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Continental United States NORAD Region – First Air Force (Air Forces Northern)

Office of Public Affairs

1210 Beacon Beach Road * Tyndall AFB FL 32403-5549

(850) 283-8080 * FAX (850) 283-3376 * DSN 523-8080

afnorthpa@tyndall.af.mil * www.1af.acc.af.mil * [twitter@1staf](https://twitter.com/1staf) * [Facebook@AmericasAOC](https://www.facebook.com/AmericasAOC)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Release 11-05-20/001

May 20, 2011

AFNORTH participates in national-level disaster exercise

By Angela Pope, AFNORTH Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – If two major earthquakes rocked the Midwest and South, the results would be disastrous.

In a recent exercise in which U.S. Northern Command's Air Component played a critical role, that was precisely the scenario: a 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit just north of Memphis, while a 6.0 magnitude aftershock hit near Mt. Carmel, Ind. In the exercise scenario, thousands of people were killed, hundreds of thousands more were left homeless, damage was severe and widespread, and every level of the disaster response hierarchy, from local to federal governments and the military, was involved in the rescue and recovery effort.

Exercise Ardent Sentry 11, which was held May 16-19 across the U.S., gave Air Forces Northern members here a chance to practice its mission of Defense Support of Civil Authorities. The national-level exercise was a White House directed, Congressionally-mandated exercise. It was the largest NLE to date, involving eight states and four Federal Emergency Management Agency regions, and it was the first NLE to be centered on a natural hazard.

With FEMA as the lead federal agency, the exercise brought together emergency response assets from AFNORTH, USNORTHCOM, the National Guard Bureau, numerous federal agencies, and participating states including Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee.

“Our goal is to take all the lessons learned through experience since the command was formed, and apply them to a sudden disaster affecting multiple states – in this case two large earthquakes striking the New Madrid fault in the Midwest,” said Adm. James A. Winnefeld, USNORTHCOM commander. “The lessons we learn in this exercise will benefit not only USNORTHCOM, but also our interagency partners at every level as we look for new and better ways to work together in a nightmare scenario where every second counts.”

Some of the capabilities AFNORTH brought to the table for the exercise were airspace coordination and deconfliction, search and rescue, air mobility coordination and visibility, airflow control, and incident awareness and assessment.

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One of AFNORTH's Contingency Action Team directors discussed the importance of readiness when responding to disasters.

"AFNORTH personnel must be ready to respond at a moment's notice to any potential homeland defense or disaster mitigation situation," said Greg Penning. "Our organization has experience with hurricanes, and the good thing about hurricanes – if you can say there's anything good about them – is that thanks to our technology, we know they're coming and we have time to prepare. No-notice events like earthquakes are much more difficult. As we saw in this exercise, the hardest part is figuring out what has happened, what has been damaged, and what we need to do to help."

Within the first few hours of the simulated disaster, Air Forces Northern's National Security Emergency Preparedness Directorate deployed several emergency preparedness liaison officers to the affected states to assist FEMA and state officials in determining which AFNORTH assets would best aid in the response efforts.

"Air Force EPLOs are senior Air Force Reserve officers who are subject matter experts in state and regional disaster response plans," said Rodney Simmons, NSEP director. "They advise states and regions on Air Force capabilities that may be used during disaster responses."

The Joint Personnel Recovery Center at the 601st Air and Space Operations Center also jumped quickly into action, providing valuable search and rescue capabilities to the simulated rescue and recovery effort.

"The JPRC is a USNORTHCOM team that responds as a contingency arises," said Andy Cornett, JPRC director. "We have the capability to conduct large-scale search and rescue operations during contingencies such as hurricanes or other natural or man-made disasters, making the JPRC a valuable asset to the DSCA mission."

The 601st AOC contributed another major asset to the exercise response: the Regional Air Movement Coordination Center. One aspect of the exercise scenario involved the overcrowding of Memphis International Airport due to the vast amounts of relief supplies and equipment flooding in numerous sources.

The RAMCC stepped in to coordinate air movement to help those relief efforts run a little more smoothly, enabling officials to deliver much-needed supplies to their destinations more quickly.

Based on priorities established by FEMA and other local and federal officials, the air movement experts in the RAMCC assigned 'ground reservations' to inbound and outbound aircraft to maximize the efficient utilization of the Memphis International Airport ramp.

"We wanted to make sure that the simulated air operations over the Memphis area were flown efficiently and effectively during the exercise," said Col. Brad Graff, 601st AOC air mobility director. "Safe accomplishment of the mission was our #1 priority as we cycled aircraft in and out of the earthquake-ravaged area."

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Meanwhile, at AFNORTH headquarters, the CAT worked 24 hours a day, tracking the scenario, coordinating responses and determining the next and best courses of action.

“In a crisis, the situation is dynamic, and events unfold minute to minute,” said Lt. Col. Greg Krane, an AFNORTH CAT director. “Being part of the CAT demands its members to be flexible, apply their skill and knowledge, and be capable of employing their expertise in a very time-sensitive and demanding environment. Essentially, we are dealing with potential life and death events.”

As the exercise pieces and players quickly came together, all of the DSCA mission at AFNORTH had been put in motion, including one of AFNORTH’s most valuable assets during DSCA events – the Civil Air Patrol.

As the Air Force Auxiliary, CAP’s primary role in Ardent Sentry was providing aerial reconnaissance for photography and assessment of damage and conditions on the ground. All CAP wings have agreements with their respective state governments to respond in the event of earthquakes measuring at least magnitude 6.0 by assisting with initial disaster assessments and gathering information for governors who may be requesting a Presidential Disaster Declaration.

“Even while CAP was providing real world and ongoing assistance with flooding in the Memphis area, we continued to train and prepare for potential future responses,” said Capt. Rob Borsari, incident commander for Mississippi River flooding in Tennessee and for the current exercise. “Civil Air Patrol members in Tennessee and across the nation are always prepared to respond to the needs of our communities, state and nation in times of disaster and crisis.”

Practicing a disaster response when there wasn’t a real disaster with thousands of lives in the balance was of huge benefit to AFNORTH and its partners.

“This exercise provided us with the opportunity to train for potential scenarios which could affect the continental U.S. and the citizens who rely on us to help when we receive the call,” said Maj. Gen. Garry C. Dean, AFNORTH commander. “Exercises like Ardent Sentry allow us to review processes and procedures and focus our future training efforts to identifying areas that may need attention.”

Admiral Winnefeld reinforced General Dean’s sentiment.

“Personally, I hope we never have a reason to use what we’ve learned, but hope isn’t a plan, and crossing your fingers is no substitute for good training and exercising,” the admiral said. “To protect what we value most, you the citizens of our great nation, we must demonstrate that we can respond well to a major disaster together.”