

Puerto Rico citizens recovering from Hurricane Maria get support from a South Dakota National Guard water supply team



In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the South Dakota National Guard responded. On this date in South Dakota National Guard history, Company A, 139th Brigade Support Battalion was providing potable water to the citizens of Puerto Rico. A month earlier, on the morning of September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria struck the United States Territory of Puerto Rico. The hurricane devastated the island and created a crisis for the 3.4 million residents.

Gov. Dugaard activated four members of Company A, 139th Brigade Support Battalion, at the request of Puerto Rico government authorities. The mission was to help with recovery operations and provide water distribution capabilities to those in need. On this date the four Soldiers were actively dispensing water, they had deployed on October 8 and had been on the job for nearly two weeks. The Watertown, SD based unit deployed with two Load Handling System vehicles and trailers equipped with four Compatible Water Tank Racks, or "Hippos." The Hippo has the capability to receive, store and distribute up to 2,000 gallons of potable water per system.

While there, the Soldiers personally distributed more than 420,000 gallons of water to Puerto Rico residents. The unit members also helped to setup two water purification sites and two water distribution sites, which allowed for a total of 920,000 gallons of water to be distributed in support of relief efforts.

"I'm most proud of the fact that our Soldiers, along with members of the Puerto Rico and Ohio National Guard, were able to work together seamlessly to produce and distribute 920,000 gallons of water to the locals of Puerto Rico," said Staff Sgt. Greg Beynon of Sioux Falls. "To help out and see the people's faces and hear their thanks made me feel like I was truly helping."

"Being part of the National Guard was significant in this mission because I could use my training and my military skills to help," said Spc. Jorge Morales, originally from Puerto Rico. "My greatest pride in this experience was being able to help my people in such a difficult situation. Returning in these conditions was hard and painful," said Morales, who had not visited the island since 2014, "but it was more than an

honor to be part of a team willing to help and cover a need. I was very satisfied with my work, my team, and that I can say 'mission accomplished.'"

"The National Guard is the military first responder for our communities, state and nation and the primary domestic response option for the Department of Defense," LTC James Selchert said. "We stand trained and prepared to assist civil authorities in protecting lives and property."

The four members returned home on November 19, 2017 after serving more than six weeks supporting the hurricane recovery operation in Puerto Rico. They came home having gained the respect and thanks from the grateful Puerto Rican citizens. "Knowing that we are needed, beyond a home state crisis or a military conflict, was the most significant thing about this operation to me as a Soldier in the South Dakota National Guard" said Sgt. 1st Class Roger Mitchell of Watertown. "I am really proud of the way everyone worked together to help those who needed it, regardless of our military branch or state of origin."

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