Oklahoma and National DAV Join Forces in Tornado Relief

Charles Early, a 17-year Air Force veteran, watched the approaching storm from the porch of his Newalla, Okla., home when an eerie calm descended. “There was no breeze and no wind,” Early said. “Then I saw flocks of thousands of birds flying away from the storm. It was then that I became real concerned.”

In the town of Moore, Okla., Lewis Haywood, a 25-year Army veteran, and his wife, Janie were at home watching the weather report when the tornado approached. “It was reported on the other side of town,” Haywood said. “But when it was too late to escape, it suddenly turned and started coming down my street. The last thing I heard, it was seven or eight houses from where I lived.” They both huddled in a closet as an outside wall collapsed over them, then an inside wall.

Alissa Thompson, an Army veteran of the Iraq War, huddled in her father’s storm shelter with her husband, Corey, 17-month-old daughter, Zaria, and five-year-old son, Jaycen, as the deadly EF5 tornado ripped through. “The kids were scared and crying, and we could hear the popping as electric transformers exploded. The closer it got, the less you could hear because it was like sitting next to a jet engine,” she said.

The tornados hit the Oklahoma City area on May 19 and 20, killing 24 people and destroying or damaging 4,000 homes and businesses. Eleven days later, on May 31, a 2.6-mile-wide EF5 tornado—the largest ever recorded—hit El Reno, west of Oklahoma City, killing at least 21 people.

“DAV was in the eye of those storms,” said National Adjutant Marc Burgess. “The Department of Oklahoma Mobile Service Unit was set up near Shawnee and New Bethel to assist veterans on
May 19. It was moved to Moore immediately after that storm.”

In the following days, DAV provided ill and injured veterans with disaster assistance vouchers for food, shelter and clothing. “DAV was among the first disaster assistance to arrive in Moore,” said Department of Oklahoma Adjutant Danny Oliver. “We established a command post at Home Depot and were distributing supplies as victims and survivors were still being pulled from the debris.”

The Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs then joined DAV to create a multi-agency disaster center for veterans, and the American Legion later joined the combined team, resulting in a one-stop location, which maximized relief assistance for veterans.

“When I heard that a tornado had struck Lake Thunderbird—just a mile away from us—my son Weston, my mother and I headed south in my truck,” said Early. “Trees were falling around us as I floored the truck to get away. Weston was scared and praying quietly in the rear seat, but after going two miles, the weather turned beautiful and peaceful,” he said.

Early and his family returned home soon after. “As we approached our home, I began seeing the damage,” he said. “When I couldn’t see the top floor of my log house, I knew we got hit.” Early found his roof in the yard next door. One of his log walls had penetrated a neighbor’s brick house. “Debris was piled high,” he said. “It was one of those devastating moments, but I said, ‘We’re OK. It was just a house.’”

The Haywoods were trapped under the rubble of their home. “The closet door and ceiling had fallen on us, but it’s only because we were trapped that we survived,” he said. “The tornado passed in seconds. We listened for the wind and storm to roar by, and then we saw a clear sky. I climbed out and dug rubble away to free my wife. We surveyed the damage and saw everything was gone,” he said. “We checked on our neighbors,
but no one was home, so we joined other people looking for their neighbors and then we just wandered around for a while.”

Alissa Thompson first planned to leave her husband and daughter at home while she picked up her son from school, but changed her mind at the last minute. So the family of four drove to her father’s house in time to get into his storm shelter.

“When we climbed out, we saw a lot of debris, but my dad’s house was still standing,” said Thompson. “There were reports a school had been hit, so I went to find my brother, Shawn, at his high school.” The Thompsons’ car was heavily damaged so she set out on foot.

“On the way, I saw houses down on both sides of the street,” she said. “The whole neighborhood was gone. Water was pouring into the streets, and downed power lines and debris were preventing firemen from getting through. People were covered with dirt and mud as they were being pulled out of the debris.

“When I heard my brother’s school was not hit, my instincts kicked in and I began to help pull people from their houses,” Thompson said. “The service-connected injuries to my feet, back and wrist made it very painful. I wasn’t really prepared to search debris for people.”

When she went home, she saw her own house was gone. “It took my breath away,” Thompson said. “I went numb, I guess. It was the shock.

“We had a two-story, five-bedroom house that collapsed on itself. Cars were flipped over. One vehicle was smashed into the ground where my doorway used to stand. The two cars we left behind were destroyed.

“I really didn’t pay any attention to the stuff I had lost,” she remembered. “My focus was on my dogs.” Luckily, the animals were found unharmed beneath the second floor in a
fiberglass bathtub and shower. “The firemen had to use axes to cut them out.”

In Moore, the Oklahoma Mobile Service Unit and Fred White, Jr., Assistant Supervisor of the Muskogee National Service Office, began to spread the word that DAV was offering assistance to injured and ill veterans. “We organized foot patrols to go into ravaged neighborhoods to locate veterans, and truck loads of supplies were distributed to the rescue workers.”

“We were looking for veterans, but we helped anyone,” said Oliver. “We distributed gloves, trash bags, first aid gear and protective masks, and we assigned chainsaw volunteers to help with the cleanup.

“Our foot patrols helped prevent looting, so veterans could leave their property to come to us for help,” he said. Ultimately, DAV ran two command centers in Moore and two others in Shawnee. More than two dozen staff members and nearly 200 volunteers helped storm victims. “It’s an amazing outpouring of support from our membership,” said Washington Headquarters Executive Director Barry Jesinoski.

“Our National Service Officers proved DAV’s expertise and skill in being the first line of relief for the victims of these disasters,” said National Service Director Garry Augustine. “Our Muskogee National Service Office was the closest to the storm scenes and they brought comfort and compassion to the veterans there. The losses were great, but our NSOs handled their needs quickly and with great efficiency—well above and beyond what the veterans there even expected.”

A motorcycle group named “The Horsemen” and other volunteers helped distribute flyers with DAV’s message of assistance. “The Red Cross and others came to us asking how everyone knew where DAV was,” Oliver said. “The VA relief effort joined up
with us, followed by FEMA and the Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs. We were all at the same site.”

Department Commander Cougar Hammons said that without power, vehicles or communication, it was difficult to tell victims where to find help. “But the motorcycle group must have put the flyers on every pole left standing,” he said. “We did it the old-fashioned way, boots on the ground.”

To respond to the spiritual needs of tornado victims, Department Chaplain Dan Capri provided counseling and religious services in the disaster area. “Chaplain Capri was there every day for three weeks,” said Oliver. “He brought comfort and relief through grief counseling and prayer. He also provided denominational and nondenominational religious items to those who lost them during the tornadoes.”

“I saw Dan provide prayer and hugs to those who desperately needed them” Oliver said. “He was there to provide their physical and spiritual needs with blessings and religious services.”

Meanwhile, offers of assistance came pouring in from coast to coast from entities within the organization and other patriotic causes through DAV. The VFW in Pennsylvania shipped a truckload of water to DAV volunteers to hand out in Moore. Volunteers from the Fire Department of New York Disaster Assistance Response Team helped distribute supplies. “We delivered everything to the veterans,” Oliver said. “We didn’t wait for them to come to us.”

Other groups helped DAV’s Disaster Assistance team. Neighbors-helping-Neighbors USA, for instance, provided help for veterans identified by DAV who needed demolition and restoration work. The DAV Chapter in Joplin, Mo., sent money to reciprocate the support they received when that city was struck by a devastating tornado. The Department of Arizona pledged financial assistance, and “The Fight Continues” (a
post-9/11 veterans group) teamed up with DAV to assist veterans. Meanwhile, businessman Harry Patterson of Patterson Auto Group in Wichita Falls, Texas, loaned vehicles that DAV distributed to tornado victims. “With the massive loss of transportation, this was a greatly needed asset,” Hammons said.

Veterans who received DAV vouchers were directed to the Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs, which distributed $171,000 in emergency aid grants to veterans. “They were told to establish a working partnership with DAV, and the number of claims they accepted exceeded their annual budget, with increased funding being requested,” Oliver said.

The joint service-officer team also filed disaster claims through the Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Legion, which distributed nearly $300,000 each in emergency aid grants to veterans.

“DAV transported several hundred veterans to the Oklahoma City VA Medical Center from Moore, Shawnee and the surrounding area to receive medical care and medication,” said Oliver. “Veterans were also taken to relief centers for a hot meal and a shower.”

“The people here were really not sure what to do,” said NSO White. “We were able to help them on the spot.”

Because of DAV’s speed and efficiency in providing assistance, the Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs processed their grants in 24 to 48 hours rather than the usual two to three weeks. “They’ve seen how quickly DAV can turn things around, and they want to equal that,” White said. “DAV and the state have been able to help 370 families so far, and we expect that number will continue to increase in the El Reno area.

“I just want to help everyone I can,” White said. “Veterans have wept in appreciation for the help we’ve been able to give them.”
“I was amazed that DAV stopped the world to help me,” Early said. “For the first three days, we lived in a tent. Then DAV came to help and they fulfilled their promise to us. I am very grateful.”

“DAV stepped up for me,” said Haywood. “I got a voucher for immediate needs and DAV got me a loaner car and brought it to me. DAV volunteers even helped us search through the rubble of our home. I am totally grateful for what they did. I just want to thank DAV from the bottom of my heart.”

“DAV gave me a voucher, which paid for a roof over my head,” said Thompson. “Then they got me a loaner vehicle. I’m joining DAV. I’m so overjoyed that I want to be part of the organization to help pay it back.

“It’s real hard right now,” she said. “We need clothes and didn’t have a clean change for our son. It’s hard for him to understand why he had to wear dirty clothes. We told him the storm took away his clean ones.

“There are lots of people asking what more can they do, but I have no answers,” Thompson said. “You don’t think about yourself or the things you need until you need them.”

When she was searching through the smashed homes on the day of the tornado, Thompson remembers freeing one trapped woman. “She asked me ‘Where do you go from here?’ I asked her if she remembered her life before the storm, and of course she did. I told her to hang on to those memories because the storm can never take them away.”

The assistance and coordination provided by the Department of Oklahoma was magnificent,” said Adjutant Burgess. “Cougar Hammons, Danny Oliver and all those who worked and volunteered helped soften the tremendous impact this disaster had on these citizens. It was remarkable work.”

“DAV disaster aid did what it was meant to do,” said
Jesinoski. “It provided ill and injured veterans with necessary assistance immediately after the storm. DAV is pleased that our efforts succeeded so well and so quickly for them. It is just one of the things DAV does to honor the promises made to the men and women who served our nation.”