

# **117 CIVIL ENGINEER SQUADRON**

## **MISSION**

## **LINEAGE**

117 Civil Engineer Squadron

## **STATIONS**

Sumter Smith ANGB, Birmingham, AL

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

117 Mission Support Group

## **COMMANDERS**

Michael Todd

## **HONORS**

**Service Streamers**

**Campaign Streamers**

**Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

**Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **OPERATIONS**

On the afternoon of July 16, an observer with the National Weather Service watched from his office as a killer tornado slashed its way across the Wyoming Air National Guard base at Cheyenne. Hardly believing what he was seeing, for there had been no advance warning, Mr. Sam Standfield, the observer, excitedly reported the twister's progress: "It's running

down the runway now. It hit an Air Force building. It hit some planes . . . she's smashing the C-130s . . . parts of a wing look like they're coming apart. I can hear it roaring. It's incredible. God, it's black as night."

Little David McKinnon, 14 months old, was killed immediately. His mother died several days later as a result of injuries sustained during the worst tornado ever to hit Cheyenne. Fifty-seven other persons were hospitalized and over 200 homes were damaged, some completely leveled. More than a thousand people were left homeless. At the Air Guard base, damage to property and aircraft was estimated to be several millions of dollars.

In addition to the immediate, humanitarian efforts of Wyoming Army and Air Guardsmen, members of the Alabama and Nebraska Air National Guard played significant roles in the aftermath of the disaster.

Flying RF-4C Phantoms, pilots of the 155th Tactical Reconnaissance Gp., Lincoln, Neb., flew photo missions on the three days following the tornado. The photos, one of which is reproduced on this page, are being used by the Wyoming Disaster and Civil Defense Agency to assess the damage to the area.

As for the Alabamians, 69 members of the 117th Civil Engineering Flt., Birmingham, had arrived for their two-week tour the day before the twister struck. As part of their training, they were tasked with completing several construction projects for the Strategic Air Command at the Francis E. Warren AFB in Cheyenne.

However, work schedules were quickly revised following the tornado. Lt. Col. Charles Machemehl, commander of the 117th CEF, likened the situation to conducting field operations in a combat zone saying, "Although the tornado was a disaster which no one wanted, it provided the 117th personnel with the most realistic training. It was as if the base had been bombed prior to commencing operations."

Within minutes after the tornado hit, the Alabama hardhats went to work in groups. The Base Recovery Team included Search & Rescue, Utility, Barracks Repair, Clean up, and Security. Another team was dispatched to the State Emergency Organization Center to assist victims in the civilian community.

Within four hours, most of the debris around the barracks and other working areas was removed; the

barracks were reconstructed; generators installed for emergency power; and, minimum waters upplies restored. The next day all personnel except a small team working on the SAC construction projects continued working on recovery operations. While one team used trucks and front-end loaders to remove debris, another covered windows and holes with plastic sheeting. Meanwhile, a utility team was busy restoring commercial power, gas and water while an electrical team inspected and repaired wiring and lighting.

When it came time for the Alabamians to leave, Wyoming's Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. James L. Spence, expressed his feelings to Colonel Machemehl saying, "Your unit was such a blessing to us. I never saw men work like your men worked. We are so thankful."

As a postscript, the 117th troops also found time to complete the assigned Strategic Air Command projects.

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USAF Unit Histories  
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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.