

Missouri Guard Begins Support Operations in Joplin

From a Missouri National Guard News Release

CARTHAGE, Mo., May 23, 2011 – About 140 Missouri National Guard troops are working under the orders of Gov. Jay Nixon to assist local authorities after a tornado ripped through the city of Joplin, Mo., yesterday. Guardsmen are assisting in search and rescue missions in support of local authorities, and are expected to conduct a number of missions in the upcoming days, including emergency route clearance, communications support, door-to-door safety visits and security, officials said.

“As soon as we heard the news of the tornados, the Missouri National Guard began mobilization activities,” said Army Maj. Gen. Stephen L. Danner, adjutant general. “Your Missouri National Guard is bringing experienced citizen-soldiers and leaders to provide the best support we have to our neighbors in Joplin.”

Among those responding are soldiers of the 117th Engineer Team, of Monett, and 294th Engineer Company, of Carthage and Anderson. Additionally, a Joint Task Force Communications Kit out of Jefferson City is en route to assist local authorities.

The troops are part of a task force organized under the 203rd Engineer Battalion and is using the Carthage Armory to stage and deploy troops to Joplin. The Missouri National Guard has a total force of more than 11,500 Guard members who are ready to respond, officials said.

Army Spc. Daniel Brown of the 117th Engineer Team said his unit was the first to respond and worked throughout the night.

“We got the call while doing our annual training in nearby Anderson, and we immediately packed up and went straight to Joplin,” he said. Along the way, he added, he saw overturned trucks at the intersection of highways 71 and 44, and his unit stopped to check a gas station for people who might have needed help.

“We moved on to Joplin, where we spent the night at the Walmart and a local sports store searching the rubble,” Brown said. “This is something nobody wants to see and thankfully we haven’t needed to save anyone yet. But we’ve got a lot of good knowledge and training to help. This is our job and Joplin is our backyard.”

The 117th Engineer Team has special equipment, and the soldiers have extensive training and expertise to conduct search and rescue missions. The soldiers are working 12-hour shifts.

Army Spc. Richard Stotts of the 294th Engineer Company said he was driving with his girlfriend when the storms hit. After taking shelter and making sure his family was safe, Stotts immediately began helping. He pulled three people out of the local AT&T building when he got the call that he was mobilized.

For Stotts, the transition from citizen helping citizens to soldier helping citizens was seamless.

“This is what I signed up for -- to help people,” he said.

The 294th Engineer Company worked throughout the night and is supporting the 117th and local authorities. Supporting people throughout the area is the main mission, said Army Maj. Michael Brown, executive officer for the 203rd Engineer Battalion.

“We are here to support the citizens of Joplin any way we can,” he said. “Our hearts go out to those who have lost loved ones in this disaster. The residents here are our fellow citizens, neighbors and friends. We will remain here as long as they need us.”

Missouri’s soldiers and airmen will continue supporting local authorities until released by the governor, officials said.

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