



JTF THUNDER: 149th MEB Operations During the Kentucky Ice Storm of 2009

By Major Timothy R. Starke

The morning of 26 January 2009 began with rumors of approaching inclement weather as the staff at 149th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB) headquarters began their daily physical training routines. All day the discussion across the command was of the clouds on the western horizon, and an update from the Military Support to Civil Authorities (MSCA) office advised units to expect “ice to the west and snow to the north, south, and east.” Every unit in the state was ordered to double-check winter storm response standing operating procedures, verify vehicle readiness plans, ask full-time staff to check and recheck alert rosters, and ensure that contingency supplies were available for emergency response operations.

The night of 26 January became busy with incoming calls to the MSCA office, which relayed initial missions to the MEB’s full-time staff. Early taskings required units to alert and mobilize Soldiers for MSCA missions in support of state Department of Transportation districts in the western and central parts of the state. These route clearance missions were a very small precursor of what was to come.

Throughout the day on 27 January, conditions deteriorated fast as freezing rain continued to accumulate across the western part of the state. By 1200 hours on 28 January, 46 counties had declared a “state of emergency” and nearly 350,000 homes were reported to be without power. Hours of sustained sleet and freezing rain followed by bitterly cold temperatures resulted in widespread icing that toppled large trees and cell phone towers, dropped power lines, and shattered utility poles. Telephone and radio communications with counties in the western half of the state were virtually nonexistent. The only information coming from the most severely affected areas was from

residents and first responders who drove far enough east to pick up a cell phone signal. Units located immediately outside of the affected areas were alerted to mobilize, while initial damage assessments and requests from emergency managers were received by Joint Force Headquarters, Kentucky. By the evening of 28 January, Kentucky Army National Guard units were supporting multiple counties throughout the central and western portions of the state and preparing for a full mobilization.

Joint Task Force 149

The 149th MEB is the largest unit in the Kentucky National Guard and is composed of units stationed across the entire Bluegrass State. Units assigned to the 149th are based as far west as Benton, north to Walton on the outskirts of Cincinnati, south to Bowling Green near the Tennessee line, and east to Harlan along the Virginia border. As the initial main effort, the brigade immediately stood up its emergency operations center (EOC), issued a warning order to the entire command, and shifted the full-time force from operational support to civil support. Additionally, the brigade’s full-time personnel made the immediate recommendation to alert the brigade commander and his entire staff to further develop the situation.

At 1257 hours on 29 January, the 149th MEB was notified that it would be fully mobilized in support of disaster relief operations. The unit was officially activated as Task Force (TF) 149 on 30 January at 1100 hours and assigned responsibility for all counties from Interstate 65 to the western boundary of the state, roughly one-third of Kentucky and by far the hardest-hit area. In addition to its organic 149th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB) and 149th Signal Support

Company, the TF received 1st Battalion, 623d Field Artillery Battalion (1-623 Field Artillery), and the 206th Engineer Battalion to conduct civil response operations. During the next two weeks, the unit also integrated forces from the 198th Military Police Battalion; 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry Regiment (1-149 Infantry); and numerous other company-size units whose armories were located in the affected areas. Additionally, TF 149 received three “Strike Teams” from the 123d Air Wing of the Kentucky Air National Guard and was redesignated “Joint Task Force (JTF) 149.” (See Figures 1 and 2.)

Following the total activation of the 149th MEB, the commander and his entire staff moved to the brigade headquarters in Louisville to establish the full brigade tactical operations center (TOC) that would facilitate centralized planning and command and control. As the command group and headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) Soldiers arrived, it became apparent that the current situation had become a disaster of a magnitude that none had experienced in their military careers.

MEB Doctrine in MSCA Operations

The vast majority of MEBs are in the National Guard, due to their unique force structure and mission set that makes them extremely well-suited to conduct domestic disaster response operations. Several core mission-essential task list (CMETL) tasks of MEBs directly relate to domestic support operations, including “conduct consequence management” and “maneuver support operations.” Consequence management includes the following subtasks: conduct relief operations; provide support to civilian law enforcement; respond to chemical,

JFT 149th MEB Task Organization

Task Force 149

HHC, 149th MEB
 149th Signal Company
 198th Military Police Battalion Headquarters
 123d Air Wing Strike Team Dalton
 123d Air Wing Strike Team Shelton
 123d Air Wing Strike Team Howard
 20th Special Forces Group (SFG), Military Intelligence Detachment (MID)

Task Force Morgan

1-623 Field Artillery
 HHD, 1-623 Field Artillery
 A/1-623 Field Artillery
 B/1-623 Field Artillery
 C/1-623 Field Artillery
 HHC, 203d Forward Support Company
 Detachment 1, 203d Forward Support Company
 Detachment 2, 203d Forward Support Company
 2113th Transportation Company
 A/149th BSB (-)
 940th Military Police Company
 438th Military Police Company
 2/75th Recruiting and Retention Battalion (-)
 41st Civil Support Team (-)
 75th Troop Command Medical Team (-)

Task Force Sapper

HHC, 206th Engineer Battalion
 A/206th Engineer Battalion
 A/2-138 Field Artillery
 Service Battery/2-138 Field Artillery
 C/1-149 Infantry
 617th Military Police Company
 2/75th Recruiting and Retention Battalion (-)
 41st Civil Support Team (-)
 307th Maintenance Company
 Detachment 2, 307th Maintenance Company
 176th/177th/178th Firefighting Teams
 130th Engineer Company
 Detachment 2, Medical Command
 103d BSB
 1204th Aviation Support Battalion Forward (-)
 20th SFG, MID Linguist Team

Task Force Orphan

HHD/149th BSB
 Detachment 1A/149th BSB
 B/149th BSB
 A/1-149 Infantry
 D/1-149 Infantry
 2/75th Recruiting and Retention Battalion (-)
 Detachment 1/A/206th Engineer Battalion
 Military Police Security Team
 HHD, 198th Military Police Battalion (-)
 223d Military Police Company(-)
 1103d Military Police Detachment(-)
 41st Civil Support Team (-)

Figure 1

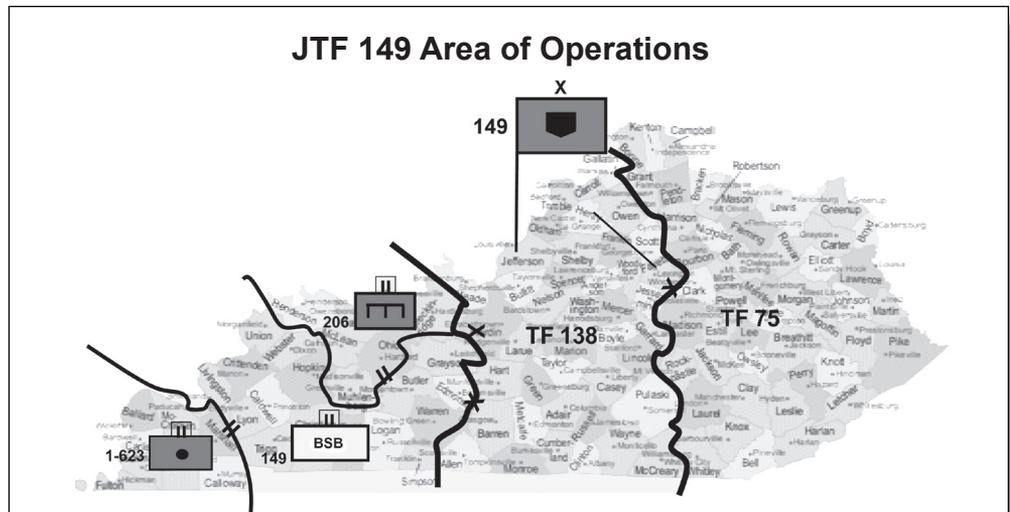


Figure 2

biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosives (CBRNE) incidents; establish civil control; and restore essential services. Additionally, maneuver support operations entail route clearance operations, law enforcement operations, and route maintenance. Nearly all of these subtasks were executed as part of JTF 149 operations in response to the Kentucky ice storm of 2009.

The 149th MEB’s initial mission set on activation consisted primarily of route clearance and transportation of relief supplies, such as cots and generators, to emergency shelters. Route clearance was particularly challenging, because nearly every road—including interstate and major state highways—was blocked by trees or power poles that had fallen under the weight of



Soldiers of the 149th MEB cleared paths to isolated homes after the ice storm.

the ice. During this phase of the operation, cargo vehicles from the 149th BSB (Task Force Orphan) and engineers armed with chainsaws and high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) from the 206th Engineer Battalion (Task Force Sapper) were the most valuable assets in the MEB's arsenal. Soldiers in these units cut paths to isolated homes in rural areas and either evacuated, or delivered provisions to, residents with no power or water. Their responsiveness, determination, and ingenuity undoubtedly saved lives during the opening hours of relief operations.

Following the full activation of the command, JTF 149th MEB was authorized direct liaison with each county emergency management office. Immediately, the mission set evolved, growing exponentially to meet requests that were coming in from each emergency management area manager. The full extent of the damage was still unknown, but requirements continued to grow as the findings of damage assessment teams trickled in.

State and local law enforcement became overwhelmed by the traffic control and security requirements resulting from widespread and sustained power loss throughout the region. Among the requests were numerous calls for armed military police to augment police patrols. The 198th Military Police Battalion provided troops throughout the JTF area of operations to improve security at emergency shelters, assist with traffic control, and prevent pilferage of unsecured shops and stores. Additionally, military police were called on to prevent the theft of anhydrous ammonia used in fertilizer by opportunistic producers of methamphetamines.

JTF 149th MEB's consequence management requirements also increased rapidly as county Division of Emergency Management (DEM) EOCs gained situational awareness about the level of damage sustained by their communities. Establishment and security of points of distribution (POD) for food, water, and kerosene throughout the JTF area became immediate-priority missions taken on by all three subordinate battalion task forces. TF Orphan (149th BSB) established Refuel on the Move (ROM) sites throughout the brigade area of operations in support of all vehicles in the MEB. TF Orphan established these critical "service stations" for military and state vehicles at a time when only a handful of commercial gas stations had the ability to pump fuel.

Additionally, the Kentucky Division of Emergency Services (KyEM) requested several damage assessment teams to assist emergency management officials in identifying and annotating damage to critical infrastructure and key resources throughout the area. These teams, provided by HHC 149th MEB (Team Spartan), had been trained to conduct this mission by KyEM officials during the response to a Hurricane Ike-induced windstorm several months earlier and proved to be an invaluable asset.

Door-to-Door Wellness Checks

Despite the best efforts of first responders, federal and state emergency services officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and National Guard units, several fatalities had occurred throughout the state due to carbon monoxide poisoning

Lessons Learned

Disaster response efforts in the wake of the Kentucky ice storm of 2009 helped the 149th MEB exercise many systems required in combat operations or other large-scale homeland security missions. The operation highlighted some of the MEB's inherent advantages in an MSCA role:

- Large span of control based on the size, diversity, and experience level of the brigade staff.
 - Capability to conduct essential missions, such as route clearance, law enforcement augmentation, and sensitive site protection.
 - Maintenance of lines of communication—as necessary and valuable in MSCA as it is in combat, and best performed by MEB assets.
- In addition to validating existing force structure, operations helped to identify many lessons learned that will be incorporated into planning and execution of future MSCA efforts:
- Colocating military headquarters with DEM EOCs is necessary to validate requests for support and provide responsive forces.
 - Extensive use of liaison officers with federal, state, and local officials is essential to ensure timely information sharing and “translation” of support requirements between agencies and back to the National Guard.
 - Redundant communication systems were more important to command and control than physical proximity to the area of operations. TF 149 Headquarters remained in Louisville—where telephone, cell phone, Internet, video teleconference, and emergency radio services were functional—rather than moving west to Wendell Ford Training Center, in the affected area, as planned. This decision was essential to maintaining command and control and situational awareness.
 - Understanding and effective dissemination of the incident commander's intent is essential to coordinating decentralized operations by military personnel working in conjunction with federal, state, and local agencies.
 - MEB staff must be able to analyze information rapidly to provide the commander with recommendations for operations 72 to 96 hours out. It is easy to get immersed in the “now” of emergency response operations and fail to develop measures of effectiveness to determine when military forces should turn over operations to civilian authorities.
 - Traditional relationships between units and their communities must be retained when standing up brigade-size task forces, to avoid perception of abandonment. Though integrating company-size units from multiple major commands into the JTF was a challenge, the trust and familiarity of local unit leadership with the elected officials and government agencies in their communities were essential to the effective communication of requirements and expectations.
 - Establishment and operation of a central JRRSOI site is essential to ensure property and personnel accountability at the completion of operations.
 - Limited organic maintenance assets create a challenge. The surface maintenance company in the MEB BSB does not have the personnel or equipment necessary to maintain all wheeled vehicles in the brigade. Close coordination with Kentucky National Guard field maintenance shops and the unit training equipment site was essential to mission success.
 - Limited internal transportation assets created the need for external sustainment support. The BSB support plans officer was a critical link between the MEB and TF Logistics, a JFHQ-run TF that pushed supply and aid into the JTF 149 area.

and hypothermia resulting from improper use of space heaters in some residences and a lack of heat in others. In response to these deaths, and in an effort to prevent more from occurring, the governor issued a directive that every home in the state would be checked to ensure that residents were safe and had food, water, and necessary medical care. This massive operation required emergency responders to knock on more than 1.5 million doors. Most of these visits were conducted by National Guard Soldiers, since they had the vehicles and manpower to go where no one else could.

In the JTF 149 area of responsibility (AOR), company commanders and first sergeants worked with local KyEM officials to devise plans to check every house in their assigned counties or large cities. Brigade headquarters tracked reports that flowed into the TOC several times a day, along with coordinating the deployment of additional

units into areas that needed more personnel. Much of the additional manpower came from 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry Regiment, which had remained in eastern Kentucky, responding to a very limited number of requests for support while awaiting activation as the National Guard Reaction Force. Kentucky traditionally responds to events like the ice storm of 2009 regionally, first employing units based in or near the affected area and then task-organizing additional forces as necessary. As a result, 1-149 Infantry Battalion was relatively “un-missioned” outside of the JTF 149 AOR, despite being assigned to the brigade and serving as its tactical combat force (TCF) during training exercises.

Units from 1-149 Infantry Battalion were released from their home communities in eastern Kentucky by Joint Force Headquarters on 1 February and task-organized back to their parent headquarters for employment in the

JTF 149 AOR. To provide the necessary mobility for the light infantrymen of TF Warrior (1-149 Infantry), 116 Soldiers from the battalion flew to Columbus, Ohio, from the Kentucky Air National Guard to draw 55 HMMWVs from the Ohio National Guard. The added mobility provided by these trucks was critical in the days ahead, enabling the state's only infantry battalion to significantly impact operations.

In addition to the HMMWVs from Ohio, equipment and personnel flowed into Kentucky from a number of other states. Tennessee and Indiana provided large numbers of HMMWVs, while Wisconsin and West Virginia contributed engineer support, and Florida sent additional communications assets to help bridge the gap left by inoperable cell phone towers and downed telephone lines. These contributions from other states were absolutely critical to successful execution of door-to-door searches and all other MSCA operations in response to the ice storm.

During the course of the door-to-door searches, JTF 149 Soldiers saved several lives. Task Force Morgan (1-623 Field Artillery) Soldiers found four teenagers stranded on top of a car that had slid off an icy road into a lake and recovered them before they succumbed to hypothermia. Several residents were evacuated by authorities after Soldiers found that their homes had dangerous carbon monoxide levels from the use of kerosene heaters or gas ovens to produce heat indoors. A Soldier from TF Sapper (206th Engineer Battalion) reached a house just as the resident was collapsing from a heart attack and summoned emergency medical responders who resuscitated the man. In addition to providing emergency medical care, Soldiers, first responders, and volunteers marked homes that were without electricity or water to make restoration of services easier for utility workers. Although there is no way to determine exactly how many lives were saved, it is certain that the door-to-door search missions had a dramatic effect on the well-being of residents in affected areas.

A Successful Conclusion

JTF Thunder reached its maximum strength of more than 2,020 personnel on 6 February 2009 as the commander surged forces to complete door-to-door checks in the area of operations. As the checks were being completed, the brigade staff shifted their focus to identifying measures of effectiveness and developing a withdrawal plan that would transition recovery operations back to civil authorities and allow Soldiers to return to their employers. Measures of effectiveness included reduction of the number of citizens in, or closure of, emergency shelters; restoration of power and water; clearance of at least one lane of traffic on all county and state roads; increase in the ability of state and local law enforcement to maintain security; and completion of door-to-door searches. A system was put in place in conjunction with the Kentucky Division of Emergency Services and Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ-KY) to require county and emergency managers to complete letters of release indicating that they no longer required the support of National Guard forces in their jurisdictions. These letters

were the primary criteria for releasing units back to their parent major command (MACOM) and dismissing them from state active duty.

In addition to tracking mission completion, the JTF 149 staff worked with JFHQ-KY to develop a thorough joint reverse reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (JRRSOI) plan to gain accountability of all personnel and equipment before releasing units from the area and processing them off of active duty. A single JRRSOI site was established at Wendell H. Ford Regional Training Center in Greenville, Kentucky, where borrowed vehicles received technical inspections; state property purchased during the operation was accounted for and turned-in; excess Class I and Class III supplies were collected; and personnel were accounted for and processed out of the operation. By establishing a central point to conduct these functions, the MEB was able to significantly cut down on problems resulting from worker's compensation claims, state active duty pay, and Financial Liability of Property Loss investigations.

By 15 February 2009, all units had been released from state active duty and only a handful of volunteers remained on duty assisting Federal Emergency Management, KyDEM, and other agencies as they conducted follow-up assessments of critical infrastructure throughout the state. Though a significant number of Kentuckians remained without power, and debris littered yards and curbs throughout the state, civil authorities were very much in control of relief and recovery operations.

The MEB proved to be an effective force structure for commanding a major disaster response operation in support of civil authorities. While the geographical dispersion of MEB units will certainly impact their ability to bring all organic or administrative control units to participate in MSCA operations, the large and diverse headquarters of the MEB allows it to build a flexible and functional TF by integrating different types of forces from around the state and region. It is this flexibility that makes the MEB an ideal brigade to take the lead in major MSCA operations. These same capabilities will make the MEB an increasingly important asset in combat theaters in the coming years.



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