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Hurricane Michael

CONFRONTING A WORST CASE SCENARIO: TYNDALL AFB & HURRICANE MICHAEL

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL DANIEL J. WATSON

A member of the weather flight mentioned they were “**keeping an eye on something**” in the Caribbean Sea, but there was definitely no sense of alarm in the briefer’s demeanor.... We had no idea this would be our last day together as a group.

The first mention of a potential storm was a seemingly benign comment at our wing standup on 4 October 2018. A member of the weather flight mentioned something about “keeping an eye on something” in the Caribbean Sea, but there was definitely no sense of alarm in the briefer’s demeanor. I admit that I did not think much about the comment at the time. The next day was a Friday, 5 October, and our office was preparing for a major push on our self-assessment program. We had lunch as an office in the courtroom and split off into sections in order to address assigned areas of the Article 6 checklist. Everyone was looking forward to the three-day Columbus Day weekend. We had no idea this would be our last day together as a group.

I had been in place at Tyndall Air Force Base for about two months and was excited to have the opportunity to lead a fighter wing legal office. With the arrival of two new JAGs fresh from the Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course (JASOC), all of our office teammates were in place and ready

to take on the challenges that lay ahead. In fact, heading into the Columbus Day weekend, I remember talking with my leadership team, Deputy Staff Judge Advocate Major Satura Gabriel and Law Office Superintendent MSgt Tara Padua, and sharing the sense that good things were about to happen within the office.

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TROPICAL STORM 14 – HURRICANE MICHAEL

Over the weekend, I started to receive additional email updates from the weather flight about an unnamed tropical storm. However, these alerts were not much different than the standard email notifications I received at other bases

regarding weather events. In casual conversations with neighbors, there was no sense of alarm or the impending danger. The first time I saw the name Michael assigned to the storm was the afternoon on Sunday, 7 October, in one of the weather flight emails. Until that point, it was referred to simply as Tropical Storm 14. The email reports became more frequent, but seemed to alternate between a tropical depression and a Category 1 hurricane. The last email on Sunday evening indicated the storm track had shifted slightly to the east, removing Tyndall from Michael's projected path.

The following morning, the news grew more ominous. Emails now reported the storm track had turned back toward Tyndall AFB. The school where my wife worked and my sons attended announced a school closure for the next few days. My wife informed me there was a noticeable sense of unease among her co-workers who were eager to evacuate the area.

EMERGENCY OPERATIONS ACTIVATED

Around 0815, the alarm bells started going off. The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was recalled to report immediately. Captain Samantha Golseth responded on behalf of our office. Captain Corey Rotschafer would relieve her later that evening. Captain Golseth, who had graduated JASOC six months earlier, now found herself at the forefront of Tyndall's response to what would become one of the worst natural disasters to ever strike an Air Force base. I cannot imagine being thrust into a similar role at that stage of my career. Thankfully, Captain Golseth rose to the challenge.

Considering that an evacuation order has both legal and financial ramifications, I would recommend neither JA or CPTS attempt to write such an order in isolation.

EVACUATION ORDER

The Crisis Action Team (CAT) was subsequently notified to report at 1600. Major Gabriel and I received word that Colonel Brian Laidlaw, 325th Fighter Wing Commander

(325 FW/CC), decided to order an evacuation of all aircraft and personnel in less than 24 hours. Working rapidly with Major Anthony George, the Comptroller Squadron Commander (325 CPTS/CC), we were able to have the order ready for signature prior to the scheduled CAT meeting. Considering that an evacuation order has both legal and financial ramifications, I would recommend neither JA or CPTS attempt to write such an order in isolation. In fact, many of the questions about the evacuation order that arose in the weeks and months after the evacuation were financial, as opposed to legal, ones.

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There was also a rush to protect the exterior offices in our building. At this point, Michael was still forecasted to reach landfall as a Category 1 hurricane, so we thought, at most, we might have a few broken windows and some potential water damage. We removed personal items such as diplomas and pictures from the office walls, turned off the power, covered our computers and office equipment with plastic bags, and Major Gabriel and I moved what we could into the centermost part of our office space away from the windows.

The CAT briefing was the first time the entire group learned of the potential magnitude of the storm. The wing commander told everyone that he had decided to order an evacuation of all personnel and aircraft. In a statement that later proved prophetic, he informed the CAT that based on weather reports he was receiving Tyndall might not be recognizable within the next 48 hours. Michael was still predicted to arrive as a Category 1 or Category 2 hurricane, but had the potential to intensify. All personnel who were not part of the ride-out team were ordered to depart the area no later than Tuesday, 9 October, at 1500. In addition

to the 325 FW command team (CC, CV, and CCC), a relatively small contingent of medical, security forces and civil engineers stayed on-base as part of the ride-out team. The commander wanted the CAT to meet once more on Tuesday morning, then get our families out of town.

The Wing Commander informed the CAT that based on weather reports he was receiving Tyndall might not be recognizable within the next 48 hours.

All office personnel were notified of the evacuation order and plans to depart the area began in earnest. In talking to my neighbors, I was struck by the sense that no one thought this was going to be a big deal. Most people intended to ride out the hurricane at home. Thankfully, given the evacuation order, this was not an option for my family. We packed enough clothes for a few days. My wife and I expected it would be a bad storm, but believed we would be back in our house by the weekend.

PRE-HURRICANE CAT MEETING

On Tuesday morning, base leadership held a final pre-hurricane CAT meeting where we went over the “spaghetti models” indicating the path of the hurricane. Most of the 20 forecasts were predicting a relatively direct or close hit on the area in and around Tyndall. In the single humorous moment of a very serious morning, a lone green line model was predicting a zig-zagging storm that was veering west, then east for no apparent reason heading across Florida north of Tampa Bay for parts unknown. Someone in the CAT shouted out, “I’m rooting for the green one,” which gave everyone a much-needed laugh. After receiving final updates, but before dismissing us, the wing commander told the group to go be leaders and take care of our people. He stated something to the effect that this moment was the reason we have exercised emergency scenarios our entire careers. After being dismissed. Major Gabriel and I did one last walk through of the office and prayed for the best before heading home.

My wife, two sons and two large Golden Retrievers packed up our van and departed from our home in Lynn Haven, Florida around 1030. We intended to head towards Birmingham or Huntsville, Alabama, which were both outside of any of the storm paths I had seen in the models. Though Montgomery was closer, some of the models showed that area to be in the potential storm path. Michael was now projected to make landfall as a Category 2 storm.

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Unfortunately, as the day went on, the forecasts grew progressively worse. A Category 2 turned into a Category 3, then a 4. The seriousness of the event had increased substantially. The worst-case scenario put forth by my commander the previous day was turning into the reality. Based on the updated forecasts, I diverted my family to Arnold AFB in Tennessee.

I texted Lieutenant Colonel Andy Barker, the Arnold AFB Staff Judge Advocate to let him know my intentions. In what would become a recurring theme, many of the friendships and professional relationships I had built through the years would suddenly play major roles in supporting me in the days ahead. Lt Col Barker was a JASOC classmate who had replaced me at Arnold. He and the entire Arnold team were exceptional hosts and ensured my family and I had all the support we needed.

AFTERMATH: RE-ESTABLISH OFFICE ACCOUNTABILITY

On 10 October, the day Michael made landfall, I set up in a spare office at Arnold AFB and went to work. The first thing I did was re-establish office accountability. Major Gabriel, MSgt Padua, and I had all been working the phones the previous day to ensure information was being disseminated to the entire office. Given the rapid nature of this event, all personnel had evacuated to various locations with limited time to coordinate. We also did our best to provide information to other JAG Corps personnel stationed at Tyndall, such

as the personnel assigned to the Utility Law Field Support Center, Air Force Civil Engineer Center, Area Defense Counsel, and Special Victim's Counsel.

In addition to establishing personnel accountability, I started upchanneling information to JAG leadership at our higher headquarters, Air Combat Command (ACC/JA) and Ninth Air Force (9 AF/JA). Both of those offices had evacuated the month prior in response to Hurricane Florence, but thankfully those locations were relatively unaffected by Florence. It was becoming clear that Tyndall and the local communities surrounding our base would not be as fortunate. The damage was going to be catastrophic, and all of our personnel now entered the phase of wondering what, if anything, would be left when we returned.

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STRONGEST HURRICANE TO EVER HIT THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

Michael was initially identified as a high-end Category 4 hurricane with sustained wind speeds of 155 mph. Michael was later upgraded to a Category 5 by the National Hurricane Center with sustained wind speeds of 161 mph.[1] Michael would be categorized as the strongest hurricane to ever hit the Florida panhandle. With the upgrade to Category 5, it ranks as one of only four such storms to hit the United States.[2] Ultimately, a total of 59 people died as a result of Michael.[3] The path of destruction was approximately 35-40 miles wide along the Gulf Coast and cut a path into southern Alabama and Georgia. It was now clear that Colonel Laidlaw's decisiveness in ordering the evacuation had saved lives. To face such a consequential decision and get it right is a testament to his leadership. Outstanding leadership is a variable that Tyndall personnel were fortunate enough to have in place at a moment of crisis.

During the 10-12 October (Wednesday-Friday) timeframe, I continued providing information to my office personnel, ACC/JA and 9 AF/JA. The evacuation order was still in place, so no one could return to the area until recalled. Nevertheless, these three days were critical in terms of what would come next. I would later joke that I missed the Staff Judge Advocate Course (SJAC) elective on what to do when your base is destroyed, but in all seriousness, I immediately understood I would need the support of other JAG Corps members to address whatever challenges lay ahead.

In addition to the leadership at ACC/JA and 9 AF/JA, three individuals were critical: Colonel Shannon Sherwin (96 TW/JA, Eglin AFB), Lieutenant Colonel Tyson Kindness (1 SOW/JA, Hurlburt Field), and Mr. J.D. Reese (Air Force Claims Service Center). Unfortunately, I was never a claims officer at any point in my career, so Mr. Reese was about to become one of my new best friends. We were in frequent communication during this time period discussing the framework of what would become our emergency claims team.

I also coordinated with Col Sherwin and Lt Col Kindness, both of whom I had known prior to the hurricane. Given their proximity to Tyndall (and because of the type of people they are), both had reached out to me offering their support. In addition to Mr. Reese and I, personnel from Eglin and Hurlburt would later assist me in staffing a claims tent at Tyndall. The team I had begun to outline with Col Sherwin, Lt Col Kindness and Mr. Reese would be augmented with a team from 9 AF/JA.[4]

RETURN TO TYNDALL

On 13 October, I left Arnold AFB in Tennessee with the intent of relocating my wife and sons to stay with other family members in Pensacola, Florida. We were still uncertain about the status of our rental home near Tyndall, so it was unclear how long this arrangement would be necessary. All we could do was hope for the best.

Telephone and email communications with the Tyndall command team were down, but all the reports I received via social media and news outlets were worst case scenarios

coming true. I felt that I needed to move closer to Tyndall to be in the best position to help when needed. Based on discussions with Colonel Sherwin, I originally intended to establish a foothold within the Eglin AFB legal office.

The entire Panama City area was a cellphone dead zone. There was no electricity or running water. Curfews were imposed by local authorities as there were reports of looting.

Luckily, I was already driving south on Interstate 59 in Alabama when I received notice that Major Gabriel and I were among the first nine people being recalled to Tyndall. We were instructed to rendezvous with other recalled members at 0500 on Sunday, 14 October. The commander had given direct instructions that we travel in groups for safety. The entire Panama City area was a cellphone dead zone. There was no electricity or running water. Curfews were imposed by local authorities as there were reports of looting. No one could be sure about the status of social order in the affected areas.

Knowing that Major Gabriel and I would soon be unable to communicate with the rest of the office, I put Capt Rotschafer in charge of ensuring office accountability and providing information to our personnel. Continuity of operations is extremely important, so I provided him with the key points of contact and phone numbers. Capt Rotschafer's competence and ability to remain calm under pressure made him the perfect choice notwithstanding his soon-to-be status as the office's senior ranking available officer.

I met the Director of Staff, a squadron commander, and the two wing executive officers in Pensacola. Major Gabriel met her group in Defuniak Springs, Florida. We departed in convoys back towards Tyndall. Our respective groups were authorized to stop at our residences first in order to survey any damage and to grab uniforms, sleeping bags, and anything else we might need in an austere environment. We knew that the area and base had taken a tremendous

beating, but pictures did not adequately capture what we were about to see.

MICHAEL'S AFTERMATH

Our cellphones no longer operated once we entered Bay County, Florida. Even before seeing visual signs of the storms, the roads were heavily congested with vehicles as contractors, relief workers, and emergency crews flooded into the area. About 20 miles north of Tyndall, the visual signs of destruction were apparent. The number of fallen trees snapped and damaged homes and businesses, grew beyond anything I had ever seen in person. As our convoy entered Lynn Haven, Florida (where most of our group lived), the town was almost unrecognizable. The scale of the devastation was beyond what I could have imagined.

One of the most memorable sights was what I saw passing by a church that had been destroyed by the storm. The roof had been ripped off and the walls had caved in. However, in the parking lot adjacent to the destroyed building, the church members had gathered to worship together in the hot Florida sun. In what appeared to me to be an act of defiance against the devastation, I was both emotionally impacted and inspired by the collective display of resolve. Our convoy then drove to our respective homes.

When I arrived at my house, my hopes for minimal damage were gone. Michael had ripped a good number of tiles from my roof. This allowed rain to get into the attic, soak the insulation and sheetrock, and cause the ceiling to collapse in my home below it. Large sections of wet, molding drywall now covered the floor and furniture in nearly every room.

I had evacuated with five days before. I did not realize it at the time, but the damage to my house would prevent my family from returning to the area.

I had about fifteen to twenty minutes to assess the situation before getting back on the road to Tyndall. Fortunately, I was able to collect some extra uniforms, which only needed

to dry out a little, and a sleeping bag to augment the gear I had evacuated with five days before. I did not realize it at the time, but the damage to my house would prevent my family from returning to the area. Michael affected almost three-quarters of Bay County, Florida's 68,000 households. [5] It is estimated that 20,000 people were left homeless in Michael's aftermath.[6] In my home alone, all of the drywall and flooring had to be ripped out due to mold damage. My former landlord was not able to get the roof repaired until six months later. Efforts to repair the rest of the home are still ongoing. Now multiply my scenario by over 50,000 homes. This will provide some insight as to the magnitude of the housing problem.

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The scenes of destruction on the roads to Tyndall were apocalyptic. It was reminiscent of something from a movie. Power lines and trees were down everywhere. Houses and vehicles were wrecked at every turn. Scenes of people sifting through the ruins of their homes were similar to scenes from war documentaries I have seen on television. I had never seen damage anywhere close to what Michael inflicted upon the Panama City area.

Our two teams arrived at Tyndall sometime in the afternoon of 14 October. We then made our way to the AFNORTH Air Operations Center, which was only slightly damaged. The scene was similar to a deployed location. Generators hummed, and deployed security forces and communications personnel were busily engaged in their respective operations. Our arrival coincided with a visit from the Secretary of the Air Force, Chief of Staff, and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. I met with General David Goldfein, who was interested in the details of my evacuation as well as the safety and security of my family. They surveyed the damage to the base and met with Tyndall personnel. After the departure

of the official party, our commander convened the CAT. It was time to get to work.

Our initial briefing from the commander set out his initial assessment, expectations and priorities. There was an entire whiteboard full of objectives and goals, but at the top of his list was taking care of our people. We would work 24-hour operations until further notice. I would be on the day team with Colonel Laidlaw, while Major Gabriel would serve on the night shift with our Vice Commander, Colonel Jeff Hawkins. Even though the sun had set, Colonel Hawkins would later take me and two other recalled members on a night tour of the base. The extent of the damage would become more apparent over the next few days, but even in the darkness of that 14 October evening, Tyndall looked liked it had been subjected to a bombing campaign.

Our Command Chief Master Sergeant, Craig Williams, took us to the office building next to the AOC that served as our sleeping quarters for the next week or so. I shared a small office space with another lieutenant colonel, sleeping on cots on the opposite side of a desk. Major Gabriel had a similar arrangement with a female squadron commander. The water treatment facility that serviced the base had been damaged by the hurricane, which meant there was no running water. We were unable to take showers or shave without using bottled water. MREs became our primary food source.

The enormity of the task in front of the team was daunting. It was hard to know where to begin. On a personal level, my house was destroyed and my family displaced. My wife and sons established a safe haven location in Pensacola, three hours away. With the help of family and friends, my wife made several trips back and forth to salvage our household goods before mold consumed everything. The items she was able to save would remain in two separate storage sheds for the next few months until we moved to Ohio. The ultimate damage assessment concerning what we lost is still ongoing as my wife and I continue to realize missing items.

Unfortunately, I was not the only one from my office who suffered extensive property damage. Five people out of six-

teen came through the hurricane with only minor damage, which meant they would be able to move back into their homes. Everyone else's homes were devastated by Michael. One person from our office had the misfortune of unpacking his final household boxes the day the evacuation order was signed. Our legal team had been decimated. For a time, Tyndall's organic legal capability was down to Major Gabriel and me. We would need the assistance of other JAG Corps personnel in order to meet legal challenges. In our case, we received vital help from ACC/JA, 9 AF/JA, and other legal offices in our region.

The primary legal issues Tyndall faced were claims, legal assistance, ethics, property rights, and contracts.

Entire articles could be written related to the issues that arose in the weeks and months after Michael, but in the interest of brevity I will only highlight a few issues and general subject areas. The primary legal issues Tyndall faced were claims, legal assistance, ethics, property rights, and contracts.

ETHICS & LOGISTICS

ACC/JA and 9 AF/JA helped immensely with ethics. It is true that natural disasters bring out the best and worst in people. Focusing solely on the positive for a moment, people will want to help. We received numerous unsolicited gift offers from corporations, as well as private groups who simply wanted to contribute something. Knowing your authorities related to gifts to the Air Force is critical. Also knowing the units with whom donors need to coordinate, such as the Force Support Squadron and Logistics Readiness Squadron, should produce more efficient results. As it relates to donations of perishable food items (e.g. food trucks), remember to engage Public Health. While some of the logistics might not seem like legal ones, it is important to note that in an event such as I am describing, everything is a team effort.

Thankfully, people such as Ms. Elizabeth Waldrop (9 AF/JA) and Colonel Don Davis (ACC/JA), among others, stepped in to help take a number of these issues off our plate. Knowing that our capacity was limited and the installation commander would be extremely busy, higher level commanders and legal offices were able to analyze and approve these gift offers. In future situations, I would encourage MAJCOM and NAF legal offices to offer similar assistance to affected bases.

LEGAL ASSISTANCE, PROPERTY RIGHTS & CONTRACTS

Legal assistance is another major area where external JA teams provided major support. With the large number of Tyndall evacuees spread throughout the region, bases such as Eglin, Hurlburt, Keesler, Maxwell, and others saw an increase in Tyndall-related legal assistance. By far, the number one issue concerned landlord-tenant issues. Some tenants wanted to break their leases; for others, it was the landlord who intended to terminate the lease. It is not out of the realm of possibility that landlords will consider terminating leases in order to enter new, more lucrative leases in a suddenly tight housing market. In any event, there were plenty of issues to keep legal assistance attorneys busy in the weeks and months after the hurricane. I am personally grateful to all the legal offices who assisted Tyndall personnel during the evacuation.

While the range of destruction varied from house to house, almost every one of Tyndall's 867 housing units were rendered uninhabitable.

One of my primary lines of effort was the establishment of an on-the-ground claims team to provide information and support to Air Force personnel living in Tyndall privatized housing. My commander's stated intent was to provide Tyndall residents an opportunity to return to their homes in order to salvage as much of their personal property as possible. It was truly a race against time, because mold would soon consume personal property that might have been spared by the storm.

SAFE RETURN

While the range of destruction varied from house to house, almost every one of Tyndall's 867 housing units were rendered uninhabitable. The primary obstacle to allowing an immediate return was safety. The damage to both the base itself and the individual housing units did not allow for an immediate mass return. Between the debris on the roads (e.g., nails, wood, metal, etc.) and the unknown damage within the units (e.g., broken glass, roof damage, structural stability, etc.), allowing people to return too soon could make a bad situation worse. A significant effort was put toward getting the base to a reasonable level of safety in order to accommodate the brief return of housing residents. Major Gabriel and I were also involved in numerous discussions with base leadership concerning the ground rules for this effort. We worked with PA, FM, and others to assist the commander in communicating his message to base residents.

Given the curfews imposed by local governments, Tyndall housing residents were only allowed to return during daylight hours during the 17-22 October timeframe. This was a completely voluntary return. People had to get in, collect what they could, then depart the area before curfew. No one was allowed to remain over night. We had no services on base (e.g. no gas, no water, etc...), so people had to plan accordingly before their arrival. Nearly all recalled Tyndall personnel were ready to welcome people back, answer questions, and ensure this event was carried out as safely as possible.

One of my primary goals during this time was ensuring a claims team would be present on-base in order to address the needs of affected Air Force families. This is where the coordination I mentioned earlier, between myself and Colonel Sherwin, Lt Col Kindness, and Mr. Reese paid dividends. Mr. Reese flew in from Ohio to provide on-scene support. Colonel Lynn Sylmar and MSgt Nikki Walberg from 9 AF/JA were present every day as well. Rotating teams from Eglin and Hurlburt were sent each day in order to assist.

For five days in the Florida heat, we were able to staff a claims tent and travel into the housing areas (including the dorms) during the hours residents were allowed on base. This

enabled us to provide information directly and promptly to affected personnel. We provided handouts, answered questions, and explained the claims process. Our collective claims team met with nearly 300 people to answer questions regarding the Air Force claims process. I cannot speak for every member of our JAG Corps team, but those five days are among the most rewarding days of my Air Force career. As a sidenote, opening the base and allowing residents to see the extent of the damage went a long way to temper the anger and frustration that was being directed at base leadership on social media. After viewing the massive scale of the devastation, people seemed to appreciate why the return took longer than they wished. The residents I spoke with were genuinely appreciative of the Tyndall team's efforts in this area.

When the last base housing residents departed on 21 October, Major Gabriel and I had been working 24-hour shifts, sleeping on cots, and eating MREs for over a week. More importantly, we knew additional assistance was required to meet the legal challenges ahead. As stated earlier, most of our office personnel suffered devastating damages to their homes and had personal family circumstances that prevented their return. Most would eventually receive humanitarian reassignments. However, I am eternally grateful to the first two individuals who did return. Capt Rotschafer and Capt Golseth were recalled to assist us in addressing the numerous other issues that would arise and help re-establish a functioning legal office.[7] Remarkably, aside from requiring mold remediation in a number of exterior offices, the physical legal office held up rather well. I was pleased to see that our pre-storm actions had protected the equipment and personal items left behind.

TENT CITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

It had been a week and a half since Michael made landfall, and the base Capt Rotschafer and Capt Golseth returned to was dramatically different than the one they left. Tyndall now had all the features of life in a deployed location. Both were able to experience life in tent city before they were able to return to their homes or secure hard billeting rooms. In addition to learning the basics like eating MREs and assisting with FOD walks, their ability to directly interact with other

organizations like PA, SFS, CE, et al., is arguably the most important long-term professional development lesson. For instance, working side-by-side with PA officers on a daily basis in order to assist with crafting social media messages on behalf of the commander was an invaluable experience. This JA/PA team approach should be replicated in future exercises and, if necessary, real-world events.

LESSONS LEARNED

Tyndall faced a worst case scenario that I hope others will not have to experience, but wishful thinking is not a great strategy. History teaches us that another base will eventually confront its own Michael. Therefore, I recommend you prepare now.

FIRST, take exercises seriously. There is a tendency to see base exercises as something that must be endured before you can return to normal operations. This is a dangerous mindset. A realistic exercise scenario has the opportunity to be extremely beneficial. Hopefully, your installation has conducted a serious assessment of potential threats based on your geographic location. If you do not know what those threats are, ask around until you get the information you need.

SECOND, I would encourage additional operations training. I do not mean operations law training, which has its own place in a training program. What I am referring to is operations training that familiarizes your office with basic military skills. Do your people know what an LMR (land mobile radio) is and how to use one? Do you know the phonetic alphabet? Can you operate different types of vehicles? Do you know how to heat up your MRE without burning yourself? These are just a few of the questions you may want to ask before a crisis presents itself at your doorstep. If you do not have people on your staff with this knowledge, I recommend reaching out to other units on base (e.g. Security Forces, Civil Engineers, etc) to assist you in this area.

THIRD, print hard copies of important information. Technology is great, but if you suddenly find yourself off-the-grid for a minute, you do not want to be ineffective based on your lack of advanced planning. If your CAT and

EOC binders are not up-to-date, make updating them a top priority. I recommend making extra copies for the SJA, DSJA, and LOS (at a minimum). In addition to your own base contact information, I would recommend hard copies of contact information for your MAJCOM, NAF, and other offices you might need to contact. I printed off ROSTER data, but I recommend getting emergency numbers as well. If your MAJCOM CAT representative has a consistent phone number, you need to have it written down. The SJA and others at the scene of the crisis will have limited bandwidth. In my experience, communications with ACC/JA and the on-duty CAT representative were vital as we researched and addressed issues in the earliest days of recovery efforts.

FOURTH, communication is critical. If you are the person on-site, you will need to provide information to your family, office personnel, your functional leadership, and others. Please do not forget about other JAG Corps personnel on your base, such as the ADC, SVC, or others. I tended to focus primarily on my office members and had to remind myself to include others in the information loop. I think we improved as time went on, but it can be a blind spot if you are not careful.

FINALLY, to personnel outside the affected area, your patience, compassion, and assistance is greatly appreciated. While the news cycle moves on quickly, people in the disaster area are still living with it for months and years after the last news crew leaves. I would also say that pictures alone cannot adequately convey the difficulties presented on the ground. For everyone stationed at Tyndall, everything was more difficult in the aftermath of an event like Michael. When the world around you has been destroyed, even the daily drive to and from work can be depressing. Demonstrating some appreciation for this goes a long way, especially from functional leadership. For example, I will always appreciate the visit we received from Colonel Scott Ecton and Chief Master Sergeant Thomas Hamilton (ACC/JA) the week before Christmas. Their willingness to see the challenges we were facing meant a great deal to the Tyndall team. Moreover, I believe it provided them with a perspective that can only be gained by witnessing circumstances in person.

I have tried to mention as many people as possible who assisted during the most difficult days of this experience, but I certainly cannot thank everyone who assisted me, my family, and my Tyndall teammates. I received countless emails and texts from mentors, friends and JAG Corps colleagues. Some might recommend not “bothering” someone in my position given the various time demands, but I offer the opposite perspective. Even when I could not respond, I appreciated each gesture. An experience like Hurricane Michael can be very isolating. It is nice to know that other people are out there offering thoughts and prayers.

I hope my experience with Hurricane Michael highlights certain issues and provides future potential benefits to legal teams facing similar circumstances. However, my other intent is to highlight the courage and sacrifice of the men

and women at Tyndall who worked, and continue to work, under difficult circumstances to assist with Tyndall recovery efforts, especially my legal office teammates who were able to return to the fight at Tyndall, namely Major Gabriel, Capt Rotschafer, Capt Golseth, Capt Simmons, MSgt Padua, SSgt Magdeline Pike, A1C Adam Message, and Ms. Debra Monroe. It was my honor to serve with each of you.

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Tyndall Legal Office in front of damaged Hangar 5. Photo by Lt Col Daniel J. Watson, USAF

EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE:

EXTERNAL LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ABOUT HURRICANE PREPAREDNESS

- **FEMA Video:** Important Things to Know BEFORE a Disaster
- **FEMA:** Prepare Your Organization for a Hurricane Playbook
- **Red Cross:** How to Prepare for Emergencies

ABOUT HURRICANE MICHAEL

- **National Geographic:** Hurricane Michael's Destruction
- **National Weather Service:** Hurricane Michael
- **NOAA:** Report on Hurricane Michael
- **DVIDS Video:** Tyndall, Hurricane Michael: 1 Year Later

ENDNOTES

- [1] John L. Beven II, Robbie Berg, and Andrew Hagen, "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Michael (AL142018) 7-11 October 2018, National Hurricane Center, 19 April 2019, https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL142018_Michael.pdf.
- [2] *Id.*, at 6.
- [3] *Id.*, at 10. Of the 59 deaths, 16 were as a direct result of the hurricane (e.g. building collapse due to winds, drowning in storm surge) while 43 people died of indirect causes attributable to Michael (e.g. falls during post-storm cleanup, traffic accidents on wet roads, and medical issues compounded by hurricane).
- [4] I want to thank the following individuals for their assistance in helping me provide on-site claims assistance to Tyndall housing residents during the 17-21 October 2018 timeframe: Mr. J.D. Reese (AFCSC), Colonel Lynn Sylmar (9 AF/JA), MSgt Nikki Walberg (9 AF/JA), Major Dustin Grant (96 TW/JA), Capt Taracina Bintliff (96 TW/JA), Capt Ashley Johnson (96 TW/JA), Capt Issac Potter (1 SOW/JA), Capt Celene Delice (1 SOW/JA), Capt Lisa Passarella (1 SOW/JA), MSgt Calvin Johnson (96 TW/JA), TSgt Andrew Paterson (96 TW/JA), TSgt Joseph Stasiowski (96 TW/JA), SSgt Estrella Breazell (1 SOW/JA), and SSgt Lizandra Montero (96 TW/JA).
- [5] See Mike Schneider, *It's pure hell: Hurricane Michael leaves housing crisis*, AP News, 4 March 2019 <https://www.apnews.com/2cc6e4ecee694763991f6310fa87569b>.
- [6] *Id.*
- [7] As personal circumstances improved, we were later joined by MSgt Tara Padua, SSgt Magdeline Pike, Capt Kyle Simmons, A1C Adam Message, and Ms. Debra Monroe.