Disaster Assistance Communications

A HELPING HAND

Story by Renee Jarrett

Photos by Ken Pieper

Above: View from the cockpit of an Army helicopter shows the destroyed causeway linking Dauphine Island with the Mobile, AL, mainland. The ruined causeway and downed telephone wires kept the islanders virtually isolated. Army helicopter pilots assisted by Army Signal Corps teams from Fort Huachuca worked with federal experts to assist gulf coast citizens with a link-up to a mainland disaster headquarters. (Photo by Ken Pieper)

Maybe they didn't look like soldiers, but the two red-eyed, radio monitors in civies were 100 per cent Army from the 521st Signal Company, 11th Signal Brigade, stationed at Fort Huachuca, AZ.

After Hurricane Frederick roared through the gulf coast in September, federal disaster experts requested assistance from the Army Communications Command, and SFC Philip McClain and SSG Ronald Jones were temporarily assigned to the Mobile disaster field office and the Dauphine Island area.

Their primary mission was to establish a radio link between the Alabama mainland and the isolated island 30 miles out in the gulf. The storm had destroyed the causeway and telecommunications connections to Dauphine Island, leaving the devasted storm area remote and silenced.

The sergeants were working for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), headed by Arthur T. Doyle from the Boston FEMA region. Doyle was given carte blanche by President Carter to put together the best possible team to aid Frederick victims.

Wasting no time, Doyle proceeded to call in disaster experts from all parts of the country, including the two telecommunications technicians from Fort Huachuca.

Official orders requested McClain and Jones to travel and work in civilian clothes. A FEMA spokesman said that the request came from the governor of Alabama, Fob Jones, and high level federal civilians. The reason given for the unusual travel orders was that due to the remote location of the island, local citizenry might become upset and further alarmed by the presence of regular Army troops. Alabama National Guardsmen were allowed to wear their uniforms because the islanders were accustomed to the Guardsmen emblem and knew many of the citizen-soldiers personally.

Honoring the unique order, McClain and Jones then started gathering and shipping communications equipment to the duty area. The team took two I.5 kilowatt generators and

several small base radio monitors. Walkie-talkies were available at the field office. Doyle said that for several days the only power that the disaster field office had came from one of the Army generators.

The team found quarters in Pensacola, FL, because accommodations were filled for miles around the disaster site. The quarters were 63 miles from their duty area.

Scaling an antenna on top of the field office building, McClain installed the beginning of the radio link-up. He and Jones then proceeded to the island by helicopter. There they finished the hook-up to a like antenna on top of the post office and fire station.

Once the system became operational, the silent island came to life. Hundreds of requests and messages were patched out and, with the aid of the three Army helicopter teams from Fort Rucker, AL, and Navy and Army boat crews, clean up and rescue missions started full scale.

After communications were established, McClain and Jones set to work modifying radio equipment and headsets in the helicopters and boats for the connection with base operations monitoring from the mainland and the island. Jones admitted that some of the modifications were strictly "jerry-rigged" but chopper and boat crew members said they work. And transmissions even in windy conditions were clean and clear.

Working hand-in-hand with federal and local civilian disaster experts was a new experience for one of the communicators, but both Signal men said that it was a pleasure dealing with hard-working professionals.

McClain and Jones worked 12 to 15 hours a day. Scaling 200-foot towers to string wire with only a rope for safety support, along with piecing radio equipment together from borrowed parts, soon became routine duty.

Georgia LaForce, a civilian on Dauphine, said, "The islanders really appreciated the Army's help. Besides locating key people on the mainland for question and answer sessions at all hours of the day and night, Jones radioed for a helicopter to take me to the mainland for bronchial asthma shots when I suffered a severe attack."

Several others, including a heart patient, owe the quick treatment they got for their injuries

Below (top): Groceries and canned goods were strewn from one end of the shopping area to the other after Hurricane Frederick whipped through Dauphine Island. This store was a block away from the telecommunications station set up by the Army.

Below (bottom): A team from the 521st Signal Company, 11th Signal Brigade, Fort Huachuca, was sent by federal request to assist in establishing telecommunications in the devasted area. Fallen telephone poles and wires attest to the damage done by Hurricane Frederick to Mobile, AL, and nearby areas.

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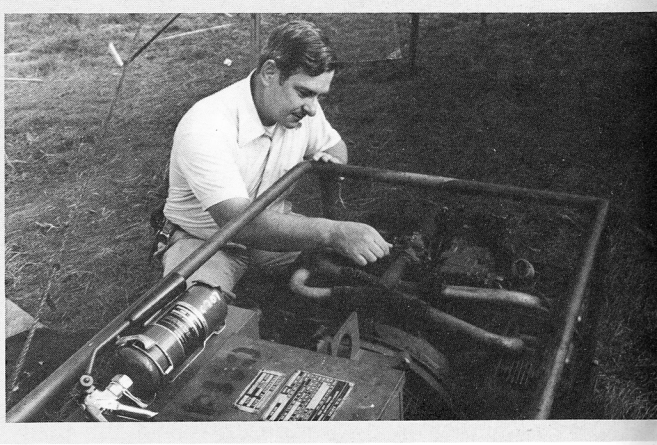
and ailments to the communications sergeants and the chopper pilots, she added. LaForce stressed, "We just don't know what we would have done without the Army."

The FEMA disaster expert on Dauphine commented that both sergeants were willing to do more than just their regular duty of relaying messages and monitoring and maintaining the base stations. Russell C. Wilder, who came from the Denver Region, explained that Jones had also been repairing propane refrigerators and other equipment for the local people in between calls.



67TH SIGNAL BATTALION PROVIDES EARS FOR DOMINICA

Editor's Note: All members of the 67th Signal Battalion detachment have now returned to Fort Gordon.

by SFC Aro Couch

Tropic breezes, when they blow in excess of one hundred and thirty miles per hour, tend to do a fair amount of damage, and so it was with Hurricane David and the island of Dominica.

In the aftermath of David, US Forces units and equipment were rapidly dispatched to help relief operations in the stricken areas, and a twenty-four soldier detachment from the 67th Signal Battalion was among those sent, departing Fort Gordon on 22 October.

Operating from sites at Roosevelt Roads Naval Base in Puerto Rico, Melville Hall and Roseau on the island of Dominica, the soldiers of the 67th have been providing voice radio and radio teletype communications for the 40th Mobile Construction Battalion (Navy Seabees) and also handling some State Department traffic for the island.

CPT Ralph Lauer, OIC of the detachment during its first weeks, expressed some surprise at two aspects of the operation: the clarity of communications possible on the island, and the "sheer ability and professionalism of the soldiers involved."

"There's a significant difference," says Lauer, "between the attitude and performance of the average soldier in garrison or training, and what he is able and willing to do in a real-world situation. The troops on Dominica have been really amazing in accomplishing what was asked of them."

LTC John E. Pirkle, battalion commander of the 67th, phrased it only slightly different, saying that his soldiers were "In very high spirits, proud of themselves and doing a very, very professional job."

Life on Dominica is less than pleasurable, according to Lauer and Pirkle, with one 67th detachment living on the ground floor of an airport control tower and another currently quartered in the Chemistry Lab of the Clifton J. Dupigny University, which is undergoing extensive repairs by the Naval Seebee unit.

"Some of the Navy people had real problems at first," says Lauer, "because they sampled local food and water. Our folks, largely because of SFC Ladson, the detachment NCOIC, have managed to stay healthy. They're all popping malaria tablets, of course, but we haven't had any health problems because of local foods or beverages; all they're allowed to eat, other than what the Army or Navy provides, are 'peelable' fruits, such as bananas, oranges, etc."

Right: The only 'accident victim' in this photo is the jeep, which is suffering from loosened universal joints as a result of the pounding it received on the daily thirty mile haul from Melville Hall to Roseau, an experience which usually took around two and a half hours.

Far Right: Luxurious it isn't but for nine soldiers of the 67th Signal Battalion's detachment on Dominica, the airport towers at Melville Hall is home during their stay on the island.

Left: SSG Ronald Jones of the 521st Signal Company, 11th Signal Brigade, works on a generator set at the Mobile, AL, disaster site. Jones was part of the team sent from Fort Huachuca to re-establish telecommunications from Mobile to Dauphine Island. The island was heavily hit by September's Hurricane Frederick and was without communications, supplies and other necessities for several days. (Photo by Ken Pieper)

The director of information for FEMA, Bill Williams, said that one thing the civilians all commented on about the communicators from the southwest was that when the team said "equipment would work, it worked." The spokesman commented that McClain and Jones really got the job done and usually before the deadline or darn close to it.

All praise set aside, the team from the 521st did have one hardship. It seems that with long duty hours and travel time, getting laundry done was a real problem...but that's how it is in the Army sometimes.

Below: Even the Dominican jungles did not stand up to Hurricane David's 130 mph winds without damage.

Above: An HF antenna reaches skyward on a hilltop near the town of Roseau, Dominica, marking the operations center of the 67th Signal Battalion near the island's capitol.

Right: Two members of the 67th Signal Battalion rest in their quarters on Dominica during their stay on the island to provide disaster assistance communications.

"They have to be provided almost everything," says Pirkle, "from fuel to food to water. There's a weekly flight from Roosevelt by Navy aircraft which brings in supplies to Melville Hall. The people at Roseau are getting one "B" ration a day at the Seabee mess, but other than that, it's C-rations all the way."

The 40th Mobile Construction Battalion (Seabees) has been rebuilding the main docks, a hospital and the college buildings on Dominica, while the 67th detachment provides their only links to the outside world.

"We took over from an Air Force detachment," says Lauer, "and since they had operated a satellite terminal system, I was a little worried about how our commo would stack up in comparison. That was my second surprise; I've never seen better HF communications anywhere than are possible there. Whether it's because of being on an island or the lack of other radio interference...anyway, it is really, really good."

When the soldiers of the 67th Signal Battalion returned from their "real-world" mission, they did so with the confidence that comes from knowing you did a job well and the satisfaction of having done it for the benefit of people who truly needed it.