. It is obviously devastating, but our employees have gotten through it just fine."

Twenty to 25 aircraft at Aransas County Airport were lost when Harvey came ashore, airport manager Mike Geer told **AIN**. The airfield serves Rockport, Texas, which took the brunt of the landfall. Most were single-engine aircraft with a couple of twins in the count, he said. "We are trying to dismantle flattened hangars and get to the airplanes, but resources are limited because heavy equipment is working in crucial priority areas. It might take 30 more days to get the aircraft out and as many as two years for the airport to recover fully," Geer said.

At least five aircraft were seriously damaged or destroyed at McCampbell-Porter Airport in Aransas Pass, next to Rockport. "We did not flood, but wind caused considerable damage," said Paul Lehnert, airport manager. "An older structure of T-hangars was opened up by strong wind, and one aircraft was flipped onto another." What he called "project aircraft" occupied many of the stalls. "An older Apache was ripped from a tiedown and carried about a hundred yards to be wrapped around a pole."

Harvey did not seriously damage FAA buildings and equipment. "Major facilities in that region are on comparatively higher ground, so we didn't suffer serious damage, other than a few roof leaks," said a spokesman for FAA Mid-States. "Some ground equipment, such as ILS systems, was flooded and will require repairs. We are working with the various airports to assess that damage." Power restoration was a typical repair.

FAA employees remained on duty to provide assistance during relief efforts, he said. "In some cases, controllers spent several days at their facilities because flood waters prevented them from leaving. They alternated taking rest periods until relief personnel could make it in."

Even when airports were closed to airline traffic, "they remained open to Coast Guard and other aircraft that were flying official missions. Our controllers made sure those operations were able to take place safely," the spokesman said.

Avfuel reported that Astin Aviation at Easterwood Airport in College Station, Texas, was active during Harvey search-and-recovery efforts. The FBO was a staging location for military helicopters, fast-boat rescue, FEMA, commercial air ambulances and C-130 supply aircraft. Operations ran around the clock, with line staff and customer representatives working 12-hour shifts for 48 hours straight, according to Avfuel.

HOUSTON AIRPORTS

The City of Houston Airport System established “emergency mode” operations “to ensure safety and security of passengers and employees” and maintain infrastructure, according to a summary prepared by the city. An airports emergency operation center opened; all flights were cancelled and roadways were closed by high water from more than 40 inches of rain in some areas.

Neighborhoods around Hobby Airport received some of the highest rainfall totals. Passengers and anyone working at the airport were stranded when airline operations ceased and water rose, the city said. Cots, food and water were in high demand, but Sarah Freddie, Hobby administration manager, pulled everything together, notably the airport’s food vendor, for emergency assistance, a Houston statement said. Rescue and relief flight operations continued during the closure.

George Bush Intercontinental Airport “essentially became a civil-military operations center for the U.S. Air Force, Air National Guard, U.S. Coast Guard, Homeland Security and FEMA,” said the city. “Medical supplies were routed through the field, with aircraft refueled and crews resting. Several injured people were flown to relief hospitals in bordering states,” it added.

When military operations started at Ellington Field, they continued with no interruptions, according to Arturo Machuca, general manager. Airport runways, taxiways and roadways were cleared to ensure movement of all aircraft, refueling trucks and the like, he said. The entire 12,000-troop Texas National Guard was activated, and a portion of them conducted search-and-rescue missions from Ellington, the city reported. The Coast Guard’s typical six operations a day mushroomed to 40 a day during the busiest days. Evacuees were taken to the George R. Brown Convention Center.

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