

# Alabama Guardsman

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# Alabama Guard brings relief after tornado sweeps through state

Contributed  
131st MPAD

April 27, 2011 will be remembered as a dark day in the history of Alabama. It was the day that tornadoes swept through the state, leaving a trail of death and destruction. The record storms were followed by a record response, as the Alabama National Guard immediately joined in recovery efforts.

“The National Guard response to the 27 April tornados was the largest in-state response in Alabama history,” said Lt. Col. Jim Hawkins, Deputy Director of Military Support. “At its peak, nearly 3000 Soldiers and Airmen were on duty with a total of over 35,000 mandays spent in response. Every Army Major Command and both Air Wings had personnel involved in the response.”

The Guard helped the recovery in several different areas.

“The Guard’s response included a wide mission set from SAR (search and rescue), emergency route clearance, security, support to law enforcement, commodities distribution, transportation and communications support,” said Hawkins.



Eric Roberts/photo

*AHMMWV from the 231st Military Police Battalion, Prattville, patrols a tornado devastated area in Tuscaloosa.*

Although the Tuscaloosa area was one of the hardest hit, and received much of the media attention, the Guard helped with recovery throughout the state.

“The Guard response in the Tuscaloosa area was well documented by the media but it is important to note there was also a major Guard presence in Jefferson, Marion, Cullman, Marshall, DeKalb and Madison Counties,” said Hawkins.

There was a human element that the numbers can’t convey, the effect that the presence of Guardmembers can have.

“Our presence alone has such a calming effect,” said Command Sgt. Maj. William

Jones, then State Command Sergeant Major. “We are here and we are here to help. The resiliency could not be better. This is a traumatic event that will be felt for a long time. The Guard is helping heal the hurt of the people that were affected by the storm.”

“I came here expecting to be asked why the National Guard is here, but they have welcomed us with open arms,” said Spc. Craig Penn, 1670 Transportation Co. Det. 1, Troy. “We were there the day after the tornado. We were the first people the residents saw. We were their shoulders to cry on.”

### Alabama Guardsman

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### On the Cover

Pfc. Justin Jackson, of the Alabama Army National Guard’s 1670th Transportation Co. in Clayton, Ala., provides security for residents of Concord, Ala., May 9. Approximately 2,900 Guardsmen were activated in response to the April 27 record breaking storms. (photo by Eric Roberts).

## Adjutant General

# Alabama Guard gives its all in tornado response



**Maj. Gen.  
Perry Smith**

I want to begin by expressing our sorrow and empathy for those in Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas and across the Midwest who have experienced the devastating effects of powerful tornadoes in the last few weeks.

The thoughts and prayers of Alabama National Guardsmen are with the citizens of those areas. We also continue to feel sorrow and loss for those of our own state who lost lives, loved ones and

property as tornadoes ravaged much of our state April 27. Some even within our own ranks were severely affected, as you will read about later in this issue.

Yet, in spite of the personal losses of many; in spite of unprecedented devastation; and in spite of having more than 1,500 Soldiers and Airmen deployed supporting overseas operations, the Alabama National Guard responded in a way that is most appropriately called exemplary. The skill, dedication and professionalism with which nearly 3,000 service members activated to assist their fellow citizens is something of which any Fortune 500 company or any military organization around the world would be envious.

You responded quickly and efficiently

to what has become the Alabama National Guard's largest domestic response operation in history. You searched wreckage and rubble for survivors and rescued them. When that was not possible, you gave dignity to those you found and comfort to their families. You secured the streets from those who would take advantage of people already devastated. You handed out countless cases of water and meals to those who had no other means of sustenance. You provided vital communications between responders to ensure the most effective response. You did so much more than this, much of which may never be completely known; and you did it all in a way that only enhanced the already positive image of the **(Please see *Response*, page 7)**

## State Command Sergeant Major

# An introduction to the new State Command Sergeant Major



**Command Sgt.  
Maj.  
Eddie Pike**

As this is my first article for The Alabama Guardsman, I would like to tell our Guardsmen about myself and my priorities as the state command sergeant major. I enlisted in the Alabama Army National Guard in October,

1971, in Roanoke, Ala. Of my 39 years of service, I served 20 years in 2nd Battalion, 117th Field Artillery and eight years in 3rd Battalion, 1-117th Field Artillery.

I was selected to fill the command sergeant major position in the 2nd Battalion,

1-117th Field Artillery when the battalion was reactivated in 1996. In 2000, I moved over to the 278th Chemical Battalion in Oneonta to serve as their command sergeant major. I transferred to 3rd Battalion, 1-117th Field Artillery in 2002 as their command sergeant major.

I was selected as 621st Troop Support Command Brigade command sergeant major in 2006 and held that position until 2010. I transferred to the newly organized 142nd Battlefield Surveillance Brigade in Decatur where I served as command sergeant major until Maj. Gen. Perry Smith called and asked me to be his state command sergeant major.

My first priorities as state command sergeant major will be to improve duty military occupational specialty qualifica-

tion, medical readiness, late/ delinquent noncommissioned officer evaluation reports, noncommissioned officer education system courses, noncommissioned officer vacancies, and working with Recruiting and Retention and the major commands' command sergeants major to address the distance some of our young Soldiers have to drive to inactive duty training each month. My plan is to utilize the major commands' command sergeants major as much as possible in the big decisions concerning our enlisted force.

I look forward to my new challenges in this position and all opportunities to visit your units and meet Soldiers and Airmen to give them the chance to talk to me.

# Snap Shots

A look at some of the recent highlights in the Alabama National Guard



Jamie Brown/photo

*A soldier with Det. 1, 208th Chemical Co., out of Oneonta, places a box of MREs (Meals Ready-To-Eat) in the car of a resident in Fultondale affected by the tornados. The Alabama National Guard manned distribution points in areas affected by the tornadoes, where they provided residents with water, ice, MREs, tarps and other essential items.*



Katie Dowd/photo

*Army Sgt. Mary Irving, 731st Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB), Tallassee, Ala., assists Air Force Tech. Sgt. George Peoples, 117th Air Refueling Wing, Birmingham, Ala., with moving a pallet of bottled water to distribute to the people of Pratt City. They were working out of the distribution center at Legion Field in Birmingham, Ala.*



Sandra Lucas/photo

*NORTHPORT, Ala. – Brig. Gen. Charles Gailes Jr. passes the unit guidon to Maj. Gen. Perry Smith, The Adjutant General of Alabama, during a promotion ceremony May 3. Gailes, was promoted to major general during the ceremony. Gailes is currently the Commander, 31st Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Brigade. “I am humbled and honored. However, my focus is the immediate mission to assist those affected by this tragic disaster” said Gailes. He dismissed the gathering with the command for Soldiers to return to mission.*



Katie Dowd/photo

*Pfc. Leslie Williams with the 214th Military Police Co., Alexander City, stands watch over a devastated neighborhood in Tuscaloosa after the April 27 tornado. The Alabama National Guard assisted the affected areas in various ways including search and recovery, traffic control, security patrols, transportation, aviation support and food and water distribution.*



Jamie Brown/photo

*Alabama National Guard Soldiers with the 877th Forward Support Command out of Northport man a traffic control point in the Holt area near Tuscaloosa April 28.*



Eric Roberts/photo

*Spc. Cary Barber and Pfc. Patricia Nowell, 1670th Transportation Co., provide security for the residents of Concord in response to the tornadoes of April 27.*

## 6 Alabama Guardsman



Tiffany Harkins/photo

*Master Sgt. Michael Smith, 217th Military Police Co. surveys the damage left by the tornado in Tuscaloosa.*



Katie Dowd/photo

*Bill Cosby talks to Alabama Army National Guard Spc. Deanna Gerowski, a medic with the 128th Medical Co., Ashland, Ala., during his trip to Pratt City, May 6. Cosby stopped to greet the troops that are assisting in the recovery zones.*



Katie Dowd/photo

*The 31st CBRN Battalion flies the American flag at half staff outside of the armory in Northport, Ala., in honor of the victims of the tornadoes that hit Alabama on April 27.*



*Spc. Robert Boettner, 31st Chemical Brigade, Northport, Ala., carries a child's bike from the rubble in the Crescent Ridge area in Tuscaloosa, Ala., during search, rescue and recovery operations. The Tuscaloosa area was one of the hardest hit in the state, and Guardmembers assisted the area by setting up traffic control points, providing security patrols, search and rescue operations and food and water distribution.*

Katie Dowd/photo

*(Response continued from page 3)*

Alabama National Guard.

In the days to come, the way in which the Alabama National Guard planned, conducted and completed its missions will be studied by other states and organizations. You have established yourselves as the standard by which others will be measured. Let us remember, however, that this is not because we are better people than others – this operation went so well because every day Alabama National Guard leaders are planning for events such as this. This operation

went well because we have joint exercises and study best practices. This went well because sergeants inspected their squads before sending them out the door to ensure they were ready for the mission. This went well because leaders have instilled a culture of realistic planning, training and implementation.

I could go on about how proud I am of the way in which you responded when your state needed you most, but we still have a job to do. As you read this, we have units in Iraq,

Afghanistan, mobilization stations and conducting pre-mobilization training at home station. Our job is never complete. Know this, though, I have never been more proud of an organization than I am right now of the Alabama National Guard. You responded to your state in its need and you continue to respond to your country's call with more than 16,000 deployments since 9/11. You are truly the finest Guard organization in the country. Lead from the front!

# Guardmember survives direct hit from deadly tornado

by Spc. Eric Roberts  
131st MPAD

Homes have been reduced to piles of rubble, trees that offered shade for local residents now appear as toothpicks scattered across the devastated terrain. Pictures and family heirlooms lay scattered by the wind, motionless amongst the chaos. It is not a scene of war; it is the scene in parts of Alabama following the destructive tornadoes of April 27, 2011.

For one Alabama National Guardsman in Pleasant Grove, the storm changed his life forever. The storm left behind destruction that will never be forgotten.

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***“It sounded as if the house exploded. While the storm was hitting I started praying, the house was groaning and the foundation was breaking underneath us.***

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Sgt. David Heaton, a recruitment noncommissioned officer with Detachment 5 Recruit Sustainment Program, was at his home in Pleasant Grove, when the sirens alerted residents at 5:15 p.m. of a possible tornado.

“When I looked outside I saw pieces of paper and other small debris floating in the air. At this point, I knew it was going to be



Eric Roberts/photo

*Sgt. David Heaton sits in front of the wreckage that used to be his home. Although a deadly tornado destroyed his Pleasant Grove home, Heaton and his family made it through the storm unharmed.*

really bad,” Heaton said. “The rain came first, then came the hail and then it was calm. From what I learned growing up in Texas, I knew it was going to be bad.”

Heaton had no idea how bad it was going to be as an EF4 tornado, one step from the most powerful twister, was about to hit Pleasant Grove.

“I told my first sergeant if he did not hear from me in 30 minutes to come looking for me. I took my three boys to the basement and laid them on pillows. I took a mattress and I laid on top of them. Almost emotional, I told my kids it was going to be loud and scary. I told them whatever they did not to let go of me,” said Heaton.

At approximately 5:50 p.m., the tornado hit Pleasant Grove throwing debris and leaving di-

saster in its path.

“It sounded as if the house exploded. While the storm was hitting I started praying, the house was groaning and the foundation was breaking underneath us. A sound stuck out through everything else. As we were being sucked up into the air, I heard my son praying. He was repeating every word of my prayer. It took me a second to realize that we were back on the ground. I still do not know how I held on to my kids. As I looked up and through the limbs of a tree that had fallen on my house, I saw the evening sky,” said Heaton.

More than ten people were killed in the Pleasant Grove community as a result of the deadly tornado. The winds that reached approximately 200 mph destroyed everything in the storm’s path.

# National Guard Foundation helps those who help others

by Staff Sgt. Doug Howard  
Staff Writer

When disasters strike, people know they can count on the Soldiers and Airmen of the Alabama National Guard to provide a helping hand. Whether distributing food and water to tornado victims or keeping a watchful eye on their property, the Guard answers the call when things are at their worst.

But who is there to help the members of the Guard when tornados or other hardships strike one of them? The Alabama National Guard Foundation was formed in 2004 for times just like this.

To provide its assistance, the foundation relies on private donations, military retiree contributions and money given in lieu of flowers by the loved ones of deceased service members at the requests of their families. National Guard organizations from other states pitch in as well.

“We recently received a donation from the Wisconsin National Guard’s Enlisted Association of \$600,” said Col. Bryan Morgan, the foundation’s chairman. “Over \$250,000 has been donated to the foundation since it began.”

Since its creation, the foundation has responded to more than 300 hardship cases and has handed out more than \$200,000 to Guard members and their families to help with unexpected emergencies. Currently, grants are available to Guardmembers for up to \$500.

The need for aid has been constant in the past, but the recent tornadoes created an extraordinary demand for the foundation. According to Sgt. Bethany Brown, who processes each application, requests for assistance spiked after the tornadoes, April 27, 2011.

“The foundation has reviewed 38 applications for financial help after the tornadoes,” said Brown.



Eric Robertsphoto

*Alabama Guardmembers patrol a tornado hit area. The Alabama National Guard Foundation provides assistance to Guardmembers who are the victims of storms like the tornados that hit the state in April.*

Brown was not surprised, given the destruction that occurred during one of the worst tornado outbreaks in Alabama history. As a result, several heart wrenching stories have surfaced out of the devastation that occurred that day.

“Some servicemembers lost everything,” said Huston Waters, Coordinator at the National Guard Family Assistance Center in Montgomery. “They needed money to buy the essentials that were swept away by the storms, the things we take for granted every day. Things like food, water, clothing and toiletries. Many needed help to purchase these essentials while waiting for assistance from insurance, family or other charitable sources.”

Waters described a situation in which a Guardsman rushed home from a deployment to find his home destroyed and his spouse in the hospital.

“The Family Assistance Center was there to meet the soldier at the airport, and the foundation sent a check overnight to the hospital to help with expenses.”

Yet another story details the struggle of a deployed Guardmember’s wife to provide shelter for her and her two children after their home was destroyed by the tornadoes.

“She found the family’s camping equipment in the wreckage, and used it as temporary living quarters,” said Waters. “To cook, she collected wood from the storm debris for a fire.” The foundation provided her with much needed funds to help get through the aftermath of the disaster.

Any Alabama Guardmember seeking assistance should request an application from his or her unit, or contact Mr. Huston Waters or Ms. Lisa Terry with the Family Assistance Center at (334) 270-2968, (334)274-6321, or 1-800-231-2846.

## Guardmembers help keep neighborhoods safe after the storm

by Spc. Katie Dowd  
167th TSC

One Tuscaloosa Police officer. Two columns of Guardsmen. Three Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control agents. This is one of many groups that are seen patrolling the streets of Tuscaloosa throughout the night. They work together to secure the areas designated as recovery zones that were destroyed during the April 27 tornadoes. The groups are patrolling to make sure there is no theft, robbery or criminal trespassing.

This group quietly walks through the neighborhoods in the Leland area. They go from checkpoint to checkpoint, occasionally shining flashlights onto areas if they suspect there is something going on. Mostly though, everyone is more comfortable without the flashlights. After six nights of patrolling through the same neighborhood, they are familiar enough with the area to be able to recognize it in the darkness.

“There was a grandfather clock right there,” ABC agent Hines said as he pointed to what was left of a storage unit. “I really hope the owners came and got it.”

Caring comments like this continue throughout the night amongst the patrol group. They protect the neighborhood as they would their own.

“I think we’re doing a great thing,” said Staff Sgt. Eric Matraia, 214th Military Police



Katie Dowd/phot

*National Guard, Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control agents and a Tuscaloosa Police officer conduct night operations walking through a neighborhood.*

Company in Alexander City. He is the acting senior noncommissioned officer over the Guardsmen performing night patrols. “We’ve seen the theft rate go down dramatically. There aren’t as many people just wandering the streets as there were the first two nights.”

There were four checkpoints throughout the neighborhood that night, down from the twelve checkpoints that were set up initially. Members of the Tuscaloosa Police Department, along with the ABC force, operate the checkpoints. They check addresses and destinations for those driving through the recovery areas after dark.

“People are generally not living in their homes because there’s nothing left of them. There really aren’t many rea-

sons for people to be driving through here,” said Hines. “But, it is their city, and we understand that a lot of people have routes they’ve driven all their lives. We’re not going to stop that.”

Many citizens have expressed their thanks to the groups that are here assisting with the recovery efforts.

“Thank you for taking care of us,” said the driver of one car. “We appreciate everything you are doing,” said another.

The kind words are appreciated and help to keep morale high. “It feels good to be doing our part to help out,” said Cadet Joanna Hanson, 214th Military Police Co., Alexander City, Ala. “We’re doing a great thing out here.”

# Alabama Guard assists Jefferson County communities after tornado

by Spc. Katie Dowd  
167th TSC

Pallets stacked high with cases of water, bags of ice, boxes of Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) and tarps awaited distribution in the Legion Field parking lot in Birmingham.

This was the Alabama National Guard's distribution center for Task Force Jefferson, the mission to assist citizens of Jefferson County affected by the April 27 tornadoes. Guardsmen also assisted local law enforcement with traffic control and neighborhood security.

Pratt City was one of the most devastated areas of Birmingham. The streets were clear, but many of the buildings in the area were destroyed.

The National Guard had a point of distribution (POD) in Pratt City where people affected by the tornado could drive through and Soldiers would load the available supplies into their vehicles.

"More than 26,000 pallets of supplies have been distributed throughout Jefferson County," said Warrant Officer Rhonda Brown, 731st Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) out of Tallassee, the officer-in-charge of Task Force Jefferson.

Guardsmen also delivered supplies to Boutwell Auditorium, McCalla, Pleasant Grove, Hackelburg and the Trussville Fire Department. Local volunteer groups in these areas distributed the supplies to those who needed them.

"The community outreach has been phenomenal," said Brown. "We have been transporting supplies, but the local volunteers have been passing them out in those areas."

Air and Army National Guardsmen



Katie Dowd/phot

*The Alabama National Guard's Task Force Jefferson distribution center located at Legion Field in Birmingham. Pallets of bottled water, Meals Ready to Eat (MREs), ice and tarps are organized for easy distribution to the areas affected by the tornadoes on April 27.*

assisted with security and traffic control points around the area. Air Force Lt. Col. Scott Grant of the 117th Air Refueling wing in Birmingham worked one of the Pratt City traffic control points. Grant said that they have been working with the Birmingham Police Department in support of these efforts.

"The Birmingham Police Department has been great," said Grant. "They already have a lot going on in the city because they still have to carry out every day operations in addition to responding to the new needs caused by the tornado. They have shown a great amount of appreciation for the National Guard mission."

Alabama Guardsmen checked

identification and addresses at the checkpoints. Their mission was to keep traffic to a minimum so that support efforts could be carried out without impediment. It also reduced the threat of theft in the area.

"People have been very appreciative," said Staff Sgt. Michael Jackson, 158th Maintenance Company, Tallassee, Ala. "It feels good to be giving back to the communities that support us."

The National Guard also handed out information on how to contact FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) at the point of distribution.

# Guard chaplains bring comfort amid devastation

by Pfc. Eric Roberts  
131st MPAD

A mile-wide path of destruction marks where the record breaking storm hit Tuscaloosa and its surrounding community April 27, 2011. The Alabama National Guard chaplains responded quickly and efficiently, at times among the first responders to Guardsmembers in the affected areas.

“Our primary goal in this type of tragedy is to provide religious support and care to Soldiers and Airmen in the National Guard and their dependents,” said Lt. Col. Henry Beaulieu, a chaplain with the 62nd Troop Command. “We had approximately 35 Guardsmen directly affected. Our mission is to be there for the Soldiers when it hurts the most.”

Storm response is different for Guardsman and chaplains alike. It presents challenges that differ from traditional deployments.

“An overseas deployment is defined,” said Maj. Wyly Collins, full-time support chaplain with the Alabama National Guard. “You have 30 minutes to respond to a tornado. You have no idea how long you will be there. There is not a period of ramp up. You do not have time to prepare your mind. You are pulling people out of wreckage, you are assisting victims and you are offering hope to those who have lost everything.”

The challenges to mental health that are brought on by disaster and being away from home is something the National Guard takes very seriously.

“This is a high adrenaline situation,” said Betsy Houser, Alabama National Guard Director of Psychological Health.

“My job is to provide counseling to the chaplains and also the individual Soldiers. The chaplains and I are on the same team. Just as my father was a medic in World War II, I am an emotional medic. I don’t think Soldiers are broken. Individuals have



Eric Roberts/photo

*Capt. Scotty Riggs, Chaplain Candidate with the 231st MP Battalion stands next to a sign of thanks in the wreckage of the tornado that swept through the state in April.*

to have time to process what they have seen. Every service member has a story, and it needs to be heard.”

Tuscaloosa and its surrounding communities were ravaged by the winds and rain of an EF4 tornado. Lt. Col. Mark Thornton, Headquarters Detachment 31st Chemical Brigade chaplain arrived in Tuscaloosa a day after the storm hit. “I had a chance to be a first responder on Sept. 11 (2001) as a chaplain in the New York National Guard, and a first responder to Hurricane Katrina as a chaplain in the Alabama National Guard,” said Thornton. “The initial devastation (in Tuscaloosa) was more than the mind could comprehend. The devastation was total. The doughnut shop I ate in a week ago is gone. Before I could minister I had to deal with it myself. This generation that a lot of people disparage left their families without power and in the dark to come and serve. This is why I am in the Guard. When there is turmoil, we come to

provide stability. We do it for our families, our cities, our state and our country. We are here to serve. We are well trained and well equipped.”

With hundreds of homes and numerous businesses wiped out, the initial assessment in Tuscaloosa is estimated around \$100 million in damage.

“There were two times I wept,” said Thornton. “First, when I arrived at McFarland and 15th Street. I was there just weeks earlier. Secondly, when I saw coffee shops serving coffee just days after the storm was over. I realized at that moment things would be back to normal. Tuscaloosa would be back stronger. The uniforms brought hope. It is important to listen and just hear the residents’ stories. It is therapeutic. It is normal to be sad, confused, angry or even confused with God. Five years from now, it is going to be great to see the beauty rise from the ashes.”