

A Force for Good



Defense Coordinating Element Provides Assistance in Minneapolis

American Forces Press Service WASHINGTON, Aug. 10, 2007 – The Department of Defense has deployed a Defense Coordinating Element to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to assist with last week's 35W bridge collapse.



Members of Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit (MDSU) 2 from Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek, Va., swim through debris searching for victims of the I-35 bridge collapse. (Department of Defense photo by Senior Chief Petty Officer Andrew McKaskle)

The six-person Region 5 Defense Coordinating Element, based in Chicago, prepares for civil support missions by working daily with federal and state emergency planners and consequence managers in the six-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Army Col. Michael Chesney, defense coordinating officer, is DoD's on-scene representative to provide command and control of responding active-duty forces and will facilitate requests for any additional DoD support.

“We are here at the request of the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office and Department of Transportation,” Chesney said. “Sheriff Rich Stanek is the incident

commander, so we are here to provide support to him and residents affected by this unfortunate disaster.”

Chesney and the team are assigned to U.S. Army North, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Army North provides defense support to civil authorities as the Army component of U.S. Northern Command, the unified command on Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., that is responsible for homeland defense and civil support.

The Defense Department brings additional capabilities as part of a larger federal response when requested by states and approved by the secretary of defense. Currently, DoD is providing two dive teams and support personnel from Navy Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2, from Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek, Va., to assist with recovery efforts after the bridge collapse.

“The Navy has some specialized skills on this type of operation where we’re capable of entering into a confined space with high currents to recover the remains that the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office is using as part of their investigation of the incident,” said Navy Capt. Rich Hooper, director of ocean engineering and supervisor of salvage and diving at Naval Sea Systems Command.

“They need that specialized expertise the (unit) has to get into cramped, confined spaces that are heavily damaged and that are very high-risk situations for divers,” Hooper said. “That specialized skill is not something you can commonly get out on the commercial market.”

Seventeen divers and a five-person command-and-control element from the unit are on site in Minneapolis.

The dive team was able to enter the confined space under the collapsed bridge, an area that was previously inaccessible to local and FBI recovery attempts. “The team will conduct a hand-over-hand search of the entire area, which will take some time,” Hooper said. “There is no room for error.”

Naval Firefighters Respond in Greece

Members of the U.S. Navy were called to the scene July 30 when a wildfire broke out on a mountainside 35 miles southwest of the American base at Souda Bay, on the Greek island of Crete.

The Navy initially sent six firefighters – three Greek and three American – and two Navy Seabees as water tenders. Equipment for the effort included a fire engine, a brush truck designed for combating wildfires, and a 2,000 gallon water truck. The next day, two Bombardier CL-415 firefighting aircraft and two helicopters using Bambi buckets arrived to blanket still-smoldering areas with water.

Local officials “needed ground support to battle the fires close to homes and olive trees, [which] are particularly dangerous because they are very dry and extremely volatile,” said Tim Dias, Fire Chief at Naval Support Activity (NSA) Souda Bay.

“Our being there allowed some of the smaller Greek units to maintain their mobility,” added Scott Carlton, an American civilian firefighter and captain in the Souda Bay Fire Department.

All homes were protected and there were no injuries from the blaze, which destroyed more than 2,000 olive trees.

The mission of U.S. naval personnel at NSA Souda Bay is to operate and maintain a facility for refueling and other support of U.S. ships and aircraft in this strategically critical area of the world, and to enhance cooperation with the United States’ NATO ally, Greece.



A Naval Support Activity Souda Bay firefighter prepares to assist the Greek community in containing a wildfire. (Department of Defense photo by Paul Farley)