PAE to the Rescue

PAE Weathers a Hurricane; Restores Base Operations

PAE’s AUTEC program on Andros Island, Bahamas conducted a massive evacuation and quickly restored U.S. Navy base operations.

Towards the end of 2016, Tropical Storm Matthew developed into a category 5 hurricane. With the PAE AUTEC team on Andros Island at risk, the Navy ordered evacuation of all non-essential personnel. On October 2, 200 employees and over 60 pets were evacuated to West Palm Beach, Florida.

“The amount of logistics to get that many people off the island and settled, along with all the moving parts Mother Nature presented was immense,” said AUTEC Project Manager Pete Young. “PAE had not done an evacuation of this magnitude in over five years.”

As part of the evacuation, PAE sent range craft and 30+ crewmembers to a verified safe harbor in Freeport, Bahamas.

“There was a point after the evacuation and before Hurricane Matthew hit Andros that we thought our evacuation plan may have been premature,” said Pete. “We started preparations to bring people back to the island, but the storm’s path changed again; we quickly determined that not even West Palm Beach was safe.” On October 4, PAE relocated employees from there to the more inland Orlando, Florida.

Hurricane Matthew Batters the Bahamas

On October 6, Hurricane Matthew hit Andros Island just three miles off the coast. At the peak of the storm, winds hit 130 miles per hour, making Matthew the hardest storm to hit the base since the 1960s.

Although the Navy considered a full evacuation, 75 personnel (45 of whom were PAE employees) stayed on base. “The base is secure, but if unattended, unauthorized personnel can gain access. It would have been a major operation (in the midst of an emergency evacuation) to secure the base fully, and a complete evacuation would have severely delayed damage assessment and recovery operations. A situation like that would have taken months to recover from and severely impacted the Navy’s mission,” said Pete.

After tearing through Andros Island, the storm headed straight for Freeport. “In the safe harbor in Freeport, our crews typically tie up the vessels, stay aboard and let the storm pass,” said Pete. “But on October 6, Freeport took a direct hit. Moving the vessels to another location ahead of the storm was not an option. As we considered evacuating the crews, vessel captains located a shelter ashore. Although frightening, the crews made it through the storm safely. Range craft in the Freeport harbor sustained only minor damage — the crews did an outstanding job.”

Program Summary

PAE provides maintenance and operations to the U.S. Navy in support of the Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center (AUTEC). Located on Andros Island, Bahamas with support in West Palm Beach, Florida, AUTEC is a major range and test facility base providing deep water test and training environments for U.S. and international military and non-military customers.
Injury-Free, Recovery Efforts Begin

“On base, everyone made it through without a scratch,” said Pete. “There were no injuries, and nothing on base was catastrophically damaged.”

Immediately after the hurricane, the personnel who had stayed behind performed initial cleanup and stabilization to make the base safe for the return of the larger team. On October 9, PAE program management sent 20 people with chainsaws, blowers and other equipment back to the island ahead of the rest of the team. Additionally, most of the local Bahamian workforce showed up to join the cleanup efforts. “This is when amazing things happened,” said Pete. “Our entire crew — American and Bahamian employees — had just been through a harrowing experience. It didn’t matter who people were or what their jobs on base included, they all worked together to put sandbags out, tarps roofs, clear trees, remove debris, etc.”

On October 13, after PAE AUTEC Environmental Safety and Health gave the all clear, all evacuated employees returned to base — not even a week after the storm hit. Amazingly, there was minimal damage to housing units. “By October 17, we were open for business again and everyone was home safe,” said Pete. “Reports from our own employees and Navy personnel indicated that it was the smoothest evacuation they had ever seen.”

PAE employees have raised thousands of dollars and collected critical supplies to support the Andros Island victims of Hurricane Matthew. AUTEC employees continue to help the local community clean up debris, improve access to clean drinking water, rebuild critical infrastructure and much more. An employee-organized toy drive provided hundreds of toys for the local community before Christmas.

“I was really impressed with the AUTEC team throughout this ordeal,” said Pete. “Everyone came together as a community, and we were able to restore limited range operations within two weeks of the storm.”

PAE took charge during an emergency situation that came within days of a new Commander taking over the base. Pete said, “I overheard him speaking to his Admiral saying, ‘Admiral, I know I am new here but I have the PAE team, and they know what they are doing.’ We stepped in to make sure there was minimal impact to the customer’s mission, and PAE really shined.”

“Fortunately, there were no injuries and everyone was safe both on base and elsewhere on Andros.” said Pete. There was, however, severe damage to the critical infrastructure, especially on Andros Island. “The power plant off base in town was almost obliterated. Their water supply, not on backup power, was inaccessible. Roads were impassable; some bridges were completely washed out, isolating people from aid.”

I know I am new here, but I have the PAE team, and they know what they are doing.

–Navy Officer in Charge Commander
Craig Shillinger

Previous Page - On October 2, the U.S. Navy ordered the evacuation of all non-essential personnel from Andros Island via three C-130 flights.

The AUTEC Base on Andros Island, Bahamas sustained significant damage and debris. Fortunately, nothing on base was catastrophically damaged, and no one was hurt.