



Georgetown County, South Carolina

NEWS RELEASE

March 12, 2015

Contact:
Jackie Broach, public information officer
Phone: (843) 545-3164
E-mail: jbroach@gtcounty.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Vigilant Guard exercise comes to successful close in Georgetown County

GEORGETOWN COUNTY — The last of military and civilian partners participating in Vigilant Guard in Georgetown County left for home on Wednesday, bringing the large-scale disaster preparedness exercise to a close. The operation, which spanned nine days and involved numerous agencies and three states, proved hugely successful and was an incredible tool for building relationships and putting disaster response skills to the test in realistic conditions, said Sam Hodge, Georgetown County’s emergency manager.

“With any type of training event like this, a key element is to find out where your shortfalls are and to build relationships with those agencies you don’t normally have a chance to work with,” Hodge said. “We were able to achieve both those goals with Vigilant Guard, which works toward further improving our readiness to respond to a real disaster.”

Though the exercise took place in counties across the state, the majority of the activity was staged in Georgetown County, attracting thousands of military and civilian participants March 6-11. The scenario for the national exercise, sponsored by U.S. Northern Command, was a Category 4 hurricane, which made Georgetown County a perfect location for this year’s exercise.

“That’s a threat we face every year and we know it’s just a matter of time before one makes landfall,” Hodge said.

The fictitious Hurricane Zephyr followed a track similar to that taken by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, leaving widespread destruction and havoc in its path. From damaged bridges and stranded victims to hurricane-related building collapses, the hurricane scenario created opportunities for all agencies and groups participating to hone their particular skills. Georgetown County Fire/EMS and Midway Fire Rescue practiced search and rescue skills as they worked to extricate “victims” (portrayed by actors and mannequins) from an actual rubble pile created at the Northwest Regional Recreation Complex at Choppee. The S.C. National Guard set up mobile tower operations at the Georgetown Airport, practiced a method for ferrying large equipment over water, and aided county officials in conducting damage assessment using Blackhawk helicopters. Additionally, Carolinas MED-1 set up a mobile hospital unit to treat patients; SC-HART, the South Carolina Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team practiced airlifting victims; and the American Red Cross, Salvation Army and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief provided support to emergency responders and victims alike.

“This truly was a massive operation, and we’re grateful for the opportunity to have been the site of such a large part of this year’s exercise,” said County Administrator Sel Hemingway. “The opportunity for our staff to work along side the National Guard and other agencies that participated, and to improve relationships and skills, was invaluable.”

Hemingway and Hodge offer their thanks to every agency and person who participated in Vigilant Guard. Special thanks go to the National Guard, S.C. Emergency Management Division and Georgetown County Parks and Recreation Director Beth Goodale and her staff. County Parks and Recreation went to great lengths to help plan for and to accommodate the operation and its participants in Georgetown County.

One highlight of the exercise was a visit by the National Guard’s chief, Army Gen. Frank Grass, who is also a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Grass visited multiple venues in Georgetown County during the exercise to get an up-close look at joint training between National Guard, emergency management and first responder personnel.

“I saw a lot of great coordination between local, state and federal government agencies,” Grass said.

He called the operation one of the best he has seen. And seeing him on site during the operation was a treat for the county and its staff participating in the exercise.

“Having Gen. Grass here was an honor,” Hodge said. “He had a chance to see some of the great work happening here and our people were thrilled to welcome him and have their hard work recognized by someone at his level.”

A number of county residents turned out at various sites to observe parts of the exercise, but Hodge says he hopes the public will take more away from Vigilant Guard. He hopes the drill serves to raise public awareness about the serious threat hurricanes pose each and every year, and are motivated to make their own emergency preparations.

“It’s never too early to start getting ready, but it can easily be too late,” Hodge said. “It’s been a long time since South Carolina had a direct hit, but that doesn’t mean that this won’t be the year. The time to prepare is now and not when a storm is already on its way.”

Residents can find resources to help with their emergency planning at www.gtcountry.org/emergency_management or www.scemd.org. Residents may also call Georgetown County’s Emergency Management Division at (843) 545-3273.

###