



PRESS RELEASE

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Reflections as the Alaska Army National Guard's St. Croix mission comes to an end

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska – A path of devastation was left in the wakes of Hurricanes Maria and Irma, after they struck St. Croix as full force category-five hurricanes within 14 days of each other in late September.

For weeks thereafter, U.S. troops and federal agencies converged on St. Croix to aid the island's 50,000 residents in rebuilding their communities and lives. Most power lines, communications towers, residences, businesses and even the lush, tropical shrubbery bore limited signs of life in the aftermath of the sister-hurricanes' 155 mph winds.

Among those sent to provide aid are 57 Soldiers from the 297th Forward Support Company, Alaska Army National Guard, who traded sub-freezing, dry Alaskan air for the high humidity and 80-degree temperatures of St. Croix last month.

The 297th FSC arrived to the small island, which measures 22 miles in length, as a fully-functioning forward logistics element housing maintenance and distribution capabilities.

"We've been tasked with three distinct missions," said Capt. Danny Canlas, commander of the 297th Forward Support Company. "Specifically, we are supporting commodity distribution, maintenance and debris removal, however, we are here to support in any way we can, and we have."

The majority of the locals are still without clean drinking water and more than 80 percent are without power. Local utility workers and federal agencies work around the clock while steep terrain, degraded roads and thick vegetation, coupled with St. Croix's rainy season, have made making improvements challenging.

The Alaskans have united with local National Guard members and federal agencies to do what they can to assist.

"Our team has helped to palletize and transport goods from Federal Emergency Management Agency warehouses to local hospitals and armories; we've worked alongside the local National Guard repairing vehicles, generators, trucks, trailers and chainsaws; we've delivered tens of thousands of gallons of fuel to living spaces, hospitals and facilities, and conducted debris removal at state parks, schools and beaches," described Canlas. "Every time we've been asked to assist with anything, the Soldiers have jumped right in."

The Alaskans directly contributed to the re-opening of two of St. Croix's 16 public schools, many of which were closed through mid-October due to power loss, structural damage and safety considerations.

"There was one instance where we spent the day working on clearing out debris at a children's playground, and a few hours later we returned and witnessed a mother there with her children playing on a swing set—their smiles made it all worthwhile." explained Staff Sgt. Tara Church, a distribution sergeant with the 297th FSC. "Helping to clean the local schools and state parks has been the most rewarding experience, so much so that I haven't once minded working in the heat."

As relief efforts come to a close with their mission ending next week, the Soldiers have a chance to reflect on the impact they have made to people in the affected areas.

"We arrived here with the intent to help the people who call this island home and to help make their lives whole again," said Spc. Cori Hetrick, a mechanic assigned to the 297th FSC. "I'm impressed with each and every one of my counterparts who put their lives on hold to help the wonderful people of St. Croix. We have been working as hard as we can to help, and have done so while working together as a team to accomplish every task we've been given."

Aside from St. Croix, the AKNG continues to support relief efforts in Puerto Rico with 16 Soldiers and four Alaska State Defense Force members providing communications support at a Joint Incident Site Communications Capability system.

Additional Guard members are on duty in the AKNG's Joint Operation Center at the Alaska National Guard Armory here. The JOC maintains continuous communications with the National Guard Bureau in order to anticipate further relief operations requirements and receives regular updates from deployed personnel, assisting as needed from home base.

In the last two months, Alaska National Guard Airmen and Soldiers have deployed to support Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands after Hurricanes Irma and Maria; Florida after Hurricane Irma; and to Texas during the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

The Alaska National Guard stands ready for subsequent requests, while continuing to protect our communities, state and nation and to support worldwide contingency operations.

AKARNG; Alaska Army National Guard; 297th Forward Support Company; 297th FSC; Forward Logistics Element; USVI; St. Croix; humanitarian mission; relief mission; deployment

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PHOTOS

1. **DVIDS Link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/254668/reflections-alaska-army-national-guards-st-croix-mission-comes-end>

2. **Flickr Link** for additional photos

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157690380832296>



171022-Z-ZZ999-1000

Members of the 297th Forward Support Company, Alaska Army National Guard, perform debris removal and clean-up at a state park during their humanitarian relief mission to St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Oct. 22, 2017. More than 50 AKARNG members deployed to provide operational and sustainment support in the aftermath of Hurricanes Maria and Irma. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Maj. Carlos Van Nurden/Released)



171022-Z-ZZ999-1001

Members of the 297th Forward Support Company, Alaska Army National Guard, perform debris removal and clean-up at a state park during their humanitarian relief mission to St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Oct. 22, 2017. More than 50 AKARNG members deployed to provide operational and sustainment support in the aftermath of Hurricanes Maria and Irma. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Maj. Carlos Van Nurden/Released)



171025-Z-ZZ999-1000

Members of the 297th Forward Support Company, Alaska Army National Guard, perform debris removal and clean-up at Ricardo Richards Elementary School during their humanitarian relief mission to St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Oct. 25, 2017. More than 50 AKARNG members deployed to provide operational and sustainment support in the aftermath of Hurricanes Maria and Irma. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Maj. Carlos Van Nurden/Released)



171028-Z-ZZ999-1000

Members of the 297th Forward Support Company, Alaska Army National Guard, perform debris removal and clean-up at a state park during their humanitarian relief mission to St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Oct. 28, 2017. More than 50 AKARNG members deployed to provide operational and sustainment support in the aftermath of Hurricanes Maria and Irma. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Maj. Carlos Van Nurden/Released)