

Soldiers answered call to carry out task that demanded strong stomachs as well as strong backs

Showed True Grit

By James H. Early Jr.

GUEST COLUMNIST

When I was a child, we had milk delivered to our door in glass bottles that are now collectibles. I remember my wonderment the first cold winter morning when I retrieved the milk to find that the cream had risen to the top, pushed off the cap and stood above the rim.

My View

Milk is not delivered to my door anymore, and it no longer comes in glass bottles. But the old adage that cream always rises to the top still holds. Last month, I had the rare privilege of seeing this phenomenon again.

The aftermath of Hurricane Floyd left 30 counties in Eastern North Carolina flooded worse than from any storm in modern memory. Though many cities and towns suffered extensive damage, perhaps the town hardest hit and suffering the greatest loss was Princeville, a little town just outside of Tarboro.

Practically every house in this town has been rendered unfit, and many will have to be torn down. The shops and service-providing businesses suffered this same fate.

A sadness hangs in the air over Princeville. When you walk the deserted streets, you sense the tremendous loss there. The houses look as if they have been weeping, as recent rains have streaked the muddy walls like tears down a dusty cheek. Debris hangs in the trees above rooftop level. A dog that miraculously survived the flooding cowers on a porch. Hungry and with no fit water to drink, it is still afraid to leave the porch for a handout and fresh water. Cars look as if battered for deep-fat frying.

And then there are the coffins — Princeville had several cemetery areas joined together in a shape like a dumbbell. The 40-foot waters and the speed of trillions of gallons of water coursing across these cemeteries sucked many vaults and caskets out of the grave sites and carried them into the woods and, in some cases, miles downstream. Coffins were found in Princeville from as far away as Virginia. Coffins from Princeville will probably be found by hunters and fishermen many miles east and south of that tiny town months from now, perhaps years.

The recovery of coffins and vaults was a task that fell to the lot of the N.C. Army National Guard, which was activated by Gov. Jim Hunt. The governor asked for and received the assist-



James H. Early Jr. (wearing cowboy hat) volunteered to work with a team in flood-ravaged Princeville.

ance of the Kentucky National Guard. From these two groups, a unit of 20 volunteers formed the DMORT team led by Greg Love, a native of Mount Airy. I had the privilege and honor of working as a volunteer in the field with this unit.

This group went out each day and performed tasks that soldiers are not trained to do. Their task was to recover bodies, caskets and vaults floating in swamps and deposited in forest and brambles where water had receded. They retrieved them and loaded them onto trucks to be taken to mortuaries for identification. Sometimes the bodies were no longer in the caskets, and had to be retrieved and placed in body bags. More than 180 caskets were recovered from this area despite the adverse working conditions caused by the flooding and additional heavy rains that came during the operation. Despite the hardships, in every instance, the dead were handled with dignity and respect.

Soldiers who had been in law enforcement for years, soldiers who had been in special forces, soldiers who had been in crises around the world said that they had never experienced anything that prepared them for Princeville. Yet each day they got up, donned their gear and did their job.

The job was dirty, hot, wet and required a strong back and stomach. With water inside, the coffins weighed five times their normal weight. When the coffins were punctured with a pickax

to drain, those nearby needed a cast-iron stomach to deal with the odor.

The mud in the cemetery and woods was so deep that men could mire to their knees. Front-end loaders and other wheeled vehicles bogged to their axles. Only the big "Cats" could get around, and the "Cats" often had to pull out the wheeled vehicles. The mud pulled at the soldiers' feet and legs and sucked their strength. Yet, they continued their tasks. They never whined. They never quit.

I have never seen such bravery, grit and "sticktoitiveness." The soldiers of the DMORT team rose to the task and operated above the rim. The cream always rises to the top.

■ *Early is a lawyer in Winston-Salem who volunteered to help with the relief efforts.*

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