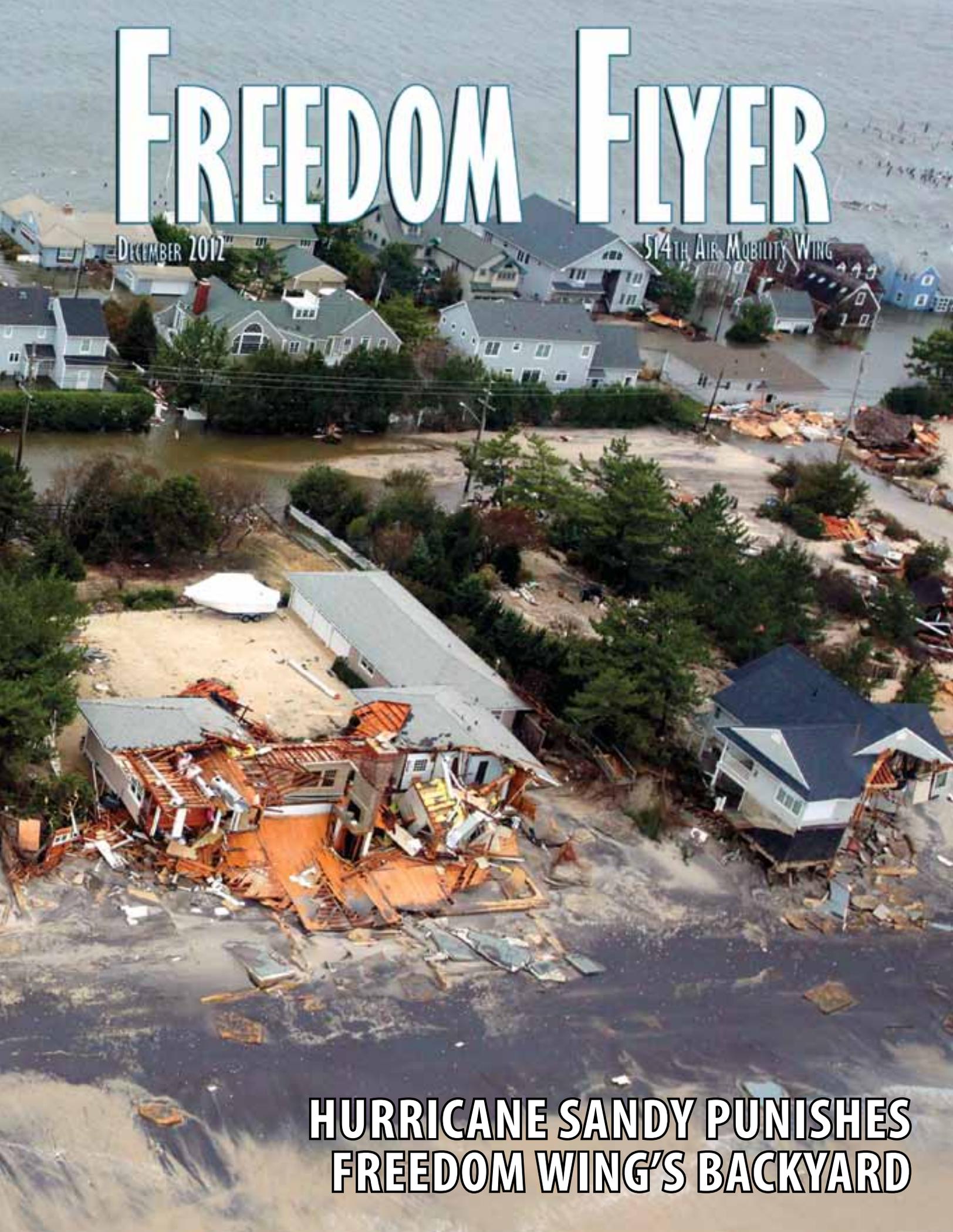


# FREEDOM FLYER

DECEMBER 2012

514TH AIR MOBILITY WING



**HURRICANE SANDY PUNISHES  
FREEDOM WING'S BACKYARD**



# FREEDOM FLYER

## CONTENTS

HURRICANES MEASURED BY THEIR IMPACT ON PEOPLE	4
VOLUNTEER HELPS AREA RECOVER FROM SANDY	7
POLICEMAN, RESERVIST EXPERIENCES WICKED WEATHER	8
HURRICANE PUTS PUBLIC SERVANT TO WORK	9
MILITARY SPOUSE BRAVES HURRICANE WHILE PREGNANT	10

---

## EDITORIAL STAFF

COL. MICHAEL J. UNDERKOFER  
COMMANDER

MAJ. KELLY ANN CHARLAND  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS CHIEF

CAPT. ALLISON ECUNG  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER

MASTER SGT. DONNA T. JEFFRIES  
NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER IN CHARGE

SHAWN J. JONES  
EDITOR

TECH. SGT. JONATHAN WHITE  
JOURNALIST

---

## ON THE COVER

The coastlines of New Jersey and New York were battered by Hurricane Sandy. This issue is dedicated to telling the Freedom Wing's Hurricane Sandy stories.



*Photo by Master Sgt. Mark Olsen*

---

This funded Air Force Reserve magazine is an authorized publication for members of the U.S. military and their family. Contents of Freedom Flyer are not necessarily the official views of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, or the Department of the Air Force. All photos are Air Force photos unless otherwise indicated. The editorial content is edited, prepared and provided by the 514th Air Mobility Wing public affairs office, 2217 W. Arnold Ave., Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J. 08641.



Senior Master Sgt. Thomas Clayton, 732nd Airlift Squadron, and his wife Maureen stand in the yard of their Manasquan home. Many friends, family and fellow Airmen helped the Claytons recover from the extensive flood damage to the interior of their home.

*Photo by Shawn J. Jones*

## HURRICANES MEASURED BY IMPACT ON PEOPLE

By Col. Michael J. Underkofler  
514th Air Mobility Wing commander

I'm not a school-trained meteorologist, but I know a little about the science of hurricanes. I used to fly in them, collecting data like air and water temperature, wind direction and speed, and barometric pressure to send to the National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida. With great accuracy, scientists there make storm path and intensity predictions. What they can't predict is the toll these storms take on human lives. Unfortunately I've seen this other side of the physical devastation—the havoc, frustration and despair left behind when the wind dies down and the water recedes.

Despite being somewhat dangerous, it was fun flying in storms and being associated with the Air Force's world-famous Hurricane Hunters. Some storms produce incredible up and down drafts, capable of throwing the venerable C-130 weather reconnaissance aircraft way off the desired altitude.

One reason we fly into hurricanes is to find the exact center, or eye, of the storm which helps predict its path. The true center also normally registers the storm system's lowest barometric pressure. Typically, the lower the barometric pressure, the worse the storm. Flying in the eye of the storm can produce absolute euphoria. It's incredibly calm and peaceful, and the surrounding clouds resemble encircling seats at a sports stadium. The euphoria, however, is short lived as within minutes you're kicked back into pea-soup clouds fighting turbulence and aircraft icing.

I quickly became a weather geek, closely following the wind and barometric pressure of hurricanes. The first one I flew in produced winds which reached 100 mph and a low pressure of 960 millibars (mbs) which classified it as a category 2 storm. I dutifully recorded this data in my personal log

book. Sadly, the next year I helplessly watched as Hurricane Isabel tracked up the coast, headed toward my hometown in North Carolina. I followed the winds and barometric pressure and made really sophomoric pilot guesses about possible storm surge levels and damage. Isabel attained winds of 165 mph and a low pressure of 915 mbs, a category 5 storm out at sea. From a distance I dutifully noted this storm's stats while sadly my childhood friends were left to deal with the results—immense damage and suffering.

Two years later Hurricane Katrina barreled in on my home in Mississippi. My family evacuated, and my children never returned to see the destruction. They moved to a new house, in a new town and made new friends, most of who never understood or could comprehend what my kids had endured. My life-changing storm was one for the record books. At one point it reached winds of 175 mph and a low pressure of 902 mbs. Again, I dutifully recorded the storm's stats.

I really thought my days of dodging and dealing with storms were over when I moved to New Jersey to command the 514th Air Mobility Wing. Who would ever think a late season storm would roar up the east coast and hit us here in New Jersey and in New York with winds registering 110 mph and a low pressure of 940 mbs. This time I was fortunate, there was minimal damage to my home, and I only went without power for four days. As you know, thousands of others weren't so lucky.

Now after Hurricane Sandy, I've decided that I'm not going to closely follow and record storm winds and barometric pressure anymore, trying to predict a storm's landfall intensity and the resulting damage.

What difference does it make? Storms are fickle and indiscriminately destroy. Some houses remain while others nearby are wiped away. People drown in wading-level water while others survive after being swept out to many fathom-deep rivers or the ocean. Cherished keepsakes are destroyed, routines upended, many needs go unmet, disappointments ensue, while fear, depression and anxiety lurk around every corner. I guess I've finally realized barometric pressure readings don't predict much about how storms will impact lives.

My job is now ground-centric, focusing on what I can do to help Airmen mitigate the damage from Hurricane Sandy.

Not just the emergent requirements, but those that challenge our long-term mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being. It does no good to rebuild a house if it is no longer a home. I've seen first-hand the effects of post-storm stress—fractured relationships and deeply scarred hearts.

I need everyone in this wing to become a human barometer, measuring the dynamic pressure of others and signaling to first sergeants, commanders or our ever-ready storm recovery team the potential catastrophic results in the lives of those we live and work with. It will take quite some time to recover from this storm; it's much tougher than simply throwing out debris. Include your family in the fun things we do here like wing celebrations and unit events. But also take advantage of our storm recovery programs. Accept help. Give it freely. Harbor no shame or guilt about it. Together we will get through this.





# HURRICANE SANDY RELIEF

ASSISTANCE IS AVAILABLE FOR THOSE WHO ARE EXPERIENCING A HARDSHIP DUE TO HURRICANE SANDY. DON'T LET GUILT, SHAME OR PRIDE STOP YOU FROM GETTING HELP. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT A FIRST SERGEANT OR ONE OF THE FOLLOWING AGENCIES:

## AIRMAN AND FAMILY READINESS

JUDITH PATES

JUDITH.PATES@US.AF.MIL

609-754-8229

## WING CHAPLAIN

CHAPLAIN (MAJ) PETER SOURITZIDIS

PETER.SOURITZIDIS@US.AF.MIL

609-754-3261

CHAPLAIN (CAPT) RAECITA HIGH

RAECITA.HIGH@US.AF.MIL

609-754-8228



## PULSE CHECK: *What did you learn from Hurricane Sandy?*



**Chaplain (Capt.)  
Recita High**

*514th Air  
Mobility Wing*

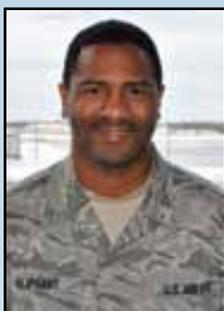
"I learned that Military One Source has disaster relief resources to include a hurricane handbook. It tells people how to deal with hurricanes before, during and after the storm."



**Tech. Sgt.  
Adam Ligon**

*35th Aerial  
Port Squadron*

"Make sure your insurance policy is up to date and you have the right kind of coverage before any storm hits. Also, make sure that you have a solid evacuation plan."



**Staff Sgt.  
Ramel Oliphant**

*514th Civil  
Engineer Squadron*

"I learned to always be prepared and to never rely on modern technology such as credit cards. Always have cash on hand along with an ample supply of basic necessities."



**Major  
Regina Reyes**

*514th Force  
Support Squadron*

"I learned how important accountability is in a situation like this. It's important that everyone update their contact information with their unit. A recall roster is only as good as the information it contains."



**Major  
Barry Slater**

*514th Aerospace  
Medicine Squadron*

"I learned going forward I will not be nonchalant about warnings of impending natural disasters. My concern at this time is for those that were more unfortunate than myself."

## In hurricane's wake, cynic learns lesson

**By Shawn J. Jones**  
*Freedom Flyer editor*

Prior to Hurricane Sandy, I thought the Air Force's wingman concept was just a gimmick that encouraged Airmen to poke their noses into my business, or worse, required me to poke my nose into someone else's business.

For goodness sake, I thought, can't an Airman just have a bad day without another Airman trying to help? Do these nose-pokers really care, or are they just doing their duty so when the next tragedy happens, no one will call them bad wingmen?

Personally, I doubted their motivation and sincerity.

You could have called me a cynic then, but not now. No, sir. I'm reformed. It just took a natural disaster of historic proportions for me to learn the lesson.

Thank you very much Hurricane Sandy.

Or more appropriately, my gratitude should be directed to the reservists of the 514th Air Mobility Wing.

Many of these Airmen live in and around the areas that were devastated by the hurricane, and while many were victims, more were wingmen and heroes.

When one senior noncommissioned officer's home was gutted by flood waters, he faced a recovery process that would require many hours of hard labor. But in the days that followed the storm, Airmen from his squadron started showing up at his door, ready to work. Several helped day after day, providing the labor and support to keep their fellow Airmen from becoming overwhelmed.

I was impressed by his selfless wingmen, but we're talking about a senior full-time employee of a reserve squadron. Of course, the wingmen show up to help him, right?

Yes but no. Wingmen aren't just for the full-time crowd in this wing.

When Airmen in another unit learned that one of their traditional reservists who was taking care of his family, including several young

children and elderly parents, had lost power and had dwindling food supplies, they were quick to act. An on-the-spot fund-raiser yielded \$400, which was immediately to purchase food and supplies for the grateful Airman.

I thought I was starting to get this wingman concept thing. Airmen will help Airmen regardless of whether they serve in full-time positions or as traditional reservists. If you got a uniform, you got a wingman, right?

Yes but no. Having a uniform has nothing to do with it.

With her husband off fighting a war in a faraway land, one pregnant military spouse remained trapped in her apartment building as flood waters began to flood the lower floors. The wing's Airman and Family Readiness office continuously communicated with her and the spouses of other deployed Airmen before, during and after the hurricane. Her needs weren't neglected just because she was separated from her Airman husband.

OK, OK. I get it. I work for a unique wing with an abnormal supply of selflessness.

Yes but no. The selflessness is in high supply, but that's not unique to this wing.

Several days after the hurricane, a letter arrived containing a significant donation for the Airmen who were affected by the hurricane. It came from Airmen from another wing in another part of the country. They saw the need to help fellow Airmen without needing to know the names or see the faces of those who would benefit from their generosity.

Well, I've learned my lesson. There are many good wingmen wearing Air Force blue and they are willing to help full-time Airmen, part-time Airmen, the spouses of Airmen, Airmen they know well and Airmen they don't know at all.

No longer will I look so skeptically upon the nose-pokers known as wingmen.

And maybe, when the situation calls for it, I'll even try to poke my nose.

# Volunteer helps with Jersey Shore recovery

By Senior Airman Chelsea Smith  
514th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs

As Hurricane Sandy's sharp winds and high tides approached, first responders suited up to prepare for the worst.

In his role as a volunteer firefighter with the Avon-by-the-Sea Volunteer Fire Department, Master Sgt. Joseph Gentile, a first sergeant with the 76th Air Refueling Squadron, assumed his duties by assisting numerous residents bound to be displaced by the hurricane.

A team comprised of Gentile and more than 30 first responders began their response efforts Sunday, preceding the hurricane, by alerting residents of Avon-by-the-Sea, Belmar, Neptune City and Bradley Beach to evacuate flood-prone areas. In an attempt to minimize flood impacts from nearby Sylvan Lake, the team also used engines to pump out a lake in the area, said Gentile.

As residents cleared the area and took refuge at local shelters, responders also ensured vehicles and equipment were completely fueled, and food supplies and water were abundant for volunteers working the aftermath of the storm, he said.

By morning, as the remnants of Sandy subsided, the picturesque shore known for its beautiful beaches and boardwalks, was nearly obliterated amid the destruction.

"The town of Belmar was forever changed," said Gentile. "There were flood waters for several days after the storm, and approximately 90 percent of its ocean front was destroyed. The biggest impact on me was witnessing people piling their belongings on the curb when they returned to find their houses destroyed."

Throughout the storm and the following days, responders operated all available vehicles, and manned the firehouse to facilitate questions from local residents, he said. Once conditions cleared, there was no time to be idle as the occasion called for swift recovery efforts.

"When I wasn't working on base, I was spending all my time at the firehouse," Gentile said. "I was splitting time between sleeping and responding to calls. We responded to three separate structure fires, all in the neighboring town of Belmar, within the three days during and after the storm."

Due to the extent of damage, days working on base were often cut short to attend to duties, such as purchasing food and water, during recovery efforts. However, Gentile said leadership here was understanding of his role as a first responder and allowed him to leave early to assist.

The volunteer firefighter training is not designed to prepare responders for natural disasters on the scale of Sandy, but the major weather-related emergencies of the past few years have changed their perspective.

Gentile said the team plans to keep their tactics the same, but with a heightened sense that the area is vulnerable to major storms in the future.



Photo by Shawn J. Jones

Capt. Holly Nelson, 732nd Airlift Squadron, performs preflight procedures prior to flight Nov. 2. Nelson and other crew members flew a C-17 Globemaster III to Phoenix, Ariz., to airlift electrical utility workers and equipment to New York to help with the recovery from Hurricane Sandy.

## HURRICANE RELIEF MISSION HITS HOME WITH N.J. RESERVISTS

By Shawn J. Jones  
Freedom Flyer editor

After a historic hurricane battered New York and New Jersey, Airmen from across the country leaned forward to answer the call for help, but for the Airmen of one Reserve wing, those calls for help were coming from friends, family and neighbors.

Most of the Airmen assigned to the 514th Air Mobility Wing at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., live in or near the areas most devastated by Hurricane Sandy.

Their knowledge of the hurricane is firsthand. Some watched flood waters bubble through their floorboards. Others watched stalwart trees snap like twigs. Most lost electrical power, and many lost much more.

Those who escaped the worst of the hurricane, were left wondering how best to help.

One of those Airmen was Tech. Sgt. Ryan Jackson, a loadmaster with the 732nd Airlift Squadron.

"Feeling personally overwhelmed with so much loss and help needed, I felt I could make the greatest impact by doing what I was trained to do: load and transport vehicles, personnel and equipment via cargo aircraft," he said.

Jackson and four other Airmen from the squadron volunteered to fly hurricane relief missions. Their first relief mission was to Phoenix, Ariz., Nov. 2, to pick-up and transport 67,000 pounds of resources to help restore electrical power.

The Airmen loaded and chained

two large boom trucks into the cargo hold of their C-17 Globemaster III. The crew then flew the trucks and their drivers – both from a Phoenix-based electrical utility company – to Stewart Air National Guard Base in Newburgh, N.Y. From there, the drivers took the trucks to Long Island, N.Y., where they were used to repair downed power lines.

The relief mission was a departure from the aircrew's usual mission of ferrying troops and equipment back and forth from the Middle East and Afghanistan. One of the aircrew's pilots, Capt. Holly Nelson, said she understands the significance of her regular duties, but the relief mission was special because the hurricane had hit so close to home.

"It was rewarding to help people on home soil and to help provide immediate relief that can help Americans directly," she said.

Although mobility Airmen have had an essential role in recovery efforts, they haven't been acting alone. They've joined fellow service members in working side-by-side with many federal, state and local mission partners.

Capt. Corey DeWaters, a pilot who flew with Nelson and Jackson, said he feels fortunate to play a key role in the total relief effort.

"It's great to live and serve in a country that cares enough about its citizens to do whatever it takes to help, regardless of cost or difficulty, and that has the resources to bring immediate relief to those suffering," he said.



Photo by Shawn J. Jones

Senior Airman Isac Ramos, 514th Operations Support Squadron, visited the Conference House Park in Staten Island, N.Y., Dec. 1. Ramos, an officer with the New York Police Department, patrolled the area near the park during Hurricane Sandy. Ramos watched from a nearby hilltop as the pictured lamp post was totally submerged by floodwaters.

## POLICEMAN, RESERVIST EXPERIENCES MOTHER NATURE'S WORST

By Shawn J. Jones  
*Freedom Flyer editor*

From his hilltop post along Staten Island's southwest coast, Isac Ramos huddled in a van with fellow New York Police Department officers while Hurricane Sandy raged around him.

As rain poured from the charcoal sky and relentless wind shoved the police van from side to side, Ramos took measure of the hurricane by observing a street lamp near the water's edge.

The Raritan Bay began to rise, forcing floodwaters ashore. As hours passed, the water level crept up the 12-foot lamp pole, eventually reaching and then submerging its light. Ramos looked upon the eerie glow of the underwater lamplight for a moment before it was abruptly snuffed out.

The sunken lamp was just one of millions of lights shut off by Hurricane Sandy, and for Ramos, it was just one of many unforgettable images of the hurricane's power.

As most Americans in the storm's path were hunkered down in relative safety, Ramos's duty as a police officer put him on the frontlines during its hostile assault of the New York and New Jersey coastlines.

"It's not often a cop feels helpless, but this event humbled a lot of people," said Ramos, who also serves as a Reserve senior airman with the 514th Operations Support Squadron here.

One of this team's duties during the storm was to patrol one of Staten Island's main thoroughfares. He said the driving proved

particularly treacherous and they rarely exceeded 15 mph due to poor visibility.

"The rain was literally coming down sideways," he said. "It was so heavy that it was like a sheet of plastic over the window."

After sunset, the widespread power outages left the island cloaked in darkness.

Ramos said he had trouble seeing anything besides the flashing lights of other emergency vehicles.

"The only way I can describe it was that it was like something out of a movie."

The roadway was also covered with obstacles.

Full garbage bags littered the streets like little black boulders, and there were so many trees and telephone poles in the street that he said it was like driving through a serpentine.

Ramos and his team encountered some of those obstacles just as they were falling.

"We literally watched as telephone poles and trees got ripped out of the ground right in front of us," he said.

His police van also took a beating during the storm. As they remained stationary at one of their posts, the van was battered by limbs that were snapping off of trees, and the wind blew so strongly that it sounded like the van's exterior panels were compressing inward over and over again.

Despite the clatter, Ramos said there was a certain comfort caused by the rain's ceaseless rhythm.

"It's kind of strange, but the rain was actually soothing," he said.

But it was a false comfort as Ramos

would learn while his team returned to the precinct building after their long shift.

"The houses in that area were completely under water," he said. "We're talking three-story houses. It was kind of sad."

Though his shift was over, he and his team still had to travel the 25 miles back to their home precinct in Harlem.

They made their way across Staten Island, but the best way home required a trip over America's longest suspension bridge. The Verrazano-Narrow Bridge, which connects Staten Island and Brooklyn, has acquired a reputation as the most dangerous bridge in New York. That reputation isn't enough to stop the 170,000 vehicles that drive across it on a typical day.

But this was no typical day. The bridge was shut down to the public during the hurricane, but emergency personnel were able to cross.

The van carrying Ramos and his fellow officers was the only vehicle on the long, lightless bridge.

"It was a scary ride."

Ramos said they would try to stay in the center lane, but the wind would push them to edge of the outside lane.

"You could feel when the wind hit, the van lifted."

Ramos would eventually make it home safe and sound.

He said he won't soon forget the powerful images of Mother Nature's strength, but he'll still be ready to answer the call for help - in his police or military uniform - the next time it comes.

# Firefighter, reservist in high demand during hurricane

By Master Sgt. Donna T. Jeffries  
514th Air Mobility Wing public affairs

Even when they aren't serving on military duty, many reservists have public service careers that proved demanding in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

After the hurricane struck, Airman 1st Class Joel Fernandez, 714th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, was on standby at his firehouse in Haledon, N.J., ready to respond when and where he

was needed. It did not take long for the civilian firefighter to be in the fray of what he describes as the busiest week ever.

"We had a lot of power outages, basement and car fires, trees down, building collapses and people trapped in their homes with gas lines open," the five-year veteran fireman said.

The workload for the Haledon fire department increased he said from the normal three-to-four emergency calls per night to

more than 20.

The workload was so heavy that he did not go home for a week.

"We all slept at the firehouse throughout the week," he said.

Staying close at hand proved best as Fernandez said his company was excellent in responding to the needs of his community.

"We were there when the seconds counted," he said. "In one call, a house was about to collapse, and we were able to get

there in time and get everyone out."

At week's end, the workload in his area began to settle down. He swapped his firefighter uniform for his Airman uniform, and reported to Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., to perform his Reserve drill.

"I feel this is a big thing that happened, and we are all trying to come together and help each other out to recover from Sandy," Fernandez said.

## Hurricane puts public servant to work

By Senior Airman Chelsea Smith  
514th Air Mobility Wing public affairs

Airmen are often revered as heroes for their service to their country, but many reservists are also public servants in their non-military positions.

For instance, Tech. Sgt. Timothy Mullin serves his country with the 88th Aerial Port Squadron, but his position as a detective with the Ocean County Sheriff's Department also calls for him to protect life and property.

When Hurricane Sandy ravaged the East Coast, Mullin's duties expanded greatly. Mullin was swiftly called to duty a day prior to the hurricane's arrival to help with evacuation efforts. His team visited more than 1,000 homes in Seaside Heights, Point Pleasant, Little Egg Harbor and Mantoloking to ensure evacuations were going smoothly.

"Individually, I knocked on more than 100 doors," said Mullin.

After the storm, Mullin's department joined with other local law enforcement agencies to assist with the recovery. Duties included transporting displaced residents from homes to local shelters, monitoring the shelters and guarding roadside checkpoints leading into affected communities.

"During the confusion following the hurricane, I drove a bus transporting residents to shelters or hospitals for care," he said. "We also patrolled houses to ensure people were able to evacuate and assisted in relocation

efforts."

In the course of his duties, Mullin said he witnessed a lot of destruction, including houses filled with as much as ten feet of water with severe water damage.

"I've seen a house in the middle of the road and million-dollar homes destroyed," he said. "I've seen a kitchen on its side."

Among the hollow streets and slowly receding water, the sullen days following the hurricane were also marked by occurrences of looting at local businesses, he said.

Amongst the devastation, Mullin said he also witnessed the endearing side of humanity during the height of the crisis. Families reuniting with loved ones at local shelters, neighbors helping neighbors and an integral network of helping hands strengthened morale in the community.

In the wake of Sandy, Mullin and his co-workers found themselves working excruciating long hours in the weeks following the hurricane. Prior to the hurricane Mullin said his usual shift lasted about eight hours, but after the hurricane, his workday more than doubled.

"We typically worked 16 to 20 hours per day, and in one week, I worked 65 hours in overtime," he said.

Mullin and many other Airmen who also serve as emergency response personnel in their non-military careers exemplify the citizen Airman lifestyle of public service.

## Honorary commander extends helping hand after Hurricane Sandy

By Master Sgt. Donna T. Jeffries  
514th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs

Mr. James Ewen, 514th Operations Support Squadron honorary commander and his wife Joette spearheaded a food drive in Burlington County to help victims of Hurricane Sandy. The community response was overwhelming.

"We had enough donations within the past two days to not only help the local Burlington County civilian populace, but to also help our military neighbors," said Ewen.

Ewen and his colleagues personally delivered four vehicles and one trailer full of food and hygiene products to refill the coffers of the 514th Airman and Family Readiness Office food pantry and clothing donation supply.

"Bringing the civilian and military communities together in times of adversity and in times of plenty is right thing to do," Ewen said. "I'm proud to be a member of the 514th and have this opportunity to help my fellow man."

Known for his generosity and willingness to extend a helping hand, Ewen's military counterpart sang his praises.

"It's great to have that kind of support from an honorary commander," said Lt. Col. Ryan Cecil, 514th OSS commander.

The honorary commanders program provides a forum for community leaders and military commanders to partner together, fostering a cohesive and mutually beneficial relationship.

This is not the first time Ewen has looked out for the Freedom Wing members.

He knows a lot of important people, and through his contacts, ensures the Reserve receives support from the civilian sector with discounts to community resources. He also regularly puts together care packages for deployed Airmen, Cecil said.

## Life as a military spouse:

# Nine months pregnant, husband deployed, hurricane on the way

By Master Sgt. Donna T. Jeffries  
514th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs

Not many people can say they've had a Humvee driven by an Army National Guardsman show up at their front door to provide taxi services, but that's a story that one Freedom wing spouse can tell.

Bernadette Branosky, wife of Lt. Col. Joel Branosky, 514th Civil Engineering Squadron, was pregnant and alone on the second floor of her 18-unit apartment building in Hoboken, N.J., when Hurricane Sandy struck.

Branosky's entire block was still surrounded by three feet of water days after the storm.

The water came in Monday and it started to rise by Monday evening, and then the power went out about 9:15 p.m., said the expectant military wife.

"The first night it was very windy and the force of the water coming through the doors of the first floor was crazy. Cars left on ground level were quickly submerged in water up to their hoods."

Yet, being nine months pregnant, with no electricity on the second floor of an apartment building with the bottom floor flooded and with husband serving his country on foreign soil wasn't too much for this stalwart military wife.

"I was physically fine and I have wonderful neighbors that checked on me. We talked by candlelight in the evening," she said. "It's amazing how dark your apartment is without power."

The key to surviving a storm is preparation, said Branosky, who stocked up on food and fluids before the storm. Her building still had running water, which was very important for someone due to give birth to her first child.

While Branosky said she was fine with her current situation, her family members did not agree with her.

As each day passed, the fumes from oil and other debris that had mixed with the flood waters grew stronger. Branosky knew she could go into labor at any moment, and with her ultrasound appointment cancelled, there was no way of knowing if the baby was still in the breech position, which would require delivery by cesarean section.

"My family was panicking about what if I went into labor and they couldn't get me out of the building," she said. "So my sister called the Army National Guard, told them about my situation and gave them my address."

The next thing Branosky knew, she was given instructions to pack a bag and shortly after, Guardsmen and medical services personnel arrived in a Humvee, ready to take her to the nearest shelter,



Courtesy photo

Lt. Col. Joel Branosky, 514th Civil Engineer Squadron, and his wife Bernadette holds their son, who was born several days after Hurricane Sandy.

located a few blocks away in a dry zone. From there, she was able to make arrangement to go to a friend's home.

Branosky's military family was also concerned about her well-being.

Judith Pates, director of the 514th Airman and Family Readiness office made contact with Branosky after the storm as part of her duties with the key spouse program, which is designed to provide support to the spouses of deployed Airmen.

Pates reached out to ascertain if Branosky was fine.

"I've come to know Bernadette very well since she began volunteering as a key spouse for her husband's unit," said Pates. "I was genuinely concerned about her during the hurricane, as I was about all the other members of this wing and their families. I was very happy and relieved to talk with Bernadette. It was great knowing she and her unborn baby were safe and doing well."

Looking back, Branosky said the worst things about the storm had nothing to do with the material items she lost, but rather more intangible things.

She said the hardest part was losing internet connection with her husband and with the loss of

refrigeration, losing the top of her wedding cake, which we planned to share upon his return home in the spring. The newlyweds missed their first wedding anniversary on Nov. 5.

"Being without power in this day and age feels so unsettling," said Branosky.

She said she was used to talking to her husband one-to-two times a day using an online videophone, but once electricity and an internet connection became unreliable, she talked with him much less frequently.

Branosky said she feels grateful for the Guardsmen who came to her rescue and for the military in general.

"Since I married into Joel's family I'm much more aware of people in the military and I have gained much more respect for what they do for our citizens."

Several days after the hurricane, Branosky gave birth to her son. Colonel Branosky was able to view the birth via videophone. One day later, he held his son in his arms. He received special permission to return home from his deployment for a week to tend to his wife and newborn. Mom and son are doing well and are staying at the family's Ocean City, N.J., home that was untouched by the ravages of the historic storm. And now they have an unforgettable story to tell.

# Hurricane victim heads off to basic training

**By Master Sgt. Donna T. Jeffries**  
*514th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs*

To leave or not to leave – that is the question everyone asks themselves when facing the approach of a natural disaster.

“I was one of the ones who thought Hurricane Sandy was going to be OK and not so bad,” said Nikolai Gakhokidze, a member of the 514th Development and Training Flight who left for basic training in mid-December. The soon-to-be Airmen is a resident of Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, N.Y., who ended up being among the thousands left homeless with very few personal effects.

Going home the night of the storm, he watched the water rush in from the bay towards the taxi he had taken from visiting a friend. As he felt the harsh winds blow and torrential rain fall, Gakhokidze said he realized his mistake to ignore previous evacuation warnings, but still made his way to his basement apartment three blocks away in an attempt to save what belongings he could.

Unfortunately for him Sheepshead Bay was one of the areas that took the brunt of what Hurricane Sandy dished out. He describes walking in sneakered feet through knee high water in the middle of the street to his apartment three blocks away from where the taxi was forced to stop.

“When I reached my apartment, the water was already high and stuff was floating,” Gakhokidze said. “I didn’t think about saving my personal documents since they were already done for.”

In the darkened room, Gakhokidze used the light from his cell phone to see and made two trips to the next level bringing his computer and gaming system to safety. When he entered his apartment for the third time, all water broke loose.

“As I was grabbing some clothes, the window burst. The freezing water gushed in and in a matter of seconds it was up to my chest,” he said. “I struggled to walk around the debris that was floating to get to the stairs where I stood shaking from the cold.”

Gakhokidze watched as the water rose to the first level of the apartment building before walking away with nothing but his cell phone in hand. Outside he joined several other people who also stayed and now found themselves forced from their flooding homes, looking for shelter in the midst of the storm.

Wet, cold and now homeless Gakhokidze, met up with a friend to see what they could do for his friend’s grandmother that lived about a 10-minute walk away.

“That night the walk increased to 40 minutes and we reached a point where we couldn’t go any further because we were scared for our lives,” he said. “The water was up to our chest and was flowing like a river. We turned and went back.”

By this time rescue teams from the fire department had arrived with boats to assist people out of the area. Gakhokidze went home with his friend who had a house full of family and no electricity.

He showered, ate and then found refuge in a local shelter for the evening.

His next few days were filled with much of the same, a cross between staying with friends and staying in shelters.

“I also went back to the apartment every day and was able to salvage a few more things like a pair of sneakers, a



*Courtesy Photo*

The apartment of Airman Basic Nikolai Gakhokidze sustained significant damage from flood waters associated with Hurricane Sandy. The apartment is in Sheepshead Bay, N.Y. Gakhokidze began Air Force basic military training in mid-December.

few clothes and a box of pictures from my grandmother and mother,” said the Russian-born immigrant who enlisted in the Air Force Reserve at the base of the Statue of Liberty in August. “Everything else is gone.”

Help came when he received a call from his Reserve unit who sent a member to pick him up in Brooklyn and bring him down to the base where, with the help of Air Force resources, he was able to begin to put the pieces of his life back together.

“I would never think that in my life that this hurricane would set me back like it did, but hopefully with the help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Air Force, I will get back on my feet,” said Gakhokidze.

The 514th Air Mobility Wing has resources available to assist any of its Airmen or civilian employees who are experiencing hurricane-related hardships.

“It doesn’t matter if you’ve been in the unit 30 days or 37 years” said Colonel Michael J. Underkofler, 514th Air Mobility Wing commander, “We’re here to provide the help our people need.”

Meeting the needs of its Airmen in times of trouble is part of what separates the Air Force Reserve from many other organizations.

“I feel like the Air Force is my family and they will help you in any way they can – I’m grateful to be a part of the Air Force,” Gakhokidze said.

## FREEDOM FLYER

514th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs  
2217 W. Arnold Ave.  
Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ 08641

FOR THE FAMILY OF:

Airmen stand in front of charitable donations intended for those who have experienced a hardship due to Hurricane Sandy. Pictured are: Maj. Gen. Mark Kyle, 4th Air Force commander; Tech. Sgt. Raul Rodriguez, 514th Air Mobility Wing chaplain assistant; Col. Michael Underkofler, 514th AMW commander; Chief Master Sgt. Rocky Hart, 4th AF command chief; and Chaplain (Maj.) Peter Souritzidis, 514th AMW.

*Photo by Tech. Sgt. Jonathan White*

