

Undercut

Floods, Mudslides Wash Away Homes, Lives

By Neil Probst

Photo courtesy of David Mosby



Flooding in Washington filled homes with water and mud, forcing hundreds of families to evacuate. Even Civil Air Patrol members found themselves in need of rooftop rescues by Coast Guard helicopters.

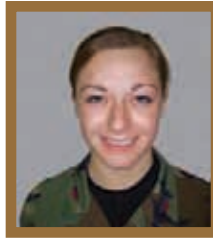
Civil Air Patrol members found themselves deep in mud in Minnesota and Washington recently, and members in Oregon dealt with similar woes after Mother Nature brought excess rain, which flooded rivers.

The waters overflowing rivers were so powerful, they washed away huge portions of land and took bridges with them. Even foundations beneath homes were undermined, so that portions and entire houses were washed away and destroyed.

Cadet Staff Sgt. Hanna Olsen of the Minnesota Wing shared a sentiment that summed up what people unfamiliar with flooding might have felt: “When we got down there, I had no idea what I was in store for. I imagined a little bit of rainfall and a little bit of damage, but the train tracks were totally ripped off their courses; houses were completely destroyed. Where a house once stood, there was nothing left. It was heartbreaking to see what had happened,” she said.

While aircrews in CAP Cessnas lent communication support for ground operations, provided aerial photography of devastated areas and flew Houston County officials above the damage, ground teams drove to hard-hit areas, then set out on foot.

Olsen found herself at the Root River alongside 2nd Lt. Jay Spreitzer and Cadet Staff Sgt. Emily Tholen. A



Cadet Staff Sgt.
Hanna Olsen

bridge over the rapidly moving water had been destroyed, marooning an entire family that relied on the crossing to reach food and supplies. The trio comforted the family members while towing them back and forth across the river several times.

Later, Olsen found herself in an even more unbelievable predicament.

“There was a house we were cleaning up. It had been washed down a hill and there was nothing left. It was completely gone. We cleaned up debris and helped save anything we could from that home. In spots, you had no choice; you were knee-deep in mud, and I didn’t

mind it all. Anything I could do to help, I was there doing it,” she said.

Olsen’s positive attitude mirrored that of the 200 CAP members who volunteered 5,600 hours to help the citizens of their communities.

For the cadets, especially, the experience was unforgettable in



Anoka County Composite Squadron members, from left, 1st Lt. Jay Spreitzer and cadets Staff Sgt. Emily Tholen and Staff Sgt. Hanna Olsen, help flooding victims out of a boat on the Root River near Houston, Minn.

numerous ways.

Cadet Tech. Sgt. Matt Frame said he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“There was a hill with trees, and it had been totally blown down. You could see trees on all sides of it except for this one huge patch where mud had knocked it down. At another house, half the basement had been torn away, and the house was standing on half a foundation,” he said.

Frame checked on the welfare of senior citizens and

even sat with other volunteers in a CAP van to protect a home.

Spreitzer said the presence of members around homes was a strong deterrent to anyone with mischief on his mind.

WASHINGTON WASHED

As if Mother Nature was imitating her work in Minnesota, heavy snow and rain also struck Washington state and Oregon.

Washington, especially, looked as if a massive pot of mud had been poured all over it.

Roads closed, power lines fell, rivers overflowed, waters systems shut down and hundreds of evacuees filled emergency shelters, according to the state emergency management division's Web site.

Hundreds of residents lost power and at least six were

killed, the site said.

Civil Air Patrol members themselves were severely affected.

1st Lt. Dan Whalen, his own basement filled with 4 feet of water, launched an e-mail in the midst of the aftermath, reporting that a Washington Wing cadet, Airman Krystina Wulff, and her family had to be rescued from their rooftop.

Most contents of the family's home were ruined.

A CAP office at Centralia-Chehalis Airport in Lewis County was flooded by 8 feet of water, which left behind 8 inches of mud. A massive cleanup effort by cadets and officers followed after the water receded.

On the first night of flooding, Whalen took 45 helicopter rescue victims from the Centralia airport to local shelters, while other members of the Lewis County Composite Squadron received, fed and warmed other



Photo courtesy of Star Tribune/Minneapolis-St. Paul

A Minnesota resident surveys what was the backyard at the home of his in-laws in Minnesota City. The Garvin Brook overflowed, taking out most of the backyards along Minnesota Street when floodwaters raged through the neighborhood. CAP members helped residents salvage their property in damaged areas like this one.

incoming evacuees who were brought to the airport.

While cadets helped make meals for helicopter aircrews and residents seeking shelter at the airport, others helped clean homes, sort thousands of donated clothing items and haul equipment and supplies.

Even before flooding hit the family's house, Whalen's wife, 1st Lt. Rita Whalen, was already managing the intake of clothing at a nearby Salvation Army community center.

CAP 1st Lt. Ron Wehnau, also the local Salvation Army captain in Centralia, said the post was activated as a shelter and was strewn with cots to provide refuge for flood victims, many of them arriving from the Centralia airport.

In the midst of the relief effort, his daughter, Cadet Airman 1st Class Tiffany Wehnau, was trapped at the airport with three fellow cadets and flood evacuees in the airport lounge.

Tiffany Wehnau, like Wulff's family, rode a Coast Guard helicopter to safety.

"The airport went under 6 to 8 feet of water," Ron Wehnau said.

Nearly 10 counties in Washington were affected, and the damage in Lewis County itself was tremendous, he said.

He spoke of the recovery effort as a half-year to year-long project.

"We lost just in Centralia alone 14 homes that are considered destroyed, but there were over 500 homes damaged by the floodwaters. According to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) 2,209 homes were affected by flooding in Lewis County," he said.

Ron Wehnau and Dan Whalen directed much of CAP's efforts in their area.

"CAP members also were able to take cleanup kits and disaster supplies into the hardest hit areas of the county, where they helped with traffic control," Wehnau said.

STORIES OF HEROISM

The CAP story in Washington is filled with excellent team efforts, as well as the sacrifice of individual CAP families, like Sr. Mbr. Elizabeth Isham and her children, Cadet Staff Sgt. Zack Isham and Cadet Airman 1st

Class Katina Isham, who helped clean homes and feed families.

In the Boistfort Valley, a hard-hit area where the water system was destroyed, 1st Lts. Gregg and Ruth Peterson and their children — Cadet Lt. Col. David Peterson, Cadet Chief Master Sgt. Jonathan Peterson and Jennifer Peterson — fed and helped residents at



Photo by 1st Lt. Ruth Peterson, Washington Wing

To help heat homes in the aftermath of severe flooding, Washington Wing cadets collect kindling for residents' fireplaces.

an emergency operations center.

Gregg Peterson opened the center and served as incident commander.

"So many people lost everything and were so overwhelmed with 2 to 3 feet of mud in their houses," Peterson said.

"When we had close to a thousand volunteers the first weekend come down into this little valley, traffic alone was a nightmare, and that's why we asked CAP cadets and senior members to help with traffic control," Ruth Peterson said.

Peterson said cadets in the valley also helped stack firewood and organize donated clothing items.

“They worked really hard,” she said.

WORKING ON THE RAILROAD

Storms caused more damage in Oregon, calling volunteers to the air.

Here, too, flooding swept the land out from under the infrastructure.

Railroad tracks that prior to the storm may have appeared sturdy were ruined. Bridges met a similar fate.

The destruction in Tillamook County in northwest Oregon was particularly severe.

Damage to railroads and rail equipment at the Port of Tillamook Bay befuddled shippers who didn't know the

extent of wreckage to rail lines.

Port Director Robert Van Borssum called on CAP to get a view of rail lines from the sky, launching with CAP pilot Capt. Dennis Wyza and scanner/observer Capt. Nick Ham.

The flying was risky, but it was the ideal CAP mission, with the customer in the cockpit.

“It was difficult to follow the rail lines through the canyons. He (Van Borssum) directed and Dennis did a good job of keeping us under the clouds and on track,” Ham said.

“While we were in the aircraft we showed Mr. Van Borssum the photos on the computer, and he said they were exactly what he was looking for,” he said.

The ultimate reward came in e-mail communication



Photo courtesy of Don Koideh

When floodwaters submerged homes in Curtis, Wash., and other parts of the state, hundreds of residents lost power and at least six people were killed.

that Wyza and Ham received from Van Borssum weeks later.

“Without the assistance of the USCAP, the port would not have been able to respond as rapidly as it was able. ... On behalf of the board members, staff and users of the Port of Tillamook Bay railroad, please accept our appreciation for the rapid and professional assistance of the USCAP,” Van Borssum wrote. ▲

Capt. Al Pabon, the Great Lakes Region's public affairs officer; Sr. Mbr. George Supan of the Minnesota Wing; and Capt. Paula Mangum and 1st Lt. Dan Whalen, both of the Washington Wing, contributed to this report.



Photo courtesy of Capt. Nick Ham, Oregon Wing

An aerial photograph from an Oregon Wing Cessna shows how floodwaters destroyed a bridge above the Lower Nehalem River. Damaged train tracks can be seen to the left of the broken bridge.

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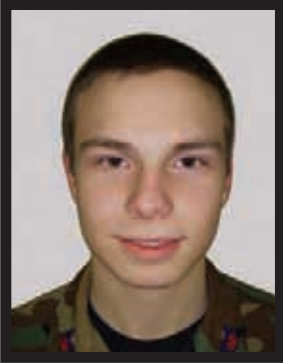


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ALUMNI

Cadets Witness Devastation



Cadet Master Sgt. Peter Mayhew

The first mission we got was to help clear out a trailer park. There was mud covering the sidewalks and the streets, and we were told to go clear that off. We got to use a fire engine and blast the streets with water.

This is the coolest thing I've ever done in CAP, being able to go down and help people out like that. I was glad I could be there. At Rushford I was grateful again for a second opportunity to come back down and continue helping.

When they (the National Guard) pulled out, the residents asked for people to come back, and they specifically asked for CAP assistance.

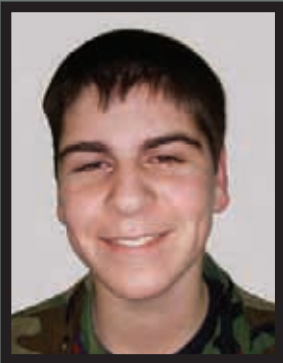


Cadet Staff Sgt. Emily Tholen

It was really terrible. I could see their houses ruined. It felt amazing to help them. It was sad to see everything they lost and that was broken.

The first place I was positioned, we were helping fix a road and I was stopping cars. I was standing right where a mudslide had wiped out a house, and I didn't even know that because there was absolutely nothing left.

We helped clean out a house that had fallen down, knocked out by a mud slide, and it was falling half off a cliff. We helped people take out their stuff. There was a lot of mud everywhere. You had to be careful where you stepped, because if you stepped wrong, your whole leg could be in the mud, and you had to get help to get out.



Cadet Tech. Sgt. Matt Frame

When we got there in the morning, we started at the firefighters' station, and from there went out to a trailer park home where we cleaned up some debris, which were huge chunks of wood, and we fixed grading that had fallen through.

The mud was about 6 inches high and it was everywhere on the street. Gas containers had been knocked over and were leaking in some places. After cleaning up, we also used firefighters' hoses and cleaned the streets into the river, which had exceeded its banks. The bridge had about 2 feet left before it would be covered in water. ▲