

The Corps of Engineers and the Origins of Federal Disaster Relief

By Dr. Martin Reuss*

The 1993 midwest flood ranks among the most catastrophic disasters in our nation's history, shattering previous stage and discharge records on major portions of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. More than 500 Corps employees were involved in the flood response, and the agency supplied 31 million sandbags and loaned 430 pumps to local interests. Along with other federal and nonfederal agencies, the Corps helped drain flooded areas, conducted damage surveys, and inspected and repaired levees.

As impressive as the Corps'

capability to respond to disasters such as the midwest flood is now, this mission was not envisioned by early champions of the Corps. Instead, it evolved after Congress and the public recognized that the Corps' organization and capabilities made the agency a valuable resource that was tailor-made to meet the urgent demands brought on by calamitous disasters.

Civil War Era

Some federal legislation was passed to alleviate the distress caused by several disasters prior to the Civil War, including

the loan of naval vessels to transport private, charitable contributions to the famine-stricken people of Ireland. But direct federal participation in disaster assistance really began in 1865, at the close of the Civil War, when the government helped freedmen (freed blacks) of the south survive flooding along the Mississippi River. Once disaster relief had been given to one group, it became legally and ethically difficult for members of Congress to oppose extending similar assistance to others.

The Bureau of Freedmen administered the first federal



The Cambria Iron Works warehouse shows debris resulting from the 1889 Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood.



Refugees and livestock retreat on a levee opposite the lower end of Island 8, near Hickman, Kentucky, during the 1912 Mississippi River flood.

disaster-relief program from 1865 to 1872, and then the Army Quartermaster Corps became responsible for this slowly expanding responsibility. The Corps of Engineers, however, with men and equipment stationed along the inland rivers, was the best suited federal agency to perform rescue and relief work during flood disasters. Consequently, although the Quartermaster Corps retained overall administrative control, the execution of relief operations during floods became the Corps' responsibility. The Corps of Engineers performed its first disaster-relief mission during the Mississippi River flood of 1882, when they supported Quartermaster Corps efforts to rescue people and property. Congress also directed the Corps to distribute Quartermaster Corps' supplies during flood disasters.

Thus, by the late 19th century, the words "flood fight" automatically produced in the minds of the public a vision of Army engineers directing men heaving thousands of sandbags into place or steaming up bayous to pick people out of treetops. In the aftermath of the catastrophic Johnstown, Pennsylvania

flood of 1889, which killed 2,209 people, the government used engineer troops for the first time for emergency disaster relief. In this effort, troops cleaned up debris and built temporary pontoon bridges. The special training and experience of the engineers soon brought other disaster-relief missions: preparing damage surveys, placing temporary bridges, and fighting civil conflagrations. Those missions were assigned to the Corps by the President, the Secretary of War, and Army Department commanders.

Early 1900's

The engineers believed that disaster relief, as administered by the Quartermaster Corps, hampered flood fights and had other unfortunate consequences. After 1913, the engineers proposed substituting a "no work, no rations" policy, or work relief, for disaster victims instead of free rations distribution, and in 1916 Congress gave the engineers an opportunity to implement that new policy. For a short time, in 1916, the Corps of

Engineers replaced the Quartermaster Corps as the primary administrative agency for federal disaster relief. During that period the engineers conducted a work-relief program that foreshadowed activities of the "alphabet" agencies that developed during the Depression years.

In 1917, the Army reorganized its disaster-relief responsibilities and assigned command and control during disaster situations to department or corps area commanders. The engineers retained their responsibility for the preservation of navigation channels and flood-control structures, but during the rescue, relief, and recovery phases of disasters both the engineers and the quartermasters acted in support of the American Red Cross.

Some disasters exceeded even the Red Cross' resources and capabilities. To facilitate relief for those disasters, the Executive Branch began in 1927 to appoint federal disaster-assistance coordinators, who supervised the activities of the Red Cross, the Corps of Engineers, the Quartermaster Corps, and all other interested federal agencies. During the



A 7th Army soldier clears Highway 83, near Minot, North Dakota, during Operation Snowbound, in 1949. More than 6,000 snowfighters cleared 115,000 miles of snow-blocked roads in that operation.

Depression years, disaster-relief efforts were also strengthened by manpower supplied by such agencies as the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps.

1940s and Beyond

The engineers improved their disaster responses after the extensive 1937 floods by initiating emergency operations planning. This initiative resulted in a perceptible improvement in readiness and a new aggressiveness in reaching disaster sites and furnishing needed relief. That planning reaped important benefits during World War II, when it became necessary to use engineer troops and prisoners of war for flood fights and other disaster operations. Their readiness was also apparent during such post-war disasters as the 1947 Texas City explosion, which killed 512 people and injured 1,784, and during Operation Snowbound in 1949.

Operation Snowbound, the first snow-removal emergency for the Corps, covered most of the states in the Missouri River watershed. Eventually it involved nearly

2,000 Corps of Engineers personnel, including 807 Army officers and more than 4,000 contractor employees. Lieutenant General Lewis Pick, the Chief of Engineers, had used 394 bulldozers during the peak construction period on the Ledo Road between India and Burma during World War II. During Operation Snowbound, he put 1,320 bulldozers to work. In that operation, Corps efforts succeeded in opening 115,000 miles of road, providing supply access to more than 243,000 people, and providing access to feed for more than 4 million livestock. Operation Snowbound was the first disaster-assistance mission for which Army Commendation Ribbons were awarded. Of the six enlisted men thus distinguished, two (Corporals John Donnelly and Melvin Shoemaker) were from the Corps of Engineers.

By 1950, the Corps of Engineers had an established reputation for swift and effective response. The Corps' geographic organization and special training had brought the agency a wide variety of disaster-relief missions, and Army engineers had built on that experience to improve their emergency readiness and response. Some engineer

officers in 1950 thought the entire federal disaster-assistance program should become an engineer mission, just as it had been in 1916.

The Army General Staff, however, fearing that disaster-relief work might interfere with national defense responsibilities, did not approve of involving the Army in what they viewed as a civil function. Nevertheless, under the Federal Disaster Relief Act of 1950, the Corps of Engineers preserved its role as the leading federal agency during flood disasters, and other governmental relief agencies learned that they could rely on the Corps of Engineers to respond in its customary "Essayons" spirit.

**Note:* This article is largely based on, and occasionally paraphrases, an unpublished manuscript by Leland R. Johnson, "Emergency Response: the Army Engineer Disaster Relief Mission, Origins to 1950." The manuscript is in the records collections of the Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Arlington, Virginia.

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